

I.

Young sat in the old radio tower north of the village and watched the churning rainclouds. It had been a month since the hunting party had left to scavenge medicine from the city once called Indianapolis, now a concrete graveyard of skyscraper skeletons devoured by the wilderness like a beggar's meal. He tightened the hood of his poncho as a frenzy of gnats gathered in the mist around him, and took this as a sign to end the days watch. Carefully, he climbed down the slick ladder.

As long as Young could remember, rain fell from the violet sky. Even Elder is unsure what caused the earth to swallow its land in water, leaving a lone strip of continent remnants call Midwest. Once Elder told Young that the sun and earth were enraged at the state of man, so the sun sent its power to cleanse the world. He knew that was just a tale, though, like the stories in the books Elder had given him. As keeper of the last known library, Elder often charged villagers with reading and remembering the ancient words, as a way to uphold the long, storied, history of man.

At the base of the tower, Young pulled a worn rucksack and a sheathed machete from beneath a slab of rubble. He slung the sack over his shoulder and knotted the blade around his waist with a nylon cord. He took a narrow gravel path choked in thorns to the bottom of the tower hill and writhed through a wavering chain link fence. Beyond, he stamped through a marsh of tall weeds to the edge of the nearby woods. The trees bent in the wind and rain, and the torrent that swept down from the endless storm above seemed to orchestrate a wistful dance of nature. It was both savage and serene. Strangely, Young felt at home.

Inside the trail thinned, visible only to those who knew its purpose, weaving through a mesh of overnourished wild. Elder had said once that the sun and water gave birth to the wild, so the sun must somehow pierce the clouds or the woods would not flourish like it had.

Young moved with his eyes fixed at his soiled boots as he stumbled between sludge and stone. It was dark beneath the canopy, but at least the rain was weaker. He thought of his mother and how she would look at him when he told her that the hunters had not returned with the medicine; a vaccine to cure the sickness spreading throughout the village; a vaccine to cure his little sister. A pain lurched in his stomach and he bent over to release his insides but it never came up. He trudged on, using the blunt machete to clear certain overgrowth that trail-marked the path of the watchmen.

An hour later and Young reached a nearly indiscernible building nested in the shadows of the forest; a schoolhouse used long ago to educate children of the social age. The dirt and plants washed up the walls of the blanched brick building like a wave of flora, camouflaging its foundation.

Young scaled a fallen tree on the eastern wing of the schoolhouse to the roof, and beneath the low hanging branches of the forest canopy, he pulled away a tarp to reveal a hatch. Beneath the hatch was a ladder leading down into darkness. This he descended until reaching smooth concrete below. He struck his hand out blindly and felt a crank, which he turned several times until a thin rope of light illuminated the hallway stretched out before him. This was the greatest luxury of their village, a continuous form of light generated by manually formed electricity. Ropelight. It ran throughout the schoolhouse, for nearly every room and hallway. In the power failures that riddled the end of the social age, Elder explained that riggings such as ropelight had become necessary for functioning industries, which is why he chose the school as a haven those many years ago, when man fell and the wild took over.

Young followed the light down the narrow corridor and came to an intersection with a much wider hall running to his left and right. He turned right and continued through the echoing dark when he came to a dimly lit room. Inside, a weathered man lay next to his wife atop a pile of knitted blankets, a baby sprawled across his chest.

"I return," Young said. He raised his hand to his forehead in salute.

The man yawned and passed the baby to his wife. He stood and stretched. "And I venture," he replied with the same gesture. "Anything happen?"

Young shook his head. "Still quiet."

"Good."

“Good?” Young thought. “Maybe good for you and your family, but my sister needs them to return, damn you.” He lay the rucksack and machete in the doorway and disappeared into the dark hall, through twists and turns of ropelit rooms where other families huddled in silence, waiting for some unknown future to knock at the door. He climbed a stairway and wandered down another series of corridors until coming to a barrier of double doors. They were all ajar, and as he crossed the threshold he entered a cavernous chamber with walls of grimey glass and ceilings of misted skylights long strangled by the grasping forest. It was black in this room, save for a light in the distance that bobbed through the countless rows of bookcase silhouettes.

Young made his way down a dusty aisle towards the light, feeling a sense of solemnness he always felt as the bookcases, with all their knowledge and history, passed by like headstones of a species forgotten, their destiny unfulfilled. When he came to the luminous ball of light he found Elder, an old bespectacled remnant of the social age churning an ancient wheelchair through a row of literature. He turned and eyed Young from beneath his decrepit robe, light piercing from the sides of spectacles which, when dimming, could be momentarily cranked to life like a child’s wind-up toy.

