

# NUTS HERDER



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Ask and it will be given... but open eyes, mind,  
and heart and the world is yours.

Follow the path of travelers  
on an unexpected peregrination.



# NUTS HERDER

## I

### GET OUT

"Why aren't you out with the others?"  
"You shouldn't be spending all your time around here."  
"You're too young to be so alone."

My dear ole mom is full of these questions and flip comments. It's not out of love. These jabs and inquiries do not come from some deep-rooted maternal instinct. It most certainly is not love. Not a good mother's love. Don't misunderstand, she does love. She is a good mother. She's generally good. Most of all though, she is a good breeder.

It's a funny thing too. That ironic, no laugh type of funny. Engage dear ole mom in conversation about parenting and she has vast wisdom on rearing children. She offers soothing words without a second's hesitation. No injury is beyond her healing touch to mend either. No sickness is a match to her medicinal prowess.

In many ways, she is a great mother. Her opinions of dad are what make her maternal virtues ironic. She is quick to describe dad as "nothing but a gene donor." Get her going and she will emphasize his lack of involvement in raising any of his progenies. "He makes a deposit, calls it love, then is gone." She loves describing dad like that – donor.

The thing is, dear ole mom overvalues and venerates her involvement –or lack thereof. Dad is a scoundrel in mom's eyes, but she is all too eager to let him back to make another deposit. She's none too hesitant to let others, random males, stop by for visits too. Visits resulting in even more souls added to the world, scurrying about, carrying her own genetic contribution.

Where dad fits the bill as the casual depositor of male DNA, mom is the epitome of breeder mill elite. She pops out her spawn like flowers spread pollen in the Spring.

When she encourages me to go out and explore, or to be like other "boys," it is not done for my own good. Not really. What she means is "get out." She's pooped me

out, licked me clean, set me walking, and now wants me gone. I'm in her way. She needs room for the next offspring. I'm in the world, now I have to leave her home.

I watched her do this with other siblings. Male siblings, that is. Never the girls. The girls stay. They stay and learn. They stay and serve. They are groomed into becoming mirror images.

The males mom encourages "to go explore" as soon as their sacks drop. What it is is her pushing them out, to fend for themselves, so she makes room for more –to spread her brood far and wide. When she says "go meet some new faces," what she means is go out and "make me new babies." Male or female, mom's greatest joy and sense of fulfillment is knowing her kids are having kids –breeding.

Of course, the girls of her genes are "beautiful mothers" and "wonderful providers." From what I can see, that distinction comes from getting "knocked-up" as soon and as often as physically possible. The accolades of "good provider" just reflect producing offspring that are alive at birth and breeding prolifically soon after.

My brothers don't rate as high. To mom, males are all just like dad—cloudy winter days that bring nothing but cold and wet. Males, hers or strangers alike, storm through, causing strife and disruption. To her, though the male storms possess life giving properties that she greedily opens her soul to and laps up like some castaway on a dot of an island licking a drop of rain, they all are also a nuance, a burden, and a cold misery when they move on. And males always move on. She makes that the constant in her universe.

"Meet new faces," mom tells me. What she means is "I'm through with you, leave my house." Her warm, motherly voice will wash over like honey offering encouraging sustenance—"you should see the world." What her caustic, calloused and rigid inner voice is saying is "he can't leave soon enough."

The hard truth I'm learning is she wants me gone—gone and breeding. She wants me to move on, to move out. Leave her and go mix with as many females I can cajole and seduce. She wants me to become just another gene donor. She wants me to become like the father she so detests. She doesn't care about me. She doesn't know me. She doesn't even know my name. There is some irony,

"Why are you so eager to have me leave?" This question fills my thoughts a lot. Every time I work up courage to ask it, my stomach rebels, building up with caustic juices and threatening to forcefully eject whatever happens to be digesting inside. But today the numbness born of rage and frustration tamps down and corrals back the bile and acridness of fear just long enough.

"Oh honey, I just want the best for you." Mom uses her sugary sticky voice of heart melting sweetness. She is fake sweetness, like high fructose corn syrup. Just a cheap imitation. That's my mom.

"I thought family was best. You said family was important." I imagine air filtering through the small passages of my nostrils as I breathe in and waste gasses rushing out as I exhale. This concentration on the process, of clean air moving in, waste getting forced out calms and centers my body trembling fears, my fist clenching muscles, and that mind scrambling anxiety. Well, it's supposed to do that.

"Honey, dear. This is just a mother's way." She turns up the act by adding that cuddling thing that is supposed to represent caring and empathy.

"Yes mother," I hiss through clenched teeth, "I have witnessed your ways many curdling times before. One brother after another."

"Why yes," sparkling eyes obscure the cavernous empty soul inside. "I care about all of you. Equally." Her syrupy sweet act almost enchants and ensnares.

"None of us have been able to stay around long enough for you to even get to know us." The words dribble out of me, almost stuck inside my head by the syrupy goo my mother keeps producing. A lava flow of bile helps them clear my throat.

"Now dear, you do not want to become an old woman's caretaker. You want to go and live your life. All your brothers have."

"None of my brother had much of a chance otherwise."

She 'tsks' at me as if I were some amusing, helpless baby passing gas.

"I like it here. I like the others. I'm comfortable." I'm struggling.

"Yes, yes," mom shifts as if to leave. My words are nothing but gas to her. To her, the conversation is over, not a sign of discomfort in her mien.

"I have my own home here. I don't want to leave." Nostrils flare, breathing out figurative fire. The calming breathing technique is a total failure.

"But dear," a shift in tone sparks and fades. Like an after image of a ghost that just snuck in a room and hid in the shadows, your senses see, maybe even feel the shift, but nothing remains to ground it in reality. With hardly skipping a beat she continues, "that is the family's home, not yours."

There it was. That hidden monster. Her words pierce me hide and hair. Her words are precise kill shots.

"I built that house," I persist. I breath on, and breathe my words back at her like the snorting of a furious fire breathing dragon.

"My deary, you must live, explore, find your own way." Burnt hide fluffs off me and is replaced by sticky sweetness.

"I am living!" A fiery geyser of rage courses through my veins. "I have found my way. Here."

A familiar and soul consuming silence, a silence of death, freezes the ticking seconds. Mom's countenance morphs, from sugary, unconditional love towards a favorite pup, to hell's fury, too long held back and trapped.

"Why is it so important for you that I leave?" I rush out the question before she explodes. Then I quickly add, "you've always criticized dad for just 'up and leaving.'"

That had been her gripe against dad forever. He had come and gone like a morning fog—or like a foul fart, as mom often said among "the girls."

"Your father was a no-good waste who stopped long enough to leave me with you." And that had always been her venom fodder against dad. He came, did what he

did, then was gone. All her best wishes and hopes for me though amounted to me doing the same thing to some random woman (women).

"I have a life here. A family." These weak words were at least uttered calmly.

My calm stance was annihilated by a hate-powered two sentence reply. Like an assassin's double tap—one shot to the heart, the other to the head.

"I need the house." Bang! "You just have to go. Bang!

She shot the words at me, with finality, then was gone. The air felt solid, pregnant with ire and loathing; a lingering miasma, like a corpse's caseration stench attacking a grave robbing fool.

## II

### SPERM DONOR DAD

"Hey dad."

"Freddy, son, how are you?"

Freddy? A silence of surprise follows. The expectation was one of a cold or at least an indifferent reception.

"You know who I am?" An unbelieving, child-like naiveté taints Freddy's voice. "You remember my name?"

"Why sure, son. You're my Freddy." A pause and a smile. "Son number 72 with dear, lovely Gina."

Again, Freddy Stumbles and trips over conflicting thoughts and weird emotions. His dad just labors on, a machine doing its job, humming some faintly familiar tune.

"So what have you been doing?" a prodding by an inquisitive, intrigued father.

"Mom says you're a dead-beat, good-for-nothing, sorry sperm donor."

"How is your dear mother?" the question is genuine, untainted by the sordid, bitter statement.

"She calls you something less worthy than scum and you act like she is the greatest."

The gentle humming intensifies, flowing now with a jaunty, happy rhythm.

"Why does she hate you?" Freddy tries to keep eye contact as he poses the inquiry, but he is looking through swimming eyes. Through snot-sucking breaths, Freddy succumbs to the momentum of un-dammed emotions, "She talks better of earthworms and vultures. She acts like all males are the dross that collects under the trash, yet has a revolving door policy for a new suitor every month.

The jauntily humming fades. With a slow, deep sigh, Freddy's dad sets down the spade. A plum of dust and detrivous rises into the air as he pats his chest and thighs,

creating a shimmering and shining like the din of tiny, happy fairies. He sits -a process that is like the movement of a glacier down a valley. Like that glacier taking planet-size boulders down with it, Freddy is brought down to sit next to his dad.

"Son, what's on your mind?"

"Mom says you don't care. She says you fill her up with sperm, then move on like you just dropped-off some old, unwanted clothing to charity."

"Ah, your dear mother. Those are her own words too -fill her up with sperm-, right?" His dad's old, weathered face wrinkles further with a hint of a smile.

"Why did you leave, dad?"

Creaking of trees growing and a slithering sound as new grass shoots brake through earth fill the silence. This is the type of silence the young feel with a pain and despair which is so deep the world seems like it is at an end.

"You weren't there," Freddy cries the words.

"I'm with you always, son. Always a part of you."

Freddy sighs. A wet cough takes over, after a sucking in of a snout full of snot.

"The good bits, that is." his dad adds with a snicker.

"I was alone. I am alone."

"Son, I am here. I've always been here. There is just no room for me with your mom." His dad's tone is light and every bit fatherly. He adds, "there is always room for you with me."

Freddy takes in these words. They are clarity in his foggy head. Of course there is no room for his dad. Not with all the other males his mother entertains.

"Why?" snivels Freddy. "Why does she chase people away?"

"Oh son, no. She doesn't chase people away." Before Freddy can object, his dad continues, "she encourages change." The words are made to float in the air as the wrinkled smile sends them aloft.

"Dad!"

"Your mother has her ways. It's endearing, really. But not unique. You'll learn son, females of our kind seek variety like us males gravitate towards thrills and adventure. Their nature requires it. We live for it."

"Mom wants me to leave. She kicked me out."

"That's great, son! Live. Explore. Learn."

This is not what Freddy hoped for. His dad's words, the seemingly lack of sympathy for his pain and desolation feels like a kick to his nut sacks.

"What's so great about being homeless?" Freddy's words are a splitting of atoms explosion. "What's so wonderful about being alone?" The questions float in the air like a bad smell.

"No, no, son. It's not about being alone," his dad speaks in sure, calm breaths. "It's about growing through change, seeing new faces, and learning through meeting new challenges. It's about living, not just being alive." Another smile adorns the weathered face. He adds, "stagnant is good for mold", beaver ponds, and boring, fading old folks."

