

Pa

Not having gone out with my Pa in some time, on account of the way things were, I was glad he changed his mind. I was going crazy being stuck cooped up in our cabin, not getting to really feel the outdoors on my face. Sure, I got to do my daily chores around our little home—coaxing chickens to lay some eggs, trying to dry out our wood pile before the long winter—but that’s exactly what they were: chores. Nothing exciting. The cabin was always within a stone’s throw; I was never out for more than an hour at a time, at most, and only when the sun cast no shadows.

“Got ya gun, boy?” My Pa asked, giving me a good shake.

I had heard him slip in my room, so I was already awake. “Course I got my gun, Pa. What’s wrong?”

“Is it clean? I don’t need no gun backfiring on my boy, and don’t you lie to me if you don’t know.”

Already out from under my covers, I was fumbling in the dark for my .22—not a scratch on her—hardly able to contain myself. “Disassembled, cleaned, polished, and put back right, Pa. I swear. Did it all myself just a few days ago.”

I could just barely make out the outline of his nodding head in the dark. “That’s real good, boy, real good.” He went quiet, head still nodding absently. It’s something my Pa does a lot, like he’s contemplating the whole universe all at once. I don’t interrupt him. Nothing good ever comes from angering my Pa, so I let him sit in silence and figure out the universe—which isn’t easy when you just want to know why he’s asking you about your gun.

“You got a lot of chores to do today?” he asked, after what seemed like an eternity of nodding. “And I don’t think I need to tell you about lying.”

“No, sir, I’m all caught up. I was just gonna try and scare the chickens into laying some eggs later today, but they’re stubborn as ever, Pa.”

My dad’s hand, big as a bear’s paw, squeezed my knee, and he gave a deep, heartfelt laugh. “If they keep it up, I’ll pick one at random and break its neck in front of the others. Motivation is a hell of a thing, boy, and don’t you ever forget it.”

“I won’t, Pa.”

He stood from my bed, a short, stocky shadow blocking the first rays of dawn trying to peek through my window. Before he left he said, “Get dressed in something warm, and make sure you’ve got some ammo for your gun. We’re going hunting.”

I packed my gear, including a Snickers bar I had kept stashed away for such an opportune time, to really savor the chocolate, knowing full well I’d probably never see another candy bar once it was gone, and I was at the front door ready to go in lightning time.

It was cold, colder than it should have been this time of year—even accounting for the new normal. Pa would be all over me if I didn’t figure out a way to get our winter wood supply dried out, and in a hurry. But I could worry about our fuel issue another time. As important as it was, right now I just wanted to focus on the present and enjoy the time with my dad, hunting. Pa was always at his best when he was out in the thick of it. Surviving.

That’s why my mom brought me here when the world started changing.

“What are you asking me to do, Helen?” my dad had asked my mom, shortly after we pulled up to his cabin in the middle of nowhere. I wasn’t even sure what state we were in anymore; I just knew it had been a long drive out of the city. Pa was standing on his front porch, thumbs hooked in the

pockets of his overalls, cobalt eyes staring at my mom like she was a specter. Not really there, but not really *not* there, either.

Yes, she was there. Because she knew what was best for me.

“Everything’s changed,” my mom had said, and before she finished speaking, the first few flakes of snow fell from the sky, getting caught in her chestnut hair. “I can’t keep our son safe anymore.” Those flakes that had fallen then were the first few of a long, brutal winter, with many more to come.

“Helen...” my dad had started to say, but whatever defense he was going to raise got caught in his throat. His hands were trembling, shock I’d say, considering he hadn’t seen my mom or me in more than ten years. I can’t imagine what a man must feel when the world’s falling apart, and the woman he loved, who still took his newborn son and left, suddenly shows up at his doorstep asking—demanding—the world. Sometimes, most of the time, I think, when he’s sitting there all quiet, nodding the way he does, he isn’t really contemplating the universe. He’s thinking about her.

“I won’t hear it!” She had yelled at my dad. “I’m not going to take no for an answer. You’ll keep him safe, I know it. And if you’ll just stop and put everything aside for a second, you’ll realize you know it too.” She had taken a step forward and stood on the first step of the porch. My dad, still only slightly taller than my mom, even with the two step advantage, stared down at her silently.