“You’re back,” Elder said.

Young nodded.

“I have another book for your sister.” Elder reached in a basket hanging from the back of his wheelchair, and pulled out a book. He studied the cover for a moment, adjusted his glasses and smiled. “It was considered a classic in my time.” He rolled forward with one hand and passed the tome to Young who palmed the dust from the cover and read the title.

*“The Wind...in the...Willows.”*

“Intended for children,” Elder said, “But even a man of my age may still find inspiration in those pages. Especially in this day and age. It speaks of a forest much like ours, before the social age when there was magic yet in the world.”

Young smiled. “She will like that.”

“I believe she will. No book better describes the country wood. Much like the wood we call home.” Elder studied Young as he stood there, the shaggy hair framing a sunken face beneath the poncho hood, gait worn and leaning, yet fierce and deceptively agile. “How is she?”

“Worse,” Young muttered. His smile withered as he tucked the book into his back waistline.

Elder ran a hand through his frail beard. “Poor thing. Spirits like hers aren’t meant to suffer. She was the quickest one in the entire village to learn her letters. So curious about the world outside.”

“Too curious.” They held the other’s gaze until Elder cast his eyes to the floor and nodded in agreement. Young turned to leave. “Thank you.”

“Give her my love,” Elder said as Young vanished into the void of bookcases. “If only I could visit her, I would.”

“She knows,” Young called back. He followed the dark passages through what would be a labyrinth to those who did not know the village, until he came to a certain door. He knocked gently as he pushed it open.

“Young?” his mother whispered from a rocking chair in the corner of a room aglow with ropelight. A smile wrinkled her worn face, wreathed in dirty blonde hair stuffed behind her ears and cascaded down her chest. She peeled herself from the rocker and slowly embraced Young, trying not to stir the little girl asleep on the floor next to her.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, surveying his face. “Of course you are. You must be starving.” She padded to a table in the corner where there was a ration of vegetables from the greenhouse on the science wing of the school. She sliced a tomato in half and scratched the dirt off of a carrot before handing the plate to Young.

He sat with his back against the wall and sucked on on the plump tomato while his mother watched with a satisfied smile. A moment later and the plate was clean and his stomach appeased.

“Any news of the hunters?” she asked, rocking eagerly in her chair, hands balled on her lap.

“Still nothing,” he replied, eyeing his sister.

"Well," she rambled, "Maybe they found so many supplies it's taking time to carry it back. I bet that's it, you know. Banan always said it's hard enough for two people to take the boat across to the suburbs, and how many went out for the hunt? Fifteen? It takes time for that many men to travel, you know."

Young blinked with tire. He knew better and wished he didn't. Something Elder had said about bliss and ignorance flashed in his mind.

Suddenly his sister shoved a layer of blankets from her chest and sat up, damp hair matting the sides of her face; blue eyes glinting from deep, sunken sockets. "Young?" she whispered.

Young knelt to her side and pulled the book from his pant waist. "Elder sends his love."

She snatched the book in her weak fingers and held it in the glow. She looked at Young and smiled. "What's it about?"

"The forest," Young remembered. "About magic, maybe." He said this last bit to keep the smile on her face. It was his favorite sight on earth...

She ran her yellowed hand across the cover. "Like Harry Potter?"

"You know I didn't read that," Young replied.

She stared at the book and turned it in her hands, then looked up at her brother and hugged him. Young held her head under his chin, breathing in the scent of her hair and breath as if it would give him strength. They lay beside each other as she thumbed through the book, studying the romantic drawings of characters that littered the text like hidden treasures of the eye. Their mother moved to the crank on the wall and churned it when the ropelight faded. She sat down on her rocker and watched her children with roving eyes, taking note of their every movement and documenting it in her memory. Before long she fell asleep, and with that the light faded, and with *that*, brother and sister fell asleep in each other's arms.

Young woke up hours later to a loud knock at the door. He sat upright and removed his sister's head from his chest. A stout man stood in the doorway and motioned Young into the hallway. Young quietly closed the door behind him. They saluted each other. "What is it?" he asked.

"Banan's calling a meeting of the watchmen."

"Why?"

"Something found by the tower," the man said. "I'm not sure. Just be there in thirty minutes. And don't alert anyone."