"First mom kicks me out, tells me to go explore, now you tell me it's great to live alone. I don't get it."

"That's the thing, son, stay put and never reach beyond the comfortable and familiar and you'll never get it. Living is moving out, exploring, reaching beyond. The first step is a solitary thing, sure, but it can lead to the world."

"So, go explore?"

"Go live!"

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Freddy lets this idea of "living" bounce around in his head. 'Live. Sure, that makes sense.' This thought is like a wasp crashing into the confining boundaries of a glass globe. It might make sense but it still feels wrong somehow. The "get out" and she "needs the house" leave little room for interpretation or pondering, however. Freddy understands his mom's wants with clarity.

With no home to go to and no one else to turn to, Freddy goes in an aimless walk. His meandering are like the floaty flight of a bird riding thermals. From the grounded eye's perspective, that bird's flying seems aimless and confused. That's because the grounded can't see what the bird sees. For Freddy, his wonderings appears wretched, but that is because he is looking at it from a narrow perspective –his view as the dejected and forlorn soul.

'Get out.' 'Explore.' 'Go live.' Freddy holds counsel with himself as he wonders about, ruminating on his plight.

"What was so wrong with my life?" he asks the empty sky. "I like my life!"

"What do you have?" asks an atom of an echo of a voice in his head. "What were you?" the voice challenges. "Who walks with you?" the tiny echoed voice presses.

"I walk alone!" Freddy screams at the random, innocent soft buzzing of the wood's shadowed world. "I walk alone," he repeats as a young soul rising to the heavens might say goodbye to the world he is leaving. "What's so wrong with that?" The question is absorbed, lost, in the cotton din of the wood's indifferent existence.

"I'll just leave, then. Yeah! I'll leave them all. See how they like that." Only the trees and the wood's many uninterested critters hear his new rant. Their quivering and scurrying has nothing to do with Freddy or his angst. It is their life, their living –do what is needed. The fact though does not slow Freddy down. Oblivious to their indifference, he takes on an ant's foraging walk, determined.

As the day's blazing sun slides just past zenith, Freddy is purposely on his way. Where? He has no idea. "I don't care," he declares to no one and everyone, and rushes on, one driving step after another, towards nowhere.

"I don't care," is what he keeps telling himself as he resolves to pack his things. "That's the first thing."

There is nothing to pack. He has nothing. "Nothing," says his sigh. To the world, to his sullen spirit he says, again and again, "I don't care."

(The trees, the critters, the world, don't care either.)

# III

## CIRCLES

Days may have slipped away for all the pain and muscle putrefying fatigue Freddy is feeling. Every joint in him feels like iron hinges knowing only acid rain, never oil, or simply precision clockwork victim to blunt heavy tool management. His muscles feel as if they were sloughing off or were wilting to wisps of useless dust from neglect and over use. 'You are sorely out of shape,' Freddy reflects. The joke 'round is a shape' no longer seems funny to him. And if he is honest with himself, shame would weigh on him as heavy as the fatigue for having walked only for a couple of hours, not days like his tired body is alleging.

The forest around Freddy, once a familiar home, feels different to him. Once, he drank in and relished the chirping and songs of birds and bugs; he soaked in the cool breezes, with its many scents. What Freddy feels now is dour and threatening, like a familiar hand throttling without care. The forest's music now is a cacophony of cackling laughs, jeers, and jibs, all aimed at him. They ridicule his every step, his very existence. 'Look at the sorry cretin, huffing and puffin, after just a few steps!' That is what Freddy hears from the chirps and squawks, accepting his asthenia of body and spirit.. What once seemed like lively, playful hopping and fluttering comes to him now as aggressive posturing and kamikaze attacks aimed to humiliate, maim, and kill.

To Freddy, the forest is staging a consorted effort to stop him. The forest is against him. There is no doubt in his tired mind. Before, a sense of peace and an invigorating pleasure came with every breath and every step within the forest, now he shakes in fear and chokes in the oppressive burden he feels is closing in on him. The forest is throttling him, denying him life sustaining air. Every breath is a struggle, like trying to breathe under water, with the dark force of death rushing in. And all the living things of the forest, the animals, the trees, all the fascinating insects, are working together to snuff Freddy's existence.

Freddy's own body seems to be against him. Every step jabs and pierces his ballasts of will, robbing him of precious resolve. Sweat might as well be his blood abandoning him. The pain and agony from his extremities, a sensation of tissue splitting and exposing his insides, comes in wave after wave, as signals of collapse and total body failure rush his brain. It is his body, failing and breaking apart with every new step. 'How much longer to endure this?' he wonders.

At what seems like his last, weakest seconds come blood curdling screeches, screams, and squawks, riding the forest breeze like carrion riding the sky, coasting yet homing in on the freshly dead. Whatever evil there is, it is coming for him. He is certain of it. Freddy sees his still warm eyes, kind, innocent, chocolate brown, being plucked out of his sockets like strawberries freshly dipped in chocolate by the forest's evil.

"I can't," Freddy declares to the threatening forest. It is a weak gesture only reflecting his fears.

"No!" he screams at the menacing, shadowy woods.

Another step. Forward. His brain may be saying no, but his body keeps moving, carried forward and onward by some primal, unrecognizable momentum.

The shrieks and piercing monstrous catcalls ooze closer through the forest shadowy cover. Freddy can feel them, taunting his senses, rattling the fragile, sensitive bones of his inner ears with their terrifying percussions of evil intent. The sounds penetrate hide, liquefying his essence, from hair follicle to solid bone, chasing his soul into some dark recess to become a sniveling, writhing, scared specter of a life. Still, his body moves, one step after the other.

In a blinding flash he is free. Air, fresh and pure, rushes at him, caressing his nostrils and inflating his lungs with clean, liberating, benign air. The shadowy, repressive, malicious darkness of the forest, the manacles of washed out, murky browns and greens, and the restraining force of the felt but unseen dissolve, to be replaced by simple, warning, inviting light. Throttling hands become embracing, welcoming bright, pure, bountiful, beautiful sun light.

Seconds that drift like years pass. Freddy wishes for lifetimes instead of peaceful seconds. His body, with all its senses, essence, and soul coalesce back into one, whole again. He has endured. He feels alive again. It feels good. He feels right once more. Complete.

The eyes adjust. They see light and shapes and things. They show Freddy THEM. A quickening returns, laced with a new wave of fear and weariness, and a scattering of odd joy and familiar shame. Much shame.

The screeching and taunting cries still haunting his insides transform into laughter and childish, playful calls. Clarity. No avaricious calls for blood, pain, and death. No monstrous creatures looking for their next soul to tear and corrupt, and a body to rip apart and consume. Freddy's tormentors are happy, frolicking, playful children at a playground.

"Get him!"

"Catch me if you can."

"You're it!"

Just a din of benignant joy and unmolested blissfulness twisted and made malicious by the darkness of the forest and the fatigue of the body.

"I'm a fool," Freddy muses.

"I feared this?" he asks the clear, fresh, beautiful air around him.

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Pow! The ball is a blind bird in a panic rush, going wide and moving wild. It makes contact with Freddy's head. The welt is minor but the sudden surprise and pain bring Freddy back from his mental sojourn. His numbing shame is driven into some cobweb recess of the mind.

"Not a foe's blow," Freddy muses as he spots the offending ball. "Not a kill shot."

"Hey Freddy," a young, familiar, and friendly voice echoes in Freddy's head, chasing away the bong of the offending but innocent and harmless ball blow. The owner of the voice, and chaser of errant ball, broad smile radiating youthful glee and peace, rushes close, recovers the ball, and blasts away.

"Hi Freddy!"

"Freddy!"  
"It's the Fred-miester."

Cries of recognition and joy from the romping gang of blissful youths serve as salve to Freddy's aggrieved body and soul. A blink and the happy gang is gone, carefree and wild with unencumbered joy; Gazelles without predators, enjoying tall grasses, comradeship, and peace.

The speckle of peace, ease, and levity fade as quick as the scent of a single rose carried in the wind. All that burst of delight and thrill blinks away as hasty and fleet of foot as the youngsters can run, skip, tumble, and dance away.

"I'm back," Freddy whispers at the back of the retreating bodies at play. Dread, pain, and anger rush in to fill the sudden void. "I'm back!" he hisses through gnashed teeth at a world indifferent and cold.

Hours of walking, hours of agony, hours of arduous toil, tribulation and humiliation only to have traveled in a circle. 'A blasted circle!' Freddy is right back where he started. He is back. Back to the home that does not want him.

Freddy splits from his body, rising into the air in concept if not reality, reacting to a touch on the shoulder.

"What's up Freddy?" a meek voice inquires. "What 'ya doing? What's got you so spooked?" the voice belongs to Harry, but to Freddy, it is another vicious apparition of the forest, come to drag him back, to finally rip his body to pieces and feed on his poor, sad soul. If he had any energy reserves Freddy might have rushed away like a Gazelle in flight from a ravenous lion. Instead, he just melts to the ground. His bones dissolved and unsupportive, leaving the body as nothing more than a sorry sack of miserable goo.

"Oh buddy, what's going on with ya?" Harry's voice drips with concern and distress. Freddy looks bad.

Through sobs, sniveling misfires, and a barrage of over dramatic deep sighs, Freddy gives an explanation of his arduous flight from home, his harrying travel through the wicked woods, and his absolute, no doubt in his mind, no other choice need to put distance between what he once thought as a perfect, loving home and life, and himself.

"Yeah, I know." The blithe and trite words resonate, hitting Freddy like a sudden frigid blast of air while stepping out of a shower that should have been pleasantly hot but instead was so cold as to freeze the snot dripping from a cold-burnt nose. The "yeah, I know" is so dispassionately yet familiarly dour to Freddy to knock the wind – and will to care- out of him.

Sharp Harry catches the forlorn and defeated glint in Freddy's conflicted eyes. "I do know," he says. "Ever hear the phrase bete noire?" Freddy stays silent but the eyes that had looked frozen dead blink, as if saying "go on."

"It's foreign," Harry offers. "Doesn't matter," stalls Freddy's outcry. ""It refers to a person no one likes. I read that somewhere. There was something about the phrase. It struck me. I am that bete noire."

Freddy would have interjected. He would have countered or disagreed, listing Harry's many qualities. The truth though, Harry is not a popular, liked individual. The

term pariah applies. No, no one really likes Harry. That reality makes Freddy wonder, "why?"

"Let's leave this place, together." Harry throws this suggestion out before Freddy is done ruminating Harry's pariah status. With the suggestion floating in the air between the two, Freddy realizes he really can't—won't—dismiss the thought. It actually feels right. It is a logical solution. It rings as clear and obvious, as if it was foretold.

"Yeah," is all Freddy can articulate from his muddled mind. His body though seems already in motion, recovered and replenished. With queerly chary steps, he follows behind Harry the pariah, heading for the very same haunting woods that nearly devoured Freddy moments earlier.

