

## **Bush Party**

*By Alexander Saxton*

On the lake, in the fog, the world shrank down to where I thought I could reach out and catch its edge. I stretched as far as I could without flipping the canoe, and my arm's dark twin stretched with me on the surface of the water, catching at nothing. The fog was so thick I could feel its cool softness on the pads of my fingers, like damp flower petals.

**HER: What are you doing?**

I turned and smiled at her, wiping a rainy streak of hair out of my eyes.

**HIM: Nothing Just feeling the air.**

She rested her paddle on the gunnels of the canoe, and brushed the air with her fingertips.

**HER: I've never seen fog like this. Maybe we should head back in.**

I shrugged.

**HIM: Anywhere else, I'd agree with you. But the lake's so small, it's impossible to get lost. You'd just follow the shore.**

She glanced around.

**HER: I don't see any shore.**

The same fact which had seemed so wonderful the moment before now gave me a slight sick feeling in the pit of my chest. The world was a room coated in ash-coloured paint; the fog had bricked us in.

**HIM: We must be halfway across by now. If we go a few minutes further, we should see the opposite shore.**

She nodded, and stuck her paddle in the water. While we had spoken, the canoe had begun to drift, so she pried us back on course. The splash came loud in the still thick air, and both of us flinched. For the next minutes, we dipped our paddles delicately, trying to preserve the silence, though why, neither of us really knew.

In time, a line of shadow thickened through the fog, and organized itself into the peaks and jags of jack pines and red-limbed birches. As we drew nearer to the shore, we could see the black edge of the water lapping at crags of lichen-stained bedrock. Trees clung to the pink granite,

their roots grasping like the feet of predatory birds. A heron winged through the silence, long and low over the surface of the water, close enough to see the yellow of its beak, close enough to hear the soft thud of its great soft wings.

A half-sunken dock had been bolted onto the stone face, and years of mist on the rivets had left orange tear-streaks of rust on the rock underneath.

HIM: I know where we are now. About halfway up the lake. If we follow the shore to the left, we'll end up at the camp on the far side.

HER: Do they have a bathroom there?

I smiled.

HIM: They've got a woods here.

She frowned up into the trees.

HER: What are the chances somebody comes along?

HIM: I'd say pretty low. The nearest house is all the way down at the next point, and it's early in the season for anybody to actually be up here.

She smiled.

HER: What are the chances a *bear* comes along?

HIM: Hah, maybe a bit higher.

She nodded.

HER: Alright. You're coming up with me, though. If a bear comes, I can run faster than you.

We both laughed, but our voices were muffled by the hushing fog, and we fell quiet again as we drew up to the dock.

An aluminum ladder was bolted to the side of the wharf. I held onto it as she climbed out, and then jumped out myself, mooring the canoe to one of the ladder's rungs with a waterlogged painter. The dock sagged under our weight, and freezing amber-black water rushed up through the boards to swallow our bare feet. We jumped ashore, and clambered up the rock face. Some time in the past, someone had poured a set of concrete steps down to the water, but these had all but crumbled and washed away.

HIM: Something there is that doesn't love a stairs. Is that how the poem goes?

HER: Yeah. I think you've nailed it. Robert Frost is lying still in his grave right now. Not spinning at all.

I waited for her as she disappeared into the trees. A quality of the light had changed: a note of purple crept into the grey white haze of fog.

When she re-emerged from the trees, I asked,

HIM: How long have we been out? Is it starting to get dark?

She frowned.

HER: That can't be right. We can't have been gone for more than an hour.

But I was sure- it was definitely darker than it had been even a few minutes before.

HIM: Should we-

But before I could finish my sentence, both of us straightened, and looked off into the trees.

HER: Did you hear that?

HIM: Yeah. It sounded like-

BOTH: Music

We stood still for a moment, looking into the trees. The fog had started to thin, just a little bit, and we could see the shadows of tree-trunks through the white, and a bronze carpet of fallen pine needles leading into the gloom.

HIM: There it is again.

HER: I recognize that song.

HIM: What is it? I've heard it so many times before, but I don't know what it's called, or who it's by.

HER: No . . .

She stepped off the stone, and into the soft bed of needles.

HER: Me neither . . .