Young nodded and the man limped into the darkness. He turned to gather his belongings but quickly realized that he had given his watchman supplies to his reliever, so with nothing to take along, he looked long at his family and followed the grim man.

The hall of meeting was a vast room with concrete walls and a glossed wooden floor with weeds erupting through cracks every few feet. An elevated platform sank into the southern wall where Banan would speak to the people of the village beneath the only light in the room, a spotlight hand-cranked by one of his cronies. By the time Young arrived, all the watchmen were there, even Elder, who sat in his wheelchair off to the side of the crowd, silent and unmoving. Young went to his side and lay a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Any idea what this is about?" Young asked.

"Not a clue," Elder replied, "But I doubt it's good."

"Has it ever been?" They exchanged empty looks, and then the whispering crowd went quiet.

A click clack echoed throughout the room as Banan birthed from the shadows and stood in the spotlight leaning on his cane. His hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail so everyone could see the ruin where his left ear used be, and the healed gash running across his neck like a crude smile. He cleared the pus from his throat and eyed the villagers.

"I have an announcement to make," he grumbled, "And after consideration, I've decided that we must keep this announcement a secret among us watchmen. At least until a new strategy can be devised."

The crowd was silent, but for the coughing of the sick. Banan took note of this before turning stage left and waving. Two men emerged, one of them carrying a heavy sack over his shoulder that seemed to drip a dark liquid. Young recognized the man as the watchman he had given the rucksack and machete.

"Today this watchman was at his post when he found one of our long awaited hunters staggering from the woods with this bag." Banan took the wet sack from the hunter and set it on the edge of the stage. "Go ahead," he said to the hunter.

The man was pale and shaken, and as he took a step forward he looked back at Banan as if to plead against speaking. Banan nodded for him to continue.

He cleared his throat and thought. "Twenty of us went...to find supplies," he stammered. "We made it in sight of Indianapolis after two weeks of searching Midwest with nothing to show but a cache of canned goods and deer hide we hunted along the way. On our journey into the city...to the hospital...we were ambushed."

The crowd stirred.

"A clan of wildmen overran us and took everything. It wasn't until we reached their camp that we knew they had...the hunger." He looked back at Banan, chin quivering.

"Go on," Banan croaked.

"Half our men were killed that night...eaten...eaten in front of our eyes. Pyres of men on spickets. Those left alive were rationed off. A limb...or...a member." The man placed a hand near his groin and ground his teeth. "Their leader let me go...with a message." He swept his eyes across the crowd and drew a deep breath. "The city is his, and any that trespass will meet the same fate."

"Were you followed?" a voice shouted from the crowd, stirring up whispers.

"No," the hunter replied. "I took my time returning. I had to cauterize my wound three times before I could make it to the suburbs. And the...sack...of course. I couldn't leave it behind."

"Well, what did you bring back?" another voice shouted. "Did you find supplies on the journey home? What's in this sack?"

Banan stepped forward and handed the hunter his cane. He opened the sack and slowly reached inside. He withdrew an object and set it carefully at the edge of the stage for the crowd to behold. Young pushed closer, and saw the object clearly, a human head. Tongue, eyes, ears and brain missing, like a jack-o-lantern decayed in the first frost of winter.

"Let us be thankful that the wildmen returned something more than a bag of shit," Banan grunted. "We'll prepare a service in the lower furnace for the family of our hunters once we decide how to deal with the options we now face."

Someone vomited and the crowd shuffled away from the slop.

"What options are those?" a voice asked.

"They were our only hope," another shouted.

"It may seem that way," Banan bellowed over the chattering crowd. "But there may be another way to get the medicine. Risky though it may be." He placed the head into the sack, scooted it aside and sat on the edge of the stage with the cane on his lap. He stared at the rafters in deep thought. "What if we went about it another way."

"What way?" the crowd asked.

"Our men were caught," he thought aloud, "Butchered, because they were travelling in a large pack. They were easily discovered. We thought sending strength in numbers was the answer but clearly it is not. No, what we need to do is be more selective...more silent."

Young looked down at Elder. The old man had his face buried in his palms, eyes damp and shaking. He placed a hand on Elder's shoulder and listened to Banan.

"We will try again. We will go back to the city. But this time we will not send a host of men." Banan glared over the crowd, eyeing each man individually. "We will send one man, unseen, quiet."

"One man?!" came a cry. The crowd stirred in protest.