"I don't care," Freddy tells himself.

## **HARRY**

Returning to the dark forest should have brought an apoplectic panic, turning Freddy's body and soul into cold, primordial ooze, but somehow, following in Harry's purposeful, confident wake through this once suppressive, hostile blackness, now is right. There is now a surreal refulgence to Harry, like an ethereal glow. The glow seems to part the darkness as if pushing it aside and back, chasing it, forcing a loser's surrender and retreat.

Why was Harry a pariah then? In asking himself this, Freddy realizes he knows very little about Harry.

"Harry, how come you want to..." Freddy is unsure how to finish; how to pry. What fits best? 'Want to leave?' 'Want to run away?' 'Want to hide?' Prying into the affairs of others isn't Freddy's way. He has never been keen on intruding into people's lives or dealing in gossip. Many would call him shy or introverted. The more coarse and meddlesome say he's antisocial. Having a 'fauroche indifference' is how one elder spoke described him.

"I'm tired of all the hypocrisy and indifference of them all, if you must know." Harry is not so shy or subtle. "And I've done things to people there," he adds as an end to the discussion, turning and walking on before the words have all been vocalized.

Freddy stays silent, pensive. He's conflicted now. He studies this Harry, trudging through the woods, surefooted and lithe. What were some of the things he'd heard about this character now leading him, things he tried not to heed or give credence.

Ugly is the physical description creeping up in Freddy's mind. The more kind among the gossipers called Harry common and plain. Just days ago Freddy heard one of his mother's girlfriends say, "that Harry wants love and lasting companionship. How dull is that?" 'Yikes!' Freddy cringes at the memory.

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Harry chooses to set up camp in a small clearing where a large old tree has lost its reach for the heavens, toppling over, exposing its huge root ball, while the once proud trunk and limbs take a forever horizontal slumber. The pulled up root ball leaves a flat, clear space of soft earth and also provides a protective wall. There's also a cool,

clear water babbling brook near by. 'It actually sounds like it is babbling,' Freddy thinks with childlike amusement.

Settled in, soothed by the babbling brook's music and soft, dancing glow of the campfire, Freddy studies his newly truculent companion. Their passage through the frightful, once suffocating forest had been safe and uneventful. No shadowy spooks reaching wooden tentacles at them. No vines slithering into their path, intent on stumbling and ensnaring the trespassers. No. Darkness laid still, unthreatening. Birds only chirped their banal bird songs. No jeers or sneers. This peace gives Freddy space to reflect and cogitate.

Harry is not hairy. This is one thought that surfaces in Freddy's mind with the subtleness of a fart in a well attended wake.

"They... WE use to tease you about that as kids," Freddy's words burp and cough out of him. "I mean..." his speech and the thoughts that feeds it trail away like an illusive field mouse eluding the hungry Falcon.

"I know what you're talking about," Harry fills the new quiet. "Hair. Everyone teased me then. Still do."

So it comes. Harry is not his real —original—name.

"Bernard. Haven't heard it in forever. Harry has been it for me for so long I don't see myself as anything other now."

"Kids can be cruel."  
"Adults will be crueler."

Silence joins them again, soothed by the soft crackling of burning wood and that ever present melody of the brook. The babbling brook's song is sleep's siren. Neither traveling companion is able to resist the call.

In sleep, Harry dreams of the cruelty of kids. He has never come to understand it. It isn't as if he could help how he looked then. Yet the taunts and ceaseless deriding beat him under; drowned him in malice.

There is revenge. Oh, he has enjoyed some get-back. Many tormentors have woken to shaved bodies. Streaks of wild colors have also adorned many of his tormentor's hair. These forays into mischief taught Harry stealth and extreme survival. These are skills that have served him well, as he has drifted into lonerville. The revenge has been sweet, but yet to be fulfilling.

In seeking that love and companionship, Harry finds that adulthood does not also mean compassion, empathy, or tolerance. Most girls have avoided him. Avoid him still. The few who dare to look his way cringe at anything beyond a curious rump and gene donation.

Here too Harry has taken a covert approach, spreading his genes through deception and an abundance of flattery. Disguises have been his best rouse. Once in a darken room, his hairless body matters little, so long as his thrusts and immersions are swift, fulfilling, and deeply penetrating. Those duped will never denounce the trickery, for their physical satisfaction came in the end.

To Harry, the revenge and empty connections are not what he wants out of his life. The thoughts of what life has been offering him have an ebullient effect on his dreams, not to mention his interactions with females back home. Leaving is his best escape. A right course. In time, Freddy will come to know and understand. Hopefully.

## **JACK**

The rising of that great ball of fire in the sky announces a new day's arrival. The two travelers trudge through the woods in contemplative silence. Only their steps through the leaves, gravel, and grasses announcing their travel. Nature's din encircles the two, holding them to a path through its inner, shadowy secrets.

Just before midday the two exit the forest to stare over a small valley and an opalescent blue water tarn just off in the distance. Between the travelers and the cold, clear waters of the lake is a field of tall grasses. The grass stocks wave and willow to the caressing touch of a mountain wind. Moving to the grasses' rhythmic dance is a furry head, bobbing up and down.

The head belongs to Jack. Freddy and Harry tentatively approach, noting what task he is so earnestly endeavoring, and decide to continue walking by. Jack never wavers or pauses. His protruding lips engulf his appendage -a fully enlarged and blood-filled phallus—like a suckling chit seeking life giving nourishment from an engorged teat. Sucking, slurping sounds add to the field's soft, wind-driven song.

Once out of earshot from the enterprising Jack, the two travelers break their palpable silence.

"Jacking then is not his only vice," quips Harry.

"Didn't know you could do that to yourself."

The name Jack had long ago been bestowed on Oscar -his true name—for his incessant, impulsive, and obsessive need for physical exploitation.

"He does like to masturbate," Freddy adds. "A lot. Always has."

On the two travelers go, sharing tales heard and gossip often reluctantly absorbed through resisting ears, all about Jack and his jacking peculiarity -his unique proclivity.

With the mesmerizing shine and sparkling of the lake's waters and their soft patting upon the shore, Freddy and Harry slow, becoming comfortably somnolent. Good time for a quick repose.

"Nap?" Harry asks in a sleep induced slur.

"Hm, hm," returns Freddy.

Jack is on them moments later, intruding on their blissful napping. Through a barrage of comments and questions, he pleads a case to join them. He begs. A pleading reminiscent of the many termagants Freddy and Harry were hoping to never hear or see again.

As Jack's stories flow, it turns out the women back home, a large sampling of them at least, finally chased Jack away. Tired of his selfish, wasteful masturbatory obsession.

Freddy and Harry agree to allow Jack to join their travels, though they quickly but politely pass on the proffered hand meaning to seal the agreement.

"Yeah, okay, we're cool," Freddy says to the outstretched hand, waving it away.

Ennui replaces contempt, so the trio settles down for a meal, with perhaps another nap to follow.

The meal is simple and forgettable. The sleep goes longer than planned. Once awake, they are in haste to put more distance between themselves and all that they want to leave way behind.

Scrambling to find a more suitable and distant spot to set a proper camp, the three circle the small lake, heading towards some rocky outcroppings sighted just inside the forest's edge.

"There, that should do," announces Harry, pointing to the grouping of bald boulders protruding through the verdant thickness of the forest.

Like the rejected, errant travelers, this blemish of bare earth in the thickly fertile forest turns a cold, hard surface to life.

## **BETO**

The crimsons, violets, and flowing yellows of fields of blooming sunflowers of another day's gloaming give in to the drab grays and shadowy blacks of night. The traveling troupe settle on a craggy plot of semi clear land within the oppressive forest. They stumble on the spot by luck and chance rather than smarts or intuition. Had the spot not opened up to them like a open-mouthed yawn invites a fly, the forest would have picked them off like fruit and added their bodies to the forest floor's detritus and compost.

"This is the definition of an aa landscape," Beto speaks to deaf ears.

The trio knew Beto and his know-it-all, blathering tendencies. Beto had just joined the marching trio, merging in with their procession, sharing random, mostly worthless facts, without as much as a hello or where you going. And the trio accepted his addition without pause, thinking only, "there goes the silence." Now they were four sojourners.

"I don't have paruresis, by definition, but I can't always pee if stressed." The statement flows out of Beto as if he is addressing a captive audience, but again he speaks to deaf ears.

Not addressing anyone in particular and not fazed one bit by the other's apparent indifference to him, he continues, sharing his infinite useless knowledge. A vast (self professed) intellect the others know to ignore and disregard. Blurts of useless, questionable knowledge are too frequent to garner any attention. Freddy, Harry, and Jack –plus many others—hear mostly wah, wah, wah.

Beto is finally paid attention when, because of his supposed higher intellect, he takes it upon himself to start the group's campfire. He performs the task by finding and dragging a chunk of tree trunk, the largest possibly ever, into a small circular area he

brushed cleared. He douses the dry, woody artifact with a highly combustible fluid. Suffocating and smothering the dead wood with the liquid, he reasons, will facilitate the ignition and subsequent combustion.

The spark Beto creates exists for less than a second before it reacts with the saturated wood. The resulting fire flashes out like an arm of plasma being thrust out and away from the body of the angry sun. It is a price fighter's jab of burning mass and energy, reaching up and out from its core, to blink out before a breath of thought can be moved from one neuron to another in any of the other's mind.

"Stop!"

"No."

"What the... ?"

These are thoughts that never make it into sound by Beto's companions. Instead, lone syllables and ideas are released, only to be pummeled and consumed by the succeeding fire flash.

"Oh, Beto. Are you okay?" Freddy is the sensitive one. (And is the only one who feels any empathy for Boom Boom Beto.)

"You are a total dumbass." Harry, on the other hand, just barely tolerates Beto – and Beto's "higher mind"-- holds nothing back.

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After checking the scorched, charcoaled remains of Beto's campfire attempt, the others turn to the forest in search of proper fire wood. Beto stays behind to tend to his wounds. His pride is singed –and much of his hair is eradicated; to the roots.

A lifetime later there is a proper burning campfire. It cracks and flares like an exited child with superstar dancer in their hearts, but caught in a confined, restrictive cage. The animated light from the flames shape and reshape shadowy images for the enraptured campers. If wings were the group's mode of transport, the gathered would float towards the fire as a siren calls the naive and virile.

Night and all its shadowy minions becomes king. No hint of daylight remains. Only the fire's ghostly luminance keeps the group from being engulfed by the night's living blackness. Full stomachs and tired bodies add to the fire's enchantment. No surprise then when a stray ember alights a dry hard hack bush ringing the campfire. Nobody notices. The ember feeds on the succulent sappy bush and grows. The little, benign in size, hope of a flame evolves into a living, breathing, menacing fire. From a glint of light floating harmlessly over a contained campfire to growing, roaring fire, it feeds on the truculent bush and quickly transforms into a breathing, writhing, burning bush.