I followed her a short distance into the trees, and the music gradually grew louder. Something instrumental and electronic, with deep bass. Something we'd heard somewhere with neon lights, late at night, when our minds were half-erased by drugs or alcohol, and the only memory of the music had been left in some cavern of the lizard brain.

HIM: It's got to be some party being hosted by the camp. We should probably turn back.

But my own feet ignored me, and led me forward through the damp, cool needles. Evening was well in progress beneath the boughs of the trees, but the fog was thin now, and we could see a fire, and some portable electric lights, people drinking and dancing through the trees. A bush party.

Speakers and a laptop had been set up beneath A wooden pavilion with a rotting roof in the middle of the clearing. Speakers and a laptop had been set up underneath it. Twenty or thirty

strange people filled up the rest of the clearing, strangely quiet. They didn't look like the kind of people who lived in the area. They looked young, and fit, and fashionable, and rich.

The two of us looked at each other, suddenly feeling foolish in our life jackets and bulky sweaters.

**KID: Are you guys here for the party?**

We turned. A kid was leaning against the bole of a tree, looking at his phone. He looked like he was about 20, and was wearing black jeans, black sneakers, and a black t-shirt under an open denim shirt that looked like it cost about half a month's rent for either of us. His hair was the same colour as the fog, and his haircut was six months ahead of the trend. The kid was wearing sunglasses, even though it was almost dark.

**HIM: No. We were just having a look around.**

**KID: Well, now that you're here, you might as well come have a drink.**

Without looking up from his phone, he wandered back into the clearing, gesturing lazily for the two of us to follow.

Looking at each other, we shrugged, and followed him in.

Inside the clearing, the music was louder, and the bass throbbed in our ears, with a feeling halfway between pain and sexual longing. As we walked through the crowd, everybody stopped to look at us, taking in how we were dressed, and then whispering to each other. I raised a hand to rub the muscles at the back of his neck, a gesture she tells me I only make when I'm nervous. I realized that the hairs there were standing on end. I leaned in to her.

**HIM: (whispering) Who are these people?**

She shrugged, and I noticed the hairs on her neck were standing on end as well.

And then, some strange, lingering sense of wrongness resolved itself into a realization. The people at this party *were* strange. They were all slightly too long and slender in the limbs and body. They all moved the same way, with the same liquid nonchalance. Though some appeared to be white, others black, others asian, all had the same . . . translucent, ashy paleness to their skin. And all of them had hair the colour of the fog. She pressed closer to me, I to her.

As we passed in front of the pavilion, the DJ watched us, nodding his head in time with the beat. Alone out of the people in the clearing, he had taken off his sunglasses, and hung them from the collar of his t-shirt. From a distance, his laptop had looked like a mac, but now that we were closer, we could see the glowing symbol on its lid wasn't an apple, but an open hand with six fingers.

**KID: This is the DJ. DJ, these are my new friends.**

The DJ looked at us, nodding. I assumed the DJ was wearing some kind of novelty contact lenses, because his irises were a kind of bright colour that made them look like they'd been painted with gold leaf.

HIM: That's a nice laptop.

The DJ nodded.

HIM: What kind is it?

The DJ shrugged.

HER: Do you take request?-

But before she could finish, the DJ was already shaking his head.

KID: Sorry, he doesn't. Come on, this guy sucks, anyway.

The Kid still hadn't looked up from his phone.

The DJ didn't seem to mind, or even to have heard, and as we walked away, the song transitioned into something darker, something that sounded more trap-influenced, but still wordless, still distantly familiar.

KID: What kind of beer do you guys like.

HER: I like sours, but-

KID: Just kidding. We only have the one kind.

On the far side of the clearing, a folding table with leg extensions had been jammed between two trees, making a makeshift bar.

KID: Bartender, these are my new friends.

Over the Kid's shoulder, I could see the game the Kid was playing on his phone involved tessellations, and tiles that changed colours. After a moment, watching it made me feel vaguely seasick.

KID: Hook them up with whatever they want, as long as it's not the good stuff, ha ha ha.

With that, the Kid wandered off, leaving the two of us with the bartender.