After what had seemed like an eternity—Pa always has a way of making time slow—he reached out and wiped away a freshly fallen snowflake from my mom’s eyelash, gently, with his thumb. It was like he was staring at a priceless painting, and upon seeing a small speck of dust resting on the painted canvas, threatening endless ruin, he knew the blemish had to be removed.

“Okay,” was all he said.

The snow had really started to come down then, as my dad and I watched my mom rush back to her car and drive away. We never saw her again. And even though there were so many questions I wanted answered, knowing it was best if I left them a mystery, we never spoke of my mom again. On account of the way things were.

The leaves crunching underfoot, as we made our journey through woods and open fields, felt comforting. They reminded me of bonfires and hot cider, a time when things were so much more alive—a time when fall was the beginning of only a temporary death, a few dark months that would pass and bring new life, new hope.

Now, my Pa and I were stalking the earth in search of food for the winter, the longest one yet, in an increasingly desperate attempt to find a surviving deer or rabbit, even a squirrel—anything—to feed our bellies, keep us warm with properly skinned hides.

Sometimes at night, when I'm still chilled to the bone under several layers of blankets, I wonder if my mother was wrong when she brought me to my dad. She was doing what she thought was best, what she thought would give me the best chance of survival, but is this kind of life worth living? Would I have been better off to stay in the city and pass with the others? I try not to think about it too much. I certainly don't bother Pa with it. He's got too much to worry about without me weighing him down with my nonsense.

We came upon a small clearing when my dad signaled *silence*. He crouched low to the ground, gliding silently to a tree just short of the field ahead. Never taking his eyes off the clearing, he beckoned me to him before steadying his rifle on a small notch in the trunk of the tree.

"Saw something moving in that patch of trees across the field," Pa whispered out of the side of his mouth. He squinted down his rifle sight, adjusted the knob on the scope, and tried to peer

through the lens once more. “Can’t see a damned thing outta this sight anymore. Or my eyes are going...” He sighed. It was the kind of sigh that deflates your whole body—like God himself decided to set a boulder right on top of you.

“Do you think it was a deer?” I asked tentatively, because I’ve learned a man with the world on his shoulders can’t muster the strength to handle much anything else. The thought of hot venison stew must have lightened the load, because my dad’s shoulders raised, back straightened, and he was staring intently down his rifle sight one more time.

“Come on, ya furry bastard, just poke your head out where I can get a nice clean shot... Come on.... Come on...”

When I was 11, about six months before everything changed, Bobby Larkins cornered me in the boy’s bathroom. I didn’t see his left hand, balled into fury, strike me, but I remembered my right ear erupting in pain. A week after our little misunderstanding, while lying awake trying to understand the state of how things were going to be, I could still faintly hear a thin, high-pitched hum.

The same ringing came back the moment Pa fired his rifle. He stood and said something to me, which I couldn’t hear over the whine in my ear, and then he stepped out from the line of trees. I shouldered my .22 and followed. About half-way across the field I finally started to hear our feet crunching on the frosted ground. My dad was moving fast, cursing to himself as he went. He glanced back at me, mumbled something about staying behind him—he looked so tired all of the sudden—before he turned back. Pa had been sliding into those exhausted states more frequently, but I did my best to not dwell on it too much.

The ringing cleared completely, and I could finally hear why my dad was moving so fast. Someone, definitely not a deer—animals don’t scream like that—was wailing and moaning nearby.

“Oh, God, my guts,” the man cried, writhing around on the ground, hands patting his stomach like he was trying to put out a fire.

Pa dropped down on his knees next to the man. “Now just calm down, nigger,” he said, trying to stop the man from grabbing at his own wound. “I need to see where you’ve been shot. Stop kicking around, dammit, it ain’t gonna help none.” Pa lifted the man’s shirt to take a look at the wound.

That really got the man hollering.

“Dammit, nigger, stop!”

“Pa! Stop!” I yelled, but quieted down when I realized who I was yelling at. Just above a whisper, I finishing saying, “you can’t call him that.”