Still, none of the weary, bleary eyed travelers notice. Their eyes are open, sure, but see nothing but the dancing flames of the bewitching campfire.

Maybe it is the screeching, unearthly, make your skin crawl demonic sounds breaking the silence of the night that reaches into their senses, demanding to be heard and heeded. Or maybe it is the flash bang of light that sears retinas and punches at optical nerves. Perhaps it is that sudden appearance of a writhing, contorting, convulsing, and burning body that, like a malicious hostile apparition, is suddenly among them, where a split second earlier there was just them and the darkness of night.

The group does finally pull away from their campfire trance to take note of Manny's arrival.

"Jesus," cries Freddy.

"Christ," seems to both express Jack's surprise and energize his jackrabbit jerk backwards.

Harry produces a few more sensible words, thrusting them like weapons while also coming to stand erect, in an offensive pose, as if ready to spar with an advancing foe. "Holy shit fire," he spits out at the intruder.

It is Beto's reaction that has the most profound –and memorable, not to mention beneficial—result. It seems his self-professed higher intellect comes with a longer time delay. It does not drive his body to respond to the sudden intrusion with any speed. While his friends are on their feet, intoning words of surprise, Beto remains seated, unresponsive. The he comes alive like a lightning strike.

With the trained precision and speed of a professionally trained gymnast, his muscles coordinate an acrobatic maneuver. The move is totally blind, backwards, and woefully inappropriate. In its haste, the initial beauty of coordinations becomes the arms swinging of a wild, crazy man. Beto goes from a cross leg, sitting position, serene and Zen-like, like a Buddhist deep in meditation, to a frog's last ditch survival hop, all limbs spread wide and wild, accomplishing a backwards leap.

The backwards spring shoots him back a short distance, where he lands on his haunches, a hand's reach away from the newly arrived Manny. Rather than performing a feat of self-defensive moves or simply reaching a helping, welcoming hand to the intruder, Beto does him a greater, though unintended service.

The intruder, Manny, is on fire. In a fully subconscious, automatic fear response—which Beto later relates as a well planned, expertly executed maneuver—a powerful, long-lasting, and life-saving, quenching stream of urine shoots out of Beto's body, dousing the burning Manny.

"Oh my God," Beto says, in a disguise of the dread, embarrassment and adrenalin drowned terror coursing through his body. Maybe there is something to his boasting of higher intelligence, to be able to put a sentence together despite the otherwise totally automatic, uncoordinated response.

"Oh wow! No. Look, it's Em," Freddy says. His wide grin reveals a regained level headedness and mirth for what just took place.

"Em?" Jack asks, still in a stupefied stupor.

Harry speaks with action, not words. He is on top of Manny quicker than a grain of sand falls through the hourglass, slapping lingering hot spots and crimson embers still clinging to Manny's urine soaked body.

"Em and Manny are both homophobics of the name EMANUEL, often used to express close relation and familiarity, as in within family units."

Before Harry or Jack can interject, Beto's intellectual (and totally erroneous) babble, Freddy says, "he usually goes by Manny."

Beto has at least enough sense, or at least enough understanding of Freddy's facial expression, with the rolling of eyes, not to speak on the name thing any further.

The group's attention shifts back to the now responsive and somewhat alert Manny. He is brushing off soot and urine-soaked bush detritus from his body, a rueful grimace altering his usually calm countenance.

"Appellations or sobriquets. Maybe cognomen." Manny speaks in calm, even tones as if nothing has happened. Looking around, making eye contact with all in the troupe, he adds, "for out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."

An awkward silence suffuses the group, like a fog creeping over a broad landscape, a smothering blanket that robs all of air and speech. Even the forest, with all its din and song, is bereft of voice and music.

### **MANNY**

"What the hell?" Harry murmurs to the silence.

"Away from me, Satan!" Manny cries in response.

"Dude, Manny, are you okay?" Freddy's soothing tone and warm touch aim to calm the strangely flighty new arrival.

"When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,'" Manny answers.

As odd as Manny's retort strikes them, at least it was spoken calmly.

"Curious," Beto says. "Random obiter dictums or abstruse reflections."

"Not now Beto, please," whispers Freddy. He returns to the wide-eyed and rather hairy looking Manny. In Freddy's mind, Manny looks as if he'd just woken from a deep sleep after suffering someone's harrowing prank.

"Hey Manny, you need anything? Maybe you should sit." Freddy gestures to a vacant chair. "Something to drink?"

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few," is Manny's response. "I am a bit thirsting," he adds.

All scramble for bottles or canteens, offering them to the bewildered Manny. He takes one of the proffered bottles, drops to the ground, and empties the bottle like a desert on the last oasis water hole after too long without rain.

Manny hands back the empty bottle, looks around at the staring faces, and asks, "what are you guys up to?"

Sighs and restrained chuckles fill the air. No one is sure Manny is okay, but at least he's made a sentence that is not freaky weird.

"We still have some rations. Are you hungry?" Jack has been silent until now. (He should have stayed silent.)

"I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear." Manny is speaking again as if addressing some large, clerical

crowd. Just as quickly his tone changes, mellows, and add, "I could eat something, and maybe wash up a bit." He pads his shoulders and arms, dislodging ash and flakes of singed hair. His movement releases a faintly redolent scent, not unlike the smell of a wet dog that just rolled around a puddle of urine mixed with ash.

The group finally settles around the campfire, watching Manny eat and drink in a childlike contentment. None seems willing to engage him in conversation for fear of triggering another flurry of odd phrases. Like the prickling sense in the back of your neck as you contemplate stabbing a mass of something that is producing an odd but faintly familiar buzzing. You're thinking, 'should I touch it?' while the prickling seems to be screaming, 'run!'

Without prompting, Manny speaks, "'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests."

"We have pelts and blankets, and a fire to keep us warm," replies Beto.

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men," Manny says.

"You got it, buddy. Good night," replies Beto, and lays down to sleep.

"Thank you," Manny whispers as he melts sideways to the ground. He is sound asleep before his eyes close.

Not wanting to agitate what has been an odd and disturbing exchange, the others quietly clean up, feed more wood to the fire, and set out to find a nest... a place to hole up... to lay down to sleep. They secure a bed to sleep the weird night away.

'Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.' The words reverberate in Freddy's head as he drifts off. A shudder wrecks his slumbering body. A thought invades his fading mind, 'contagious?' before it merges with forgettable dreams.

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It is through Harry's incessant prodding that Manny tells of how he comes to the burning bush. Of course, the tale comes with many of the now familiar random weirdness.

"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

"Oh Christ help us!" Jack says, giving words to the thoughts of the others.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." That is Manny's retort before going on to tell his story.

Manny marks the beginning with, "but I tell you..." Rolling eyes prepare for the worst. "I took to the forest to be alone. To center myself. To think. To meditate."

Manny's mien seems to shift, to transform with undulation like a cartoonist would depict a chameleon's color changes.

"My steps took me deep into woods without me knowing where I was going. I might have been lost, but I didn't seem to care. There was a peace about me, filling me full of inner balance. I walked as if in a trance, breathing in life without all its heavy baggage."

"I came on them without noticing. Lurid, filthy, grisly, loud bipeds. I had walked into their campsite without even realizing. The stone striking my head made me look up. That and their hideous smell and monstrous screeching. Three beasts slowly resolved in my vision."

"They were caught in awe. Awe and fear. In their eyes also reflected a vicious, barbaric hate and injurious intent."

"Daemon hell," utters one in a vile, nasal speech.  
"I'd said those abominations roamed here," says another.

Their words kept infesting the air like the rot of swamp. Whatever else they may have spoken I do not know. I was frozen in place, transfixed by what I felt was an opportunity to unite, learn, and share.

"Their intent was much different. I can only surmise that my inaction and tranquil demeanor empowered –and perhaps enraged—them. Faster than I ever imagined their two spindly, fragile limbs could move them, they were upon me. Like a horde of crazed hyena they hammered my body, beating and kicking with abandonment. All the while sounds spewed from their tiny, oblong mouths, calling for what must have been demonic powers and blessings. I stood stupefied. Then I was flat on the ground, weighed down by these spindly, fiendish creatures. With bewildering dexterity and efficiency, I was tied up."

"It appears I had come on them as they were breaking camp. They finished this chaotic exercise as I lay in filth, watching, helpless. The horrors were yet to come.

"Carrying their burdens, and leaving behind unimaginable amounts of waste and destruction, they forced me to make my way along a path towards a desolate hill top. Their physical and verbal assaults kept me moving over unfamiliar, hazardous terrain, over any objection from my mind or exhausted, battered body."

"They left me on the hill top, hung on the carcass of a once mighty tree. I hung there, arms wide and legs overlapped together, for the sun to bake and nature's carrion lovers to take me."

"Three days passed in what felt like a lifetime. I was sure all my life force had left me, when I started hearing strange song-like noises. The sounds neared and coalesced into words."

"I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn.' The voice carried up to the hilltop and into my ears as breaths refilling a dying body's lungs."

"From the mischief of those who practice Secret Arts,' continued the sing-song voice."

"I saw it then; another biped. Alone. A sort of chenille over one shoulder and a ornate tome held reverently by bony appendages."

"By the Glorious Morning Light, And by the Nigh when it is still, ...' the thing seem to find words from the tome, reciting with adoration."

"Therefore, do not treat the orphan with harshness, nor repulse the petitioner.' The sounds from the creature gave me hope. I felt a healing of my many pains."

"After a while I noticed the biped go through some peculiar routine of bending down to rest on knobby knees, then coming back up on those spindly legs. It also spoke to the sky, in that sing-song voice. In a start I realized the biped was done and leaving."

"If I made any noise I cannot say for sure. The creature's departure carried it to the hilltop where it would have continued on beyond, except that as it reached the place where I hung, my body reflexed, releasing waters."

"For three days I hung, life slipping away from me. Hope left me, one breath at a time. I was a deciduous tree losing its leaves, until only a bare trunk remains."

"As-Salaam alaikum,' were the stranger's words to me. And after sharing some water with me, he said, 'Allah has bestowed His gifts of sustenance more freely on some of you than on others; those more favored are not going to throw back their gifts to those whom their right hands possess.' Done speaking, he turned and departed.

"As Salem lay come,' I shouted at his retreating body. 'Peace,' I whispered to the ghost image of his countenance.

"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?' The question sent a strange energy through my body much like sustenance buoys the starving."

"I was cut down and set free by some stranger; a stranger who read words to the sky and did not shy from any in need. These bipeds mystify and terrify. Frightening yet intriguing. 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"Re-energized, I took to walking. I had no destination. I paid no heed to any bearings. By nightfall, hungry, dead of exhaustion, and surely delirious, a bright light in the darkness of night called to me. I saw, I followed a beacon of hope chasing away the blackness of despair."