"Yes," Banan shouted, "One man to sneak into the city and gather whatever he can without being noticed. That is unless you want your families to die of this goddam fever?"

The crowd hushed, finally.

"How many more will we burn in the lower furnace? We have ran out of herbs to heal our people. Sacrifice has been made, yes, but there must be more if we wish to survive. I would go myself if my sacrifice hadn't been given years ago when we defended this very village from the wildmen and their godforsaken

hunger. How many of you have had a body part eaten? How many of you can't sleep for the thought of your body being turned to shit in the gut of a savage?"

Only Elder raised his hand.

"One hand, alone," Banan shouted. "The hand of our Founder, who was by my side during those dark times." Banan raised a hand in salute. "But darker times seem to have come, because it will not be a fight we can hope to win, and the casualties will not be brothers in arms, they will be our wives, our children. Eventually everyone will fall to the fever unless we get the medicine."

"I will go." The unsettled crowd turned and stared at Young, and even with every eye doubting his resolve, he held his hand aloft.

Elder clung to his wrist, "Don't be foolish boy, you will *not!*"

"I will," Young protested.

Banan dropped from the stage and pushed his way through the crowd, cane clicking and clacking. He came to Young and squared up to him, eyeing the boy up and down.

"Banan please," Elder pleaded, but Banan raised a hand to silence the old man.

"Young, is it?" the leader asked.

"Yes sir. I am a watchman. A fucking good one, too."

"Are you now?" Banan thought for a moment. "If you have an ounce of your father, I expect you are. Good man, he was." The crowd grumbled in agreement. "You want to risk your life for your people. I respect that."

"No. Not for my people," Young replied. "For my sister."

"Even better." Banan said as he faced the crowd. "Quartermaster!?" he shouted.

"Aye," came a voice. A lean, sinewy man pushed through the crowd and stood before Banan with a salute. A pair of thick, long knives hung down his thighs and a club lay across his back, emblazoned with the words *Louisville Slugger*.

Banan waved down the salute. "You have trained this young watchman?"

The Quartermaster eyed Young and nodded, lips flickered into a grin. "I've trained every swinging dick in the village. Young included."

"Would you declare him worthy of this task?" he asked. "Strong enough to endure the wild?"

The Quartermaster thought hard for a moment, spitting twice on the glossed floor while he searched his mind for words. "I have a saying for the men that I train," he began at last. He whipped around and glared evilly into the eyes of the crowd. "Every man here knows it, and I reckoned you would always know it the moment I stripped you down to your sack and nipples and whispered it in your ear." He spat a third and final glob at the feet of the men. "I have no use for a man without scars."

"*Then make me useful, Master*" the crowd shouted together.

The Quartermaster looked at Banan, proud. "Young has his scars." His eyes drifted to the young man and he chuckled. "Son of a bitch gave *me* a few, too."

"That settles it," Banan shouted. "All in favor of watchman Young's quest to save our people say aye."

"Aye," the auditorium resounded.

"And those opposed say nay."

"Nay," shouted Elder. He stared emptily at Banan, who looked back with sympathetic eyes.

"I know why it is you say nay, founder, but even you must understand with all your books, that a young mind is not easily calmed, and this watchman has chosen his fate whether we allow it or not."

Elder spun and wheeled into the darkness. Echoes ricocheted throughout the hall as a door slammed behind him.

Banan turned back to the crowd with his hand on Young's shoulder. "Hear me now,," he proclaimed. "Young *will* journey to Indianapolis and return a savior of his village."

The crowd saluted and recited simultaneously, "*To venture and return!*"

"Your provisions will be waiting on the roof at dawn. It may seem sudden, but every passing hour brings our people closer to the edge. Be with your family tonight and rest well. As for everyone else, I will send a messenger to deliver the news to the villagers, and to inform them of the hope we have in this young

watchman. The funeral for our fallen men will be tomorrow night in the boiler room. Every man must bring fuel for the furnace. Meeting adjourned." Banan climbed the steps to the stage and disappeared stage left. The spotlight faded out as the whispering crowd shuffled out into the winding hallways, each man raising a hand to their brow as they passed Young.