My dad had this certain look, only on the rarest occasions would it flash—when the weight was simply too much to bear anymore—and I knew it was best to shut my mouth and keep it that way.

“I’ll call him whatever I want,” he grumbled, pushing the man on his side to get a look at his back, “until he starts listening to me.” Pa ran his fingers over the small of the man’s back, who had stopped howling, but still whimpered at the prodding, and then checked the pads of his fingers.

“What’s wrong, Pa?” I asked, already forgetting about making a promise to keep my mouth closed.

He shook his head and rolled the man to his back, which brought forth another yelp of pain. “Now listen here, nig—” He stopped just short of finishing the slur.

“What’s your name?” I asked the man, realizing it was first time I was talking to someone besides Pa since my mom had released me into his care. Considering the state of the world, the

circumstances of our first meeting didn't shock me like it should have. The cold numbs you in a lot of ways.

The man grimaced, drew in a short breath to gather strength, and said, "P-P-Paul." It looked like it took a whole lot out of him, just to say his name.

"The bullet didn't exit, Paul. It's still in there somewhere, probably tearing you up." My dad wasn't one to mince words, not for blood, especially not for a stranger.

Tears welled up in the man's eyes. He was still holding his stomach, blood oozing out of his open wound. It was hard to see how much at first, with his skin being so dark, but now I could finally see just how much blood was leaking out of him. He just laid there, quiet now after hearing what Pa told him about his condition. The man stared up at the sky, lips moving in some silent prayer to a silent God.

A little blood dribbled off his lower lip. He was bleeding on the inside.

Using his gun as a crutch, Pa got back up to his feet slowly. He told me a few weeks ago that trying to stand anymore was a lot like trying to free a rusted hinge on an old ladder left out all winter long—lately it was getting a lot worse. At some point, I hoped not before spring, because hoping for a miracle was foolish, Pa's hinges were just going to break clean off. I tried not to dwell on it too much, because it made my heart hurt, and I knew I was too young for my heart to hurt so damn much.

"Nothing more we can do here, boy," Pa said, when he reached the top of his ascent. "He's not going to last long now, and we need to keep moving."

"But... We can't just leave him—"

“What’s done is done. He shouldn’t have been out here on my land, and there’s nothing anyone can do for him now. Let him spend the last few minutes of his life looking up at a sky that can’t do nothing for him.”

“But...”

He turned to me. “It’s just the way it is, boy. This world ain’t gonna slow down for him. You know it, so stop acting like it’s different than what it is.”

“I know. But...”

“You want me to say I’m sorry? You want me to get down on my knees and ask the man to forgive me for what I done?” He was standing a few inches from me now, eyes level with mine. “Well, I ain’t sorry. I thought he was a deer, a nice hot meal for me—for you. Be thankful, boy, that I’m not the kind of man who’d cut his throat and hang him from a tree to dry out for dinner. There’s still people out there who’d take him back to their camp and dice him up into a month’s worth of food. A month of food is an awful lot.” He shrugged and spat on the ground. “Know what I’m sorry for? I’m sorry to live in a world that’s put a man in a position where he has to make those kinds of decisions.” He stared at me.

I had nothing to say. I knew he wasn’t wrong, but that didn’t mean I had to like it one bit. It would have just been nice to be able to sit down and chat with the man, ask him about who he was before it all—if he wasn’t bleeding to death, that is.

Pa nodded. “Leave him be, and let’s get moving. Still got a long day ahead of us, and we’re already losing the light.” He turned from me and started walking with his poorly-disguised limp. Holding all that weight, all the time, was ruining Pa.

I looked down at the man with a hole in his gut. His chest was still rising and falling, eyes glued upward, lips moving without any words coming out. Maybe he was staring at heaven itself, tucked away somewhere behind the cold grey—waiting. He looked peaceful.

The first snowflake of the season, falling at least a few weeks earlier than the year before, drifted down from from heaven and touched down on the man's eyelash. He blinked it away.

The man didn't acknowledge the gesture, and it was probably wasteful of me, even dangerous had Pa seen me do it, but I slipped my unwrapped Snickers into his bloody hand. It wasn't much, but it was all I could do for him. On account of the way things were.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I meant it.