"Young man, I say to you, get up!" With that, Manny takes off walking. His tale told.

## **SQUIRRELY**

The shelter and vantage of the campsite is left behind long after dawn warms their bodies and their eyes see more texture than shadowy unknowns. No early risers in this group. The five companions move with a pace to match an elderly couple strolling, with no destination. This group is aimless, with the only collective thought of moving. Their only aim is to be away from where they come from. It is not running, their thoughts insist; just leaving something bad behind.

Conversations follow the songs of birds and din of the creatures of the forest, fading in and out, holding to no great significance or grand importance. They are the breaths of life taken without thought or deep deliberation. The creaking of trees, rustling of leaves, and chirping of birds fill the silence as well and with as much weight as any verbal exchange occurring among the group. Each traveler finds his own peace in the din of their minds, just as well as the din of the forest that envelopes them.

"Dudes! Hi ya." Silence is breached by this intruder's explosion into their midst. To the stolid travelers, the intrusion is a laughing outbreak at a funeral.

"Yo guys," shouts the intruder. His greeting carries through the forest by his frenetic movements. He bounces around the stoic group, his words shooting out, ricocheting off the travelers.

"What'ya doing? Where you going? Is this one of those walkabouts? Shouldn't you be singing or chanting something?" The questions are a rapid fire interrogation aimed at no one in particular, with no particular expectation for answers. No one in particular wants to acknowledge the harried interrogator.

"Hey Freddy," the furball of spitfire and vim finally stops, coming to stand in front of the defacto leader of the group.

"Hello Chip," Freddy's clipped words show his struggle with restraint, like one might speak to a super hyper, extremely inquisitive child that just won't sit and shut up. A child who happens to be the boss' or most important client's child.

"I go by Squirrely now," the intruder announces, as if it were a minor, insignificant detail.

"Squirrely," whispers Harry. More as a thought than a comment for others to hear. A mental question. Verbalized. Still, Squirrely hears.

"Hi, I'm Squirrely, and you are?" Squirrely actually extends a hand in greeting. A hand which Harry only stares at with a hint of amusement.

"But you're a chipmunk," Jack says.

"A big fella though, no?" Harry adds, looking at the others.

"I take after my parents. They were big too. Or so I've heard. Never knew them." Squirrely reveals these facts as if they were inane facts about the color of dead leaves on the dark forest floor.

"Squirrel. From Vulgar Latin, 'scurious,' then Greek, 'skiouros,'" Eyes roll and sighs flow out as Beto speaks the unsolicited facts. "Skia, meaning 'shadow' and Oura, for 'tail.'"

Making a menacing, serious as death eye contact with Squirrely, Beto says, "you, sir, have neither the coloring nor the bushy tail of a squirrel."

"Well, chipmunks are sometimes referred to as Red Squirrels," Freddy says through a forced smile, in an attempt at levity.

A short silence is broken by Squirrely's howl of 'Jacob's ladder!' Before anyone can react to the scream, or even understand his words, Squirrely rushes at Beto, jumping from the startled Beto's thigh, up to his shoulders, to head, to then somersault off, all while crying out "climb Jacob's ladder!"

Freddy just about splits his side holding back a laugh. Squirrely's antics bring back childhood memories. Climbing Jacob's ladder had been one of those cruel kid's thing that poked fun at someone who was different or had some peculiarity.

Beto, then known as Albert, was so afflicted. Different. Peculiar. His distinct coloring, with white to silver spots on his head, set against an otherwise dark body,

stood stark and obvious. That unique coloring and Beto's propensity to stiffen and puff when excited or agitated, gave rise to the nickname "Prince Albert."

Freddy says the name out loud, "Prince Albert." Though Squirrely keeps chanting "climb Jacob's ladder," he does not try to climb Beto again. At Freddy's words, a palpable new silence engulfs them all.

The sometimes surprisingly adroit Harry catches on to the reference though. Before being over taken by fits of laughter, he declares, "Beto. Albert. Prince Albert... I get it!" Laughter gets a grip on him and bends him over in fits and spasms.

With perhaps a hint of a smile, Manny says, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

In whispers Freddy explains to the less sharp Jack and Manny. "A Prince Albert is a piercing of the phallus. Put a metal hoop or rod through your... rod." A slight flickering of their eyes and a bristling of hide suggests at least partial understanding.

"The Jacob's ladder refers to multiple piercings running up along the... shaft, from sacks to head. More or less." Freddy hides his smile. His only outward expression is a shrug. In unison though, all turn to look at Beto, who has gone stiff and bristled.

A thunderous laughter tares through the forest like wild fire commanded by an angry wind, chasing critters into hiding and birds to flee in flight. Not a living thing is left untouched by the traveler's cackles, hoots, and mirthful howling. Eventually even Beto's iced mouth cracks and shows the teeth white hint of a smile.

"So Beto was once Albert. Alberto, really," Jack says. "Chip here is now Squirrely. Harry isn't hairy. Freddy, what about you?" His summary and oddly serious inquiry surprises them all.

"Ooh, Freddy's nom de guerre," Beto says, a mischievous grin adorning his face.

"I'm Freddy. Just Freddy. Have been for a long time." He pauses to look at the motley group. "Dear ole mom though named me Faustus." He stops again, a smile filling his face. "I know. Faustus. Dad is the one who started calling me Freddy. He said mom gave me that other name out of spite." Freddy does try to sound indifferent and unemotional, but a pinch of bile still peppers his words.

"Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power," Beto tells no one. "German lore," he adds as a footnote.

Before any other can speak, Manny says, "a student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master."

With that, the group moves on. Now they are six. (Twelve, if counting the double personalities.)

Squirrely has so endeared himself –except with Beto- that he is accepted after just some pleading and haranguing.

"Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers," Manny speaks to unhearing backs. He is last in line, resigned to his own odd world.

(Squirrely doesn't follow a trail. He swings wildly and carelessly from trees, runs through bushes unimpeded, and otherwise simply bulldozes his own way through the woods. Obviously happy.)

The others hear him saying, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself, he can do only what he sees his father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."

Squirrely is heard saying, "Sun?" as he tries, unsuccessfully, to jump over a prickly Ivy bush. "Son of the Father..." fades after him.

# IV

## **MANNY'S GET BACK**

Something is wrong. The group can sense it as they travel through a narrow clump of trees flanking a small stream. Steep mountain cliffs rise to either side, intensifying the malevolent oddity of the path, as if the confining space is a focal point for evil. This disturbance, this sense of wrongness can be felt by the travelers, prickling their flesh and bristling their hide, but none can speak of the why or what of it. One thing they all seem sure about, there is a malignancy poking and hissing at them. It's like an angry ghost, having no substance or mass, taking shots and throwing punches at the group.

"This is a perfect example of a canyon, with it's high, steep sides," Beto's whispers float forward to his traveling companions. The words fight to cut through the canyon's vapors of green and browns, of hints of light and shadow of solid somethings. Beto's words slap their ears with an almost wet smack, just as their lungs drown with the swamp-like thickness of the air.

"A spooky canyon," Beto manages to add through a quiver in his voice and a shiver of his body. Both quiver and shiver go on long after his words are submerged in the canyon's thick atmosphere.

Haunting screams, frenzied and menacing, begin just as the clump of trees thin and open to a craggy gorge. A wide valley shimmers like a desert mirage just beyond.

"People," murmurs Squirrely. His voice laced with fear and loathing.

"Bipeds? You sure?" Jack asks. His speech is unsteady, coming with a squeak.

"Humans," Beto interjects, "species of biped primate mammals."

"Trouble," is what Harry offers.

Beto agrees. "Trouble, aye."

"Their tendency to hate and destroy what they don't understand is known and well feared," Freddy expresses his fear and disdain yet beckons the others forward.

"Well, okay, but we certainly are specimen to be misunderstood," Harry suggests. "Add hated. Just saying," he tries to sound nonchalant and coy.

The sounds coming from the humans grow in intensity and ferociousness as the travelers move closer. Screams reach them clearly now, penetrating hide and hair, sinking into their bodies like poison darts, setting all their senses alight with terror. The screams begin to reach them as words, drawing them onward.

"No!"

"You double crossing scum."

"You'll pay."

"I'll kill you."

These shouts and more blast at the perked ears of the weary travelers. Like moths attracted by the flame's brightness, the group continues towards the human commotion. A few steps closer and suddenly the words turn into cracks and booms of human weapons.

Squirrely knows the sounds. "Fire sticks," he says, in a sort of awed, reverent sigh.

"Are they killing each other?" Beto asks in wonder and disgust, the question meant for no one. No one hears or answers.

Three distinct cracks tare through the air in rapid succession, punching at the travelers with a price fighting boxer's force. These are followed by a wailing of agonizing pain and a miserable sobbing. The sounds ooze through the air at the travelers. Their breaths feel as if ghosts, apparitions of the sounds, have reached into their lungs and robbed them. Their fears triple.

They are broken free of their fear reverie by Manny's sudden rush through their ranks. His passing stirs air back into vacant lungs. Those directly in his way are tackled aside like weightless balloons caught in the wake of a charging child. Squirrely goes flying through the air, having been caught low by the rushing Manny. With a dull thud the chipmunk crashes against a tree trunk, head and back taking the brunt of the impact. An "oohf" escapes his mouth. (The trunk's rotten bark and hollow core save his life.)

In awe, bewilderment, and a curious fascination, the others regroup, just in time to watch Manny careen into the human campsite. There are three of the bipeds showing gaping holes where none should be. Through the holes, they feed the dry earth of their warm, fluid of life. Groans and hints of a vestigial twitching movement tell of death not yet accepted by the warm flesh. An exit from the world is clear and imminent.

Manny goes for the third human. Manny's eyes are glazed with a singular intent. The unfortunate human, the focus of Manny's laser sharp convergence, clutches a smoking pistol. He is looking at it, at its empty chambers, as if wishing bullets will magically appear and reload the chambers. This sad, pathetic biped is also leaking his hot, crimson fluid. It squirts a stream of the metallic smelling stuff with a rhythm to match the body's shakes and shudders. Manny's sudden appearance is a horror best not acknowledged by the biped's fading mind. Maybe.

Masochism is a very human trait. This dying biped can't help himself. He looks at Manny. His eyes bulge, dilate, and fix on all of Manny and the aberration he represents to the human. Later it will be revealed that the fear the man's eyes reflected came not just from seeing the crazed and clearly blood thirsty Manny but from a recognition of Manny and their past encounter as well.

"We hung you," the human's mind processes. "We left you to die," these thoughts as well as "freak" and "abomination" would have been vocalized had he not been nearly dead with terror. Death was there to take him. Death had sent this thing, set it upon the man.