The bartender was rearranging boxes under the bar, but as he straightened up, thweey were surprised to see that he seemed . . . normal. Balding, in his early forties, slightly overweight, and tired looking, extremely tired looking.

BARTENDER: What can I-

he stopped and flinched when he saw us.

BARTENDER: What are you *doing* here?

HER: We were just-

BARTENDER: You can't be here.

HER: No, it's okay- didn't you hear, that guy just said-

BARTENDER: No-

The bartender leaned in towards us, his eyes wide and hard.

BARTENDER: It's not safe for you here. These are bad people. You need to leave.

Then, abruptly, the bartender plastered a big smile on his face and cracked two beers.

BARTENDER: Here you go! Two ice cold beers for two new friends. Here's to a long friendship!

The bartender forced the beers into our hands, and as we looked at each other, confused, we realized the entire rest of the party was staring at them.

For a heartbeat, we made eye-contact. Then, with the same big smiles, we clinked the bottles,

BOTH: Cheers!

and drank.

The beer was strange, watery, and acrid, and left me with a feeling in my mouth like I'd just eaten a spoonful of powdered cinnamon.

HIM: Mm, that's amazing!

I made a show of looking at the label.

HIM: What is it?

The beer was totally unfamiliar to me. The glass was thick, green, and misshapen. The name on the label was 'Cromlech' (CROM-lek), and it showed a picture of two standing stones, supporting a third. The style was something that I'd had never heard of before, something called a 'Largest'? And the bottle proudly announced that it was brewed with Morels, Giant puffball, and Destroying Angel mushrooms.

HIM: How interesting.

I pulled out a dollar to tip the bartender.

BARTENDER: No need, I don't take tips. (beat) but *you* should.

HER: Thank you.

The two of us walked away from the bar, talking about beer. At some point in the last few minutes, the party had gone back to ignoring us.

Trying to appear nonchalant, we drifted back across the clearing. By the campfire in the middle of the party, a girl in a choker offered us drugs, which we politely declined. The girl shrugged, then leaned back, taking off her sunglasses so she could use a dropper to measure out some kind of black fluid into her milky irises.

The music changed again, this time to something so familiar, and so intense that it made my mouth go dry. I glanced back over the party.

HIM: Let's ditch.

On the other side of the clearing, the bartender refused to meet our eyes.

HER: Let's stay for another beer!

For a moment, I was incredulous, until I noticed she was slightly lifting her eyebrows.

HIM: Sure!

A moment later, the Kid appeared out of the corner of my eye.

The Kid had taken off his sunglasses. He was still looking at his phone, and the light from the screen reflected strangely from his left eye.

KID: You guys aren't trying to ghost, are you? That'd be pretty rude.

HIM: Hah, no, actually, we were just talking about how we were going to stay for a few more drinks. If that's cool with you guys, of course.

For the first time, the Kid looked up at us. For the first time, the kid's features forced themselves from bored nonchalance into something resembling a smile.

KID: Of course. You guys are welcome to stay, for *as long as you want*.

For a moment, my brain struggled to figure out what was wrong with the Kid's left eye. And then, the song changed again, and someone threw something in the campfire, so the flame leapt up with a sound like breath. In the sudden glow, I saw that the eyeball had been replaced with, or had always been, a smooth, round piece of amber. Trapped inside, like a false iris, was the black, curled body of a centipede.

BARTENDER: Attention everybody!

All three of us turned to look at the source of the shout, and the music diminished. The bartender stood in the middle of the clearing, next to a tree stump which he had draped a white bar towel over. He held up his left hand, and waggled his fingers in the firelight.

BARTENDER: Does anybody have a pocket knife?

For a moment, there was no response, and then one of the people who had been taking drugs by the fire stood up, and offered the bartender his pocket knife. The girl in the choker giggled in anticipation.

The bartender held up the knife and unfolded it. Its blade was matte black, but the edge flickered orange in the light of the campfire.

BARTENDER: Who here . . . Has ever seen the Knife Game?"

As one, the people at the party seemed to straighten. The Kid's nostrils flared, and he turned towards the center of the clearing, seeming to forget the two of us entirely.

With theatrical slowness, the bartender spread out his fingers, and slowly placed his palm down on the bar towel. The partygoers drifted inwards, smiles catching the firelight, muttering to each other, trembling with excitement.