When the hall of gathering was empty and dark, Young made his way home. He thought on the decision he had made as he traversed the darkness like a thought in a dazed mind. He knew his choice had been abrupt, but it had been from his heart. He felt a keen sense of purpose he had never known before; a sense of being that only surfaced when he thought of his sister and his inability to change her fate. "This is my chance to change it," he thought aloud, echoes reaffirming his resolve. Yet, despite this resolve, there lingered a feeling that many characters in the books he had read had reached only too late. A feeling that he had rushed headfirst into a mistake guided by youthful emotion, not by intelligence. This feeling was not allowed a long life, though, as he snuffed it out with the thought of his sister wasting away in the dark.

He walked slower than usual as he justified rationality with emotion when he came to the stairway leading towards his home. At the bottom of the stairwell, moments from the room where his family lay, he encountered a squirming figure. Elder lay sprawled across the floor, his wheelchair crumpled against the adjacent wall. A thin line of blood snaked from the side of his head across the linoleum tile. Young ran to his side and flipped him over, head in the palm of his hand. Elder coughed and recentered the spectacles on his nose. One of the lenses had spiderwebbed.

"What have you done?" Young asked, pulling the old man's head onto his lap.

"I...needed to speak with you...before you left," Elder stuttered.

Young reached for the wheelchair and dragged it towards him, barely managing to unfold it. As gently as he could, he lifted Elder and placed him in the seat. The old man held his throbbing head for a moment as Young sat on the steps wondering what had possessed him behave so brashly.

"You could've died," Young said.

"I nearly made it," Elder chuckled. "I was three quarters of the way down before I lost control. But I had to come, Young. I had to speak with you."

"Do you really think I would have left without saying goodbye?"

"Your mind is clouded," Elder replied. "There's no telling what a man will do when he is on fire. So I came just in case. You need to know what it's like out there, beyond the watchtower and the forest you know so well."

"I know what is out there," Young said.

"You only know stories. You have never seen it. Never experienced it. I have read nearly every book in the library, but for all the knowledge I have acquired, I have no experience. But what I do have experience in is what you are about to face, Young." Elder rolled closer and removed his glasses to inspect the shattered lens. He shook his head in disappointment as he flicked the shard of glass from the frame and set it back on his nose. "Beyond our borders, you must leave behind the man you have become. You must become someone different entirely." He narrowed his gaze on the young man. "The people of Midwest are not like you and I, nor like the people of this village. You must never show the kindness or the mercy that we have held essential within these walls, Young. It will be your undoing, believe me. You will have to kill. That is why I have come, to ease your mind, because it will torture you when the time comes, but torture is the payment for survival. Not just for yourself, but for the people of this village. Our entire friendship I have instilled respect and decency within you and your sister. I ask you to leave it behind. You may have it upon your return. When you leave this village, you are given permission from both myself and providence to stay alive by whatever means necessary despite the moral consequence. Do you understand? *Do you?* At its core I am commanding you to become a savage, because that is what it will take, and if you stray from savagery...you will not return...and your sister will die."

Young listened with clenched fists, heart racing. The weight of his decision seemed to catch up with him at last, and it was heavier than he expected. The romantic notions that egged him to raise his hand at the meeting seemed to fall away like the leaves of a sapling. He began to tremble. "I understand, I think."

Elder smacked Young as hard as he could across the face and grabbed him by his wrists. "Eat your fear. There is nothing to be afraid of out there anymore." Elder reached inside a pouch on the side of the wheelchair and withdrew a cloth. He set it on his lap and unfolded it. "This belongs to you now, though I expect it back." He handed Young a silver pistol.

"Is this a...gun?" Young asked.

"A colt."

"How did you get it?" Young held it into the light and examined it. "I thought the rulers stole back the guns when the end of man happened."

"Careful with that," Elder said as Young placed a finger on the trigger. "Pull that tiny trigger, and whatever stands before this barrel will cease to exist. The small button above the trigger indicates that the gun will not fire, but if you push it in, it will activate. You will never have to load it, for it already contains all the ammunition I have. Four shots. Use it only at close range, and never take the safety off unless you are engaged. This is a dangerous instrument, even when dormant."

Young turned it over in his hand and recognized the design and make of the gun from a book he had read. "Cowboys used this gun," he said. "It kicks like a mule."

Elder smiled. "Only in the hands of a jackass."

"Where are the two missing bullets?"

Elder's smile faded. "In the man that took my legs. One in the cock, one in the temple."

Young imagined the scene as he guided the old wheelchair down the hallway, and suddenly he felt a quiet revolution in his heart, not a riotous overthrow, but a subtle dissolve of the soft thoughts he once held dear, leaving only the hardened core of truth and reality.