Never wavering, never slowing, Manny rushes at the human; all muscle flexing, zero cognitive activity. With momentum on his side, Manny launches at the human. All mass and no restraint, he flies through the air, turning over as he soars along, so his back limbs now lead his charge at the petrified biped. With all the weight of his bulky body at his leading limbs, he crashes into the human's torso. Kinetic energy is transferred in a split second exchange, like a wave reaching a shore, sped up a thousand times, from the flying Manny to the stationary human. Manny's body gives up its kinetic energy and stops its flight. He lands safely on sure footing. The human, taking on the kinetic energy, is blasted off his feet and sent flying backwards.

There is a small grotto just outside the human's campsite circle. Like a sure handed catcher picking off a perfect throw, the grotto catches and snuggles in tight the flying human. The grotto is small. The human's body is not. One has to give.

Humans are not much more than a sack of flesh over fragile bones and delicate organs. This human's body is already broken. Soft, pliant flesh folds and reshapes. The brittle bones snap, giving to the grotto's solid, unyielding rock. The human's reshaped body contours to the grotto's uneven interior, completely filling the cavity, with only the body's head not fitting within.

Manny uses a nearby stone, round and massive, to land a perfect, final blow. The stone crushes the human's head and seals the shattered body in the grotto. The crunching of the human's skull sends a reverberating sound through the woods. It offers an eerie, haunting hypnotic echo for ears to hear.

With slow, cautious movements, the others approach. Their bodies tingle with apprehension, wary of this new Manny. A strange glistening goo sticks to Manny, giving him an even more sinister appearance. This sticky, pinkish wet tissue has splattered his body, sprinkling him from head to toes. It also exudes from the human skull fragments peppering the vicinity and oozing from under the great stone.

"Manny, what the fu..." shock keeps Freddy from finishing his sentence.

"What the hell," is all Jack can come up with.

Through licking of lips, snout, and paws, Manny says, "settle matters quickly with your adversary."

Done with what he considers to be his new destiny, Manny begins to walk away from the grisly scene. Looking over at his apoplectic friends he calls to them, saying "follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." (The glaze over his eyes that obscured the soul within is now a twinkling accentuated by a smirk of the lips.)

"Christ," whispers Jack.

Squirrely is more elegant with his "holy shit fire!"

Unbecoming of his usually dispassionate demeanor, Freddy offers some oddly profound words: "For at the time appointed, the end shall be."

A kestrel flies over them. Death servants stir. This hunter waits. It catches some thermals, using them to leisurely spiral overhead. Not a carrion eater. It still feels like an ominous sight. Soon the vultures will arrive. Not that it matters to the three humans.

"Kestrel. A Falcon. Swift, long-winged, long-tailed hawk." Beto tells the retreating travelers.

"Ooh, and this," he calls out to his friends with childish excitement. "is peregrination. We're walking!"

Squirrely makes the mistake of looking back. Making eye contact is essentially saying to Beto, "I'm interested, tell me more."

Beto rushes to his new audience of one. His words flow, "peregrination is a traveling about, usually by foot. See, like we're doing." Mirth sparkles in his eyes. "A Peregrine Falcon is one popular in cities, nesting there rather than out in the wild." Beto has a listener. He is lifted, beside himself. (The human's death forgotten.)

Manny shares his short tale of his first encounter with the three humans. Time and distance gone with the travel of the sun across the sky. He recalls his near death on the tree, the now dead humans –the culprits- and how a divine rescue came upon him; a second chance.

"Do to others as you would have them do to you," is the last vestige of conversation he offers before turning in for the night.

Beto wonders, speaking his thoughts, "non compus mentis?" But Beto's question is "non sequitur." Though gruesome in their thoughts, the travelers all have a sense of fairness and accomplishment. There was carnage, yet the day felt right. A divine rescue may have touched them all.

## **PLASTIC PEOPLE**

"What's this stuff?" Harry asks as he tries to take another bite at a hard, sweet looking artifact he'd found on the ground.

"There's more over there," Jack says, pointing to the path ahead.

"Dung? Suggests Freddy jokingly. He'd just picked up a similar chunk near him.

"It's like some creature was shedding fur and hide as it walked," Manny offers. "Some very strange sort of creature," he adds, coming up on more of the discarded materials.

"I don't think it's from any sort of creature," Freddy stops near Harry, "not exactly." He takes the colorful piece of whatever that Harry is still trying to bite. A scolding look cuts off Harry's complaint.

With finality, and a good bit of disgust, Freddy tells the others, "it's not natural, and it isn't something to eat."

The troupe walks on, following a path that looks as if someone tried to mark or decorate with the colorful pieces of the foreign material. Greens and browns of nature are turned to wan, muted colors in comparison to the artifact's vibrant chartreuse, pinks, and ostentatious shades of blue.

Freddy and Manny speak in unison, their own words laden with biting disdain and disgust:

"Plastic."

"People."

Squirrely echoes the words, "plastic people," as if in fun, but expressing no amusement. No mirth or levity reflects in his dour countenance. He knows of plastic and people.

"Ah, plastic. A synthetic, often hard material molded into various rigid forms," Beto tells the group. He is cautious in his words, as if afraid to bring some vengeful demon to bare for having exposed its existence. "Evil plastic. Evil humans." These words are not for anyone's ears.

Harry, who has been leading the group, now stops. He stands as tall as possible, scouting the path ahead. He feels the need to be hyperaware. Through clenched teeth he growls, "people walk this path."

"Not walked," a visibly disgruntled Squirrely says. "They trounced and trampled like wild, blind with madness, simple minded beasts. No thought. No care."

Standing tall they all look ahead along the path, noticing the wounds and destruction on the landscape. The path had been a narrow deer route through dense, verdant forest. What lays in front of the group now is a wide swath, beaten bare and trampled dead, more like a course taken by a frightened, stampeding herd of oversized beasts.

Aghast and distressed, Beto says, "they trounce over bush, grass, rocks, and everything in between with equal indifference."

Manny has his own thoughts. "Such wanton destruction, what is the sense?" He fights back tears as he surveys the wounded land. To him this was a peaceful, harmless, living thing, senselessly beaten and maimed and left to die.

In a heavy and somber tone, Manny says, "if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" All know no answer is needed.

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"Looks like four or five distinct sets of biped tracks, heading that way." Freddy points in the direction of their own travel.

Picking up more plastic and other trash as they move, the group continues following the destruction. Several times they stop to bury a small, mutilated creature, a victim of the human's destructive stampede. In their burial process, they give kind words and offer thanks for the creature's beautiful existence.

"What sense?" cries Squirrely, his tears wetting the earth that will soon cover the crushed, mutilated bodies of two chipmunks, their torn, limp bodies looking oddly childlike and fragile in his huge hands. They are him in miniature.

"Harmless. Tiny," in between sobs and snorts come the tear wet words, oozing out of usually happy, vibrant Squirrely.

"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad." Manny's words, random and weird, still reflect the group's sorrow and somber mood.

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Piercing cracks of human fire sticks signal the presence of humans.

Birds flee in flight and creature scurry in retreat, putting distance between themselves and the humans.

"Just ahead," Freddy calls back to the others. He moves towards the humans.

Another pleasant looking valley lays ahead. It is beautiful and serene, except for the blight that is the human camp. They have set up at the edge of the valley with a forest. At that high vantage point, looking down to the valley, sit the humans. Shooting their fire sticks across the valley's tall grasses.

"What are they shooting at?" asks Squirrely. Indignation holds his words in the air; angry, tangible words.

"Nothing. Look," Freddy answers. "Looks like they're shooting at anything in the grasses that moves or so much as twitches."

As the words fade, another series of cracks ring out. Puffs of dust and dirt mushroom near a clump of grass. A gust of wind had moved the grass stacks.

"They're shooting at air," Beto says, befuddled; his words laden with disgust.

"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children." Manny isn't so off in his indignation. He adds, "these are devil's spawn." With no further words, he slinks towards the human camp.

Attention comes to bare on Manny. It is not because of his words. They have witnessed his unleashed wrath. They expect another example of righteous rage. He recognizes their silence, so he looks over his shoulder back at them, he grins and calls back to them, "he who is not with me is against me." His stealthy progress towards the humans continues.

None ponders or thinks twice. They follow after Manny, matching his stealth (and resolve).

From cover and shadow, Beto is heard saying, "for child and land, Kama' aima."

### **TACTICS AND GUNS**

Manny takes off towards the human camp in a straight line. There is plenty of natural cover along the way, with tall grasses, clumps of bushes, and boulders strewn about. Manny and his followers use this natural camouflage for some distance. The

need for cover seems to fade from Manny's mind and he becomes oblivious to the cover, or the strategic importance. Only his coloring and his traveling on all fours keep him from being glaringly visible to any half-blind eye.

The others spread wide and keep using natural cover in their progress. Without speaking it, the others fall into offensive departments. Each traveler circles wide, looking to flank the camp. Their aim is to come at the humans from all sides in unison.

"Tactics," Beto hisses, only the ground by his low hanging face hearing his words. "The Science and skills of maneuvering in combat using available means to accomplish a task."

Although none of them is a professed natural predator, the instinct for stealth and overpowering a foe shows in their progress. Their forward advancement, fast and in sync, is a perfectly predatory surreptitiousness. Only Manny seems to be openly defying quiet and stealth. He is blundering through brush and grasses like a great bull prancing through a field of flowers, liking the smells they release when crushed and trodden.

That is Manny's tactic—a undeviating attack. Overwhelm with quick, direct force. It is expertly effective. The humans are stunned and stupefied. The two who'd been shooting have only enough time to look in the direction of Manny's devilishly huge form crashing into them.

"Huh," is all one is able to utter before subconsciously trying to stop Manny's mass with his own. The man's next breath comes by force as Manny's head contacts low and convincingly. The human's lungs are emptied by the single impact. Shattered, jagged ribs make inhaling excruciating. Things only become more dire for the biped when his body, still in motion from the impact with the fast moving and much larger body of his attacker, suddenly comes in contact with the hard, unyielding, unforgiving ground. Humans don't fly far, or well. (And a hard ground feels no pain.)

Add insult to injury for this human, Manny meets its landing body with hind legs to chest and neck. Ribs snap like dry twigs, the chest cavity collapses under Manny's weight, making it seem as if the man's body just deflated into itself. The guy's neck has also suffered, now twisting an unnatural 180 degrees and looking several inches longer than it should be. Manny wastes no time noticing.

The other gun shooting man has a few more seconds of life. He goes as far as uttering, "what kind..." Had he finished his question he might have asked "what kind of beast are you?" or "what kind of beer do you prefer?" To which Manny might have responded, "an angry one" or "whatever is on tap." Instead, Manny's body does the talking, hitting him just below the man's chin, snapping his head backward. As it turns out, humans have a hard time speaking when the back of their head is touching their shoulder blades. That position also seems to inhibit life. Human neck articulation has limits.