The bartender changed his grip on the knife, and very deliberately stabbed down, plunging the tip of the knife into the wood just beside his pinky finger. Then, more quickly, between his pinky and ring finger, then ring and middle, middle and index, index and thumb, then back, and faster. For a split-second, unnoticed by the crowd whose hungry gaze was locked on the dance of fingers and knife, the bartender's eyes flicked up, and met with ours. Then he was fixed back on his hand, picking up speed, and changing the pattern as the crowd started to cheer, and clap in time.

Calmly, we stepped out of the clearing. We walked unhurriedly for the first several meters, and then, when they reached the rock, we clasped hands and started to run. At the edge of the trees, the rocks were slick from the mist, and we had to clamber down on all fours, or risk a twelve-foot fall into cold water and bonbreaking hidden rocks.

Halfway down, we heard a shriek, followed by another sound, a collective sigh, almost a groan of pleasure. I stopped.

HIM: God- do you-

HER: (hissing) Hurry!

A second later, we heard something else, a scream of anger, rising over the trees like smoke.

It was now fully dark, and would have been pitch black except that the clouds had cleared, and only a thin layer of fog whitened the surface of the lake. Above, the stars were blazing, along with a sliver of brilliant moon. We jumped onto the dock, nearly misjudging the distance in the dark, nearly falling into the inky water as the wood groaned and rocked under our weight.

The woods were filled with shouts behind us, and the Kid's voice rose above the trees, shrill and horrible.

KID: Where do you think you're going? Where do you *fucking* think you're going?

I helped her into the canoe, and began trying to untie the painter. My fingers were cold, and I fumbled with the knot, which had tightened as it dried, and had to be picked apart centimetre by centimetre.

HER: Hurry!"



The canoe had drifted to the out the full length of the painter while she had found her seat, and she now paddled in close.

HIM: I'm trying!

HER: They're here!

I glanced up. Silver in the moonlight, the girl in the choker stood on the crag above them, pointing down with one long arm.

The knot gave way, just as the edge of the trees began to fill with grey-haired figures.

HER: Get in, get in!

I jumped into the canoe just as somebody crashed down onto the dock behind me. The boat rocked, nearly capsizing as I landed, and she grunted, trying to keep it steady as she pushed us away from the dock. One hand on each of the gunnels, I wrenched myself around and into the seat. My paddle had slid overboard, and was drifting back towards shore, so I dipped my hands into the icy water, and paddled as hard as I could.

The dock was full of strangers, and their collective weight had pushed it down knee-deep in the water. Other partygoers were ranged along the rock face. All had removed their sunglasses, and the moon shone metallic on forty pairs of eyes, one of them mismatched.

KID: (trying to sound reasonable) Where are you going so early?

The Kid shoved his way through the crowd to the edge of the dock.

KID: The party's not over yet.

HIM: Thanks. But we should get going.

The Kid smiled, slightly condescending.

KID: You guys are being really weird, you know. Just come back and have another beer. What, do you think we're some sort of threat to you, or something? You're acting like crazy people.

HER: All the same. I think we're going to call it a night.

The kid bared his teeth at us and screamed, hurling himself into the water.

KID: I'll drown you!

He swam after them, coughing and spluttering through the water.

KID: I'll knock over your boat, and I'll drown you both!

But we had already drifted far over the water, and with confident strokes, she guided them us into the fogbound waters of the lake.

The fog was beginning to thicken again, and as its veil drew between us and the shore, we saw the kid treading water, still screaming after them.

In time, the muffling cloud drowned him out, and we were left alone in the silence of the lake, with mist blanketed around us, and the slow whoosh of her paddle rising to the velvet purple sky.

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The police never found any sign of a party on the far side of the lake. Officers saw no lights through the trees, heard no sound but wind in the branches when they followed the road to where it came closest to the outcropping. When they went through in the morning, they found some bottles, but they had no labels, and the glass was fogged with age. The fire-pit was cold. No table was wedged between the trees.

But they did find one thing.

In the middle of the clearing, somebody had folded up a white bar towel, and nailed it to a tree-stump with a folding pocket knife. When unfolded, they found the cloth was dark and slick with blood.