If Manny had paused to consider this second human's demise, he may have wondered if Beto could have offered some facts on human bone structure and joint articulation. Maybe Manny himself could have said an inspiring word or two; something like, "I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them." Instead, the human crumbles to the ground as Manny moves on wordlessly.

Manny is on to the third human before Freddy and the others close in their flanks. Flanks and stealth are well and good but a swift, direct attack can get things

done quick. Not that Manny has given any thought to tactics and pre-planning. And not that it is needed.

The others do finally move in. They access the scene; the carnage.

"Efficient," says Freddy, giving Manny a smile and nod.

"They do seem to break easy," notes Harry. He is probing a human body with his toe.

The campsite is searched. There appears to be no further threat from the humans.

"Reconnoiter," Beto explains, to no one, "or reconnoiter. To make a preliminary survey of an area, especially of an enemy territory."

"Been there, done that," Harry replies before bouncing away.

Freddy and Beto recover three revolvers and two long barrel fire sticks. Beto, of course, identifies the items, explaining, "revolvers are pistols with a revolving cylinder which house chambers holding projectile bullets." He spins one of the revolver's cylinder as a visual aide. No one watches.

"The long barrel fire sticks are called rifles, and expel similar projectile bullets as the pistols," Beto fires a shot from one of the rifles as another visual aide. This the others take notice.

Freddy accepts responsibility to dispatch two of the remaining humans. They did not succumb as easily and conclusively to the attack as the others. They sustained critical injuries and Manny suggested the most compassionate thing to do was to free them from their pain.

"That went... well," Jack says. He looks surprised yet oddly elated.

"The use of those fire sticks would appear to help avoid this up-close mess," Harry suggests. He speaks as he cleans blood splatter off his chest. "Rifles and revolvers, I mean." He amends, with a sheepish sideways look at Beto.

"I do believe we'll keep these," Freddy tells them. One rifle all ready slung over his shoulder.

"Might come in handy," Jack suggests.

"We'll have to practice using them," Squirrely says, unable to hide the glint in his eyes.

"Take nothing for the journey except a staff," Offers Manny. "And a few fire sticks," he adds.

"Amen."



## NOT ALL BAD

"See, they're not all bad," Harry tells the others.

The group has settled behind some large, craggy boulders and chunky, bushy shrubs. Whispered commentary flows back and forth. They are watching another human camp. Scouting humans is becoming an obsession with the travelers. The two particular humans in their sight are meeting with their approval.

"One rabbit is all they've taken," explains Squirrely. "And look, they're using every bit." The rabbit's pelt is hung on a tree limb, left to dry. Small bones and the skull are efficiently buried.

"They said words of thanks before eating as well," informs Manny.

Freddy also notes how carefully these humans have set up their camp, including their camp fire. "Cleared an area around the fire pit and laid a solid fire ring with stones. Impressive." The care the two humans are taking truly does impress Freddy.

"Bound to be some good among all the rotten fruit," Beto says. "Not all of them will be blood thirsty beasts, I suppose."

Sounds of laughter and lighthearted banter drifts up to the hidden group. The gaiety offers quaint, welcomed sounds to the group's harden ears. Many thoughts of their own laughter of years past intrude and soften their concentration.

The humans look to be planning to spend a while longer at their camp.

"We'll move on, I think," Freddy tells the others. He is feeling at peace and eager to let these humans have theirs. The idea that not all humans are bad keeps giving him and the others hope.

"We could try talking with them," suggests the ever optimistic and adventurous Squirrely. He feels a yearning to commune with these humans. Reaching out like that could be good for the group's moral.

"A man scatters seed on the ground," Manny says sullenly, "but I tell you, prudence where humans is concerned will sustain us better than optimism."

They retreat a safe distance to eat and camp for the night.

"We'll move on in the morning," Freddy proclaims.

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The clam of the new morning is shattered by the roar of smoke bellowing motor vehicles.

"People," sighs Squirrely. Exasperation colors his observation. Sadness bows his shoulders.

"What Now?" Harry asks rhetorically; his teeth gnashing and gnawing in anger.

"Wait," is Jack's hopeful reply.

"Perhaps these will just pass on through." As soon as Beto's words have faded into the strata of the woods, human cries wake the earth. Birds take flight in fright. Trees seem to shake and shudder. Insects retreat or flee to hiding places. And the group of travelers exhale their short held breaths of hope.

"Stop!" the plea is clear in its distress and fear.

"What are you doing?" anger propels the demand's force. It punches at the traveler's alert ears.

"Why are you doing this?" Freddy and the others can already see what the "this" refers to: destruction.

The shouts of pleading are met with heartless laughs and jeers. The loud, smoking machines keep tearing through the campsite, cutting ruts through supplies, equipment, and anything caught in the way.

"These new comers are tormentors and destroyers," Manny says as he watches in disgust.

Without need of any words, Freddy and the others begin to move apart. They are moving towards the trouble. Another flanking maneuver.

As he moves towards the trouble, Freddy decides that the rifle will serve well against the fast moving machine mounted humans. As he looks to his right he realizes he is not alone in thinking of the rifle's advantage here. A crack of a rifle rips through the air. His own rifle sends its own crack into the air, the sound pounding at his ear drums. Two of the motored machines roll some distance, slowing and showing no aim., their human guides and riders no longer straddling them.

Manny stays with what he knows. He gives chase to the third machine, obviously preferring a more personal, up close and physical approach to dealing with these devil humans. Moments later, and task completed, he catches up with his traveling companions on top of one of the motored machines.

"All-Terrain Vehicle, ATV," exclaims Beto. "Known by some as four-wheelers." He points at each wheel of Manny's new toy. Envy fills Beto's eyes.

Manny responds with, "Whatever." He adds, "what a rush!" hardly containing his child-like glee. "Though these machines are clearly not designed for our body structures." He wiggles his tail in demonstration.

The group approaches the original camping humans as Manny is talking of his joy ride. Their approach seems to both spook and intrigue the humans.

"What are you?" one of the humans asks the approaching group.

Manny offers his version of an answer: "I am who I am."

"You can speak?" the inquisitive human asks. (This is the one not looking half fainted with pain.)

Freddy takes lead again, serving as spokesperson. "Speak and comprehend," he tells the human. "My name is Freddy." Out of understandable caution he does not offer a hand –or paw- in greeting.

"These are my traveling companions." Freddy would have introduced each companion if not for the need to attend to the one injured human's needs.

"His leg is broken," the one human tells the travelers. Putting the fact into words gets him to focus on his friend rather than the freakishly large talking... squirrels.

"We can help," Freddy says with a smile. (At least he hopes it looks like a smile to the human.)

"We'll use tent poles for splints," Beto directs the obvious treatment of the broken leg. There are no intact tents so a couple of poles near by will serve well.

The unhurt human appears to have medical training, and seems to have come with medical supplies, still intact.

"Hmmm, impressive," Freddy says. He is watching intently as the human stitches close a flapping open head wound on one of the other humans. "That would be helpful for us. Our wounds tend to just stay flapping. Causes all sorts of secondary issues."

"I imagine it would," replies the bemused human. "How dexterous are your... fingers?"

Freddy replies by swinging his rifle off his shoulder, firing an unaimed shot, and sending a stone in the distance flying.

"Impressive," the human relaxes more and more with each exchange. A quick lesson in stitching wounds follows. Freddy picks up the technique quickly. Along with the new skill, he also acquires a needle and some thread.

"Doesn't appear as if much of your gear is worth saving," Harry tells the humans. He holds a sack that may have once held packaged food goods but now just drips an unsavory goo.

(Manny chimes in with "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.")

The human smiles and adds, "well spoken.")

What gear and supplies is salvageable they help pack. What is now useless and ruined the travelers attend to. "Leave only footprints; take only pictures. Camping rule number one." Squirrely with an attempt at a grin but manages only a sheepish smirk. It'll work.

"The two ATVs should get you to where you can get medical help for your friend and new supplies for whatever new journey you choose to embark on. They'll not be terribly comfortable for the broken leg but at least you will get wherever quicker than by foot." Beto explains. He speaks as he helps set up the injured human on the ATV, minding the splint leg.

Had any other humans been in the area they would have seen three ATVs moving south. Two ridden by people, regular, ordinary bipeds, while a third straddled

by a pilot that looks a lot like a giant rodent. A rodent very much like the creatures running along side the motored machine.

On reaching a river, the ATVs with human riders cross its shallow waters. Once across they stop and wave back to the giant creatures. The third ATV stays behind, on the wide sandy river delta. It will be ridden and abused by a freakishly large but extremely kind and friendly creature.

"Oh Squirrely, at least you got to ride some." Freddy shares the weakly consoling words to a very stricken and sad giant chipmunk. "It isn't fair," is what the chipmunk's posturing seems to say.

The travelers all have a turn at enjoying the thrill of the ATV's speed beyond imagination. Great, fun joyrides. But it was Squirrely who ran the ATV into a tree. The tree won. It took revenge on the noise and smoke-spewing machine, for all trees, bees, and horses.

"Son, your sins are forgiven," Manny says with a hint of mirth. It isn't clear though if the words are for Squirrely or the "dead" ATV.

"The humans that don't appear to be devil's spawn we can't seem to keep around for very long." Freddy muses as the group gathers, getting ready to move on. "Always off in a rush." (Them or good humans?)



"It has been said," Manny does his thing, "We aren't always so smart."

They pick a direction and move on.

### **CONFLAGRATION**

"The blind could follow their trail," Squirrely says, trying to sound serious but clearly amused.

"A fish in a river two valleys away could tell where these humans have come from," Jack says.

"Their lack of finesse is a good thing if they've come out here to trap and hunt. Any animal caught by these idiots probably is looking to die. Or is too stupid itself to fear death." Beto adds with finality.

There is little else to say. The humans who had brought the motor machines, those ATVs, left a clear trail of mayhem and destruction. Following their tracks back to their campsite took no skill; took hardly eyes to see.

Once found, it reflected these human's disregard for nature and all its living things. How these humans didn't kill themselves was a wonder. Just by the quantity of

empty bottles reeking of alcohol, it would seem a miracle the fools had not pickled themselves to death.

"Well, there's plenty of the alcohol left," notes Freddy. "It should serve our needs well, I think."

"What do you have in mind?" Beto asks, not really sure he wants to hear the answer.

"I'm thinking... fire," Freddy offers his reply with a wink and a smirk. "A really big fire." Waving arms suggest the magnitude of said expected fire.

The human campsite is a meteor crash site without a meteor. These people managed to trample every last blade of grass and verdant bush into the dirt within walking distance of the site. Where there once were dense, lush clumps of grasses and thriving bushes there are now wounds of giants, with ruts like a lashing of young, tender skin, and sun-baked dirt like that skin salted and left out to dry.

The rude and crude fire pit is a grotesquely huge crater in the innocent earth. It is more like a waste incinerating cavity in the ground than a place for cooking or providing warmth and protection.

"We'll collect all their trash, including all we've gathered along the trail these past few days, along with the tore and trampled things still left from the good human's site, and place it all there," Freddy says, pointing to the fire pit.

Jack asks, "and then?"

"Then we'll have one great big conflagration," Freddy tells them, with an explosion of the arms.

It takes them well into the next day to feel satisfied they have collected all the trash and detritus. The heap of stuff towers over them. It has a sinister look to it, like a monster pushing up from the depths of hell, poised to unleash terror on the helpless.

(That certain organic items peeking out of the monster heap, looking a lot like flesh and bone, does not defray the stack's baleful appearance.)

"Light it up!" Freddy's call rings out at sunset the next day.

The area around the mound has been swept clear. No dry leaf nor tiny twigs remain to lure the fire monster into mischief and mayhem beyond its boundaries. The group drown the mound in copious amounts of whisky, moonshine, and every other liquor the humans had brought—and miraculously not yet drunk. They were pouring poison onto the devil's out stretched tongue.

The ignition put nuclear detonation mushroom clouds to shame. Even at their safe distance—what had seemed like an excessively far distance—their bodies singed and eyes blinded by the conflagration's initial spark.

The monstrous flames, angrily shifting from yellow, red, and blue, reached up into the sky like it was trying to take the sun's place; trying to bring light into the night sky. For a few seconds, it was a new sun.

"Wicked," exclaimed Squirrely. His pupils, huge, round, bulging, reflected the fire's frantic dance.

"Wow," is all Harry utters, before a muteness overwhelms him, as he is drawn, mind and soul, into the fire's dance.

"We'll tend to this beast in shifts," Freddy avoids looking into the fire directly as he instructs the others. "Can't relax with fire. Never underestimate it. Respect it. See it as alive and hungry. Always hungry. Let your guard down and this entire valley could be ashes and dust by morning."

They know. They understand. Deep down, instinctively they all fear it. They are drawn to it, pull by its call, but the power within them, the fear of this monster, is stronger.

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"Contained and almost burnt out." Beto reports the next day.

Their eyes still hold afterimages of the alluring, beautiful, dancing flames monster. At times it was as if the fire was reaching out to each of the travelers, calling each one by name, personal. It beckoned to be joined; to marry and to dance together. Fortunately, none answered the call. No one had their last dance. And despite all its fury and internal fracas, the fire never reached beyond its boundaries.

"Yuck! This plastic stuff is nasty." Squirrely announces as he examines the ash and burnt-out husks of things left in the fire pit.

"We'll bury what the fire did not consume." Freddy is sending dirt into the hole in minutes.

"And there it will be, even once we are ourselves dead and buried, ash and dust." Manny and his words. "Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

## **FRENCHY**

"It's just one human."

"Settled in as if he's been there a while."

Harry and Jack have just returned from reconnoitering another human camp.

"The human male has built a shed," Harry reports.

"Some sort of lean-to or small a-frame," Jack proudly adds.

Beto interjects, saying "an A-Frame has triangular front and rear walls with the roof reaching to the ground, whilst a lean-to is more of a rough shed with the roof has only one side slope."

"Definitely a lean-to," Jack assures the group.

"No, I don't think so."

"Yes," Jack insists, "I saw only one roof slope."

"No, you are wrong." Harry gets animated as he insists, "you only saw one slope. It's an a-frame. No doubt."

"I say it's a lean-to."

"A-frame!"

And arms go up. Harry locks Jack in a weak Nelson. Jack wiggles out and takes Harry around the waist. In seconds the two are rolling on the ground, limbs tangling together. Their need for air finally makes them stop. Even then they struggle to breath, in between giggling and snorting.

"Could be an A-frame," Jack admits.

"You did only see it from the one side," jibs Harry

Both agree, "shed."

Manny has watched the exchange from a safe distance, wondering how the two misfits survive. Once the fracas has stopped he says, "salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?"

Freddy is speechless, "hmmm," is all he produces.

Harry and Jack are still trying to catch their breaths. Best they manage is to look at each other and shrug.

Beto feels he has contributed enough. He starts to walk away.

Squirrely is... well, no telling where he is. Without a doubt though, he will come crashing soon.

Before all make to go about their business, Manny adds, "and three humans, coming from three different directions and carrying at least two fire weapons each, rapacious in intent, are about to surprise the human in it's... shed."

Beto is off. Squirrely, who beams in among them from the ether, bounds after him.

Freddy is the first to speak, "estimated time of arrival? Guess at intent?"

These appear to be aimed at Manny, who promptly replies, "should not be more than ten minutes and their aim is doubtless to join the solitary human for a meal."

"He's been collecting rocks from the river."

"Lots of shiny, little, heavy rocks."

Harry and Jack nod at each other, pleased with their contribution.

Freddy smirks, considering the two opportunities Beto just missed at sharing his vast knowledge. He imagines Beto's words: "Estimated Time of Arrival. Also referred

to as E.T.A." and "shiny, little, heavy rocks fished out of river: probably gold. A malleable yellow metallic element, priced and coveted by humans."

Manny speaks what Freddy seems to feel, "there will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth."

Beto and Squirrely will smash some teeth and bring forth many tears if they get to the human's first.

Shots break across the valley. Harry knows one came from his rifle. It still smokes in his hands. Jack can see another smoking fire stick, in Beto's hands. It is when the group rejoins, within a clearing near the human's shed that they notice where the third shot came from.

"A merveille," says the human male. "Without conference we each chose the correct ami de cour to dispatch." He returns his attention to stirring the contents of a great kettle.

"Vichyssoise" Beto inquires as he leans near the pot.

"Ma foi, mon ami," the man replies in delight. He adds, "sans souci, there is plenty for all." He goes back to stirring.

Beto addresses the silence—and bewildered faces, "Vichyssoise is a soup consisting of leeks, onions, potatoes, cream, and chicken stock." After a pause he adds, "served cold." To the man he asks, "chicken?"

"Oui, mon faux naïf, chicken. C'est-à-dire, chicken of the valley." A wink brings forth smiles.

"Chicken of the valley," Beto turns to the others, "is usually rabbit."

"D'accord. Goût de terroir."

The man motions at boulders and tree trunks laid around the camp fire and kettle. "Sit, all of you, please." He points at himself and says, "Peter," then adds with a flick of his hat and a bow, "taut à vous."

Squirrely, the inquisitive chit, looks into the cooling pot of food. After a sniff he comes away, wringing his nose, saying, "more like gazpacho to me."

All turn to Beto, knowing he will enlighten. He obliges. "A Gazpacho, a soup, also commonly served cold, is spicy and made mostly of raw vegetables."

Squirrely plops down, whispering "'whatever.'"

"Quand meme. Even so, plenty for all." The human offers no further words or invitations to eat.

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While the others eat, Harry, Jack, and Squirrely collect the bodies of the human invaders. The one shot by the old man has a clean through and through wound to the chest. It looks to have taken a good chunk of the man's heart. Quick, efficient kill.

"I can shoot just as good," Harry says. He takes off in the direction of the guy he shot. Unperturbed, Jack and Squirrely wrap the body and carry it with them.

They find Harry, surly and mad. He stands by the dead human's body. Harry has already wrapped it. The shape of the lightly wrapped body is odd though.

"Does it have a head?" Jack asks, his own head caulked sideways, looking between Harry and the wrapped human body.

In a murmur Harry says, "it did, mostly." His shot, it turns out, shattered and mostly obliterated the human's head.

Squirrely pats Harry on the shoulder, smiles, and says, "good shot." He runs off to find the last body.

This last human, killed by Beto, may have clung to life a bit.

"Looks like he tried crawling to cover. Didn't last much longer." Jack points at the blood smears and final resting place, right at the opening to an occupied snake pit.

"Which came first," starts Squirrely before the other two scream, "stop!"

Bodies recovered, they head back to camp and the strange little human.

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"Took you long enough to get here," the human tells Freddy, Manny, and Beto. "I've come across your tracks all around these parts. It was in trying to avoid your travels that I noticed the three scoundrels. Ami de cour. Called themselves friends but theirs was insincere. Maudit chiens."

"Came across them months back. Gone to town to trade some of my gold for supplies. Autres temps, autres moeurs. Can't get all I need out here. My disdain for that world is well founded. They must have watched me. Saw me trade with gold. Made plans to follow me out here. Merde."

"No worry. Sans souci. They are no more. And none will miss them."

A long silence, filled only by the chirping of bugs and the soft music of a late day's wind, is finally broken by Beto. "Animis opibusque parati. Latin. Prepared in mind and resources."

His food gone, Manny stands and says, "a person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean." He smiles, looks down at his body, then his empty, dirty bowl and adds, "my body is full, my bowl is dirty." He takes off towards the small river.

"Bonsoir," the man calls out after him. To Freddy and Beto he whispers, "Comédie humaine? All sorts, right?"

"Will you leave?" Freddy asks the human. "Do you think others will come?"

"J'y suis, j'y reste," he answers. "I am here and here I will be. As others come, maybe they'll share."

"It is a good, beautiful place," Beto says with a deep sigh. "Annuit coeptis. More Latin, sorry." He looks at Freddy, a warm smile colored by the evening gloaming filling his countenance. "God has approved our beginnings."

"Indeed," Freddy agrees.

The peace of that gloaming moment is broken by the other's return.

"Though not wholly deserving, those three will get a bed under the stars. Not as we tonight, à la belle étoile. Tomorrow. Tomorrow under earth for them." With that said the human turns, whispering, "va t'en, espèce de marchand."

The others seek their own beds under the beautiful stars, in the open air of night, with Manny's customary final words chasing them into sleep and dreams. "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

# V

## FIRST TO GO

"We've played garbage collectors through several valleys, meadows, and wild river basins. We've served as land barons, evicting the unsavory and uncivilized. We have reached out diplomatic hands to a few good humans. It's been a messy rush, fulfilling and fun." Jack pauses.

"But?" asks Harry.

"But I still feel restless."

"Like something's missing," suggests Harry, feeling something not quite complete in himself.

"Yeah, something personal is not finished, you know?"

"I do know, but what is it?" Harry asks. He and Jack have stepped away to talk privately.

"I want something more than good deeds and service to others." Jack says this, more as a private, spoken thought than a comment to be shared.

"I've heard said that no act is truly selfless." This is a half-hearted shot at levity from Harry. Jack doesn't react. "You want to stop doing... this?" Harry waves his hands, motioning to the woods around them, to indicate their exploits as garbage collectors and diplomats.

"Ah, no," Jack is quick to reply. "I don't want to stop. I just want... I don't know. I want to be more true to myself. To us."

"Us." Harry gives a hint of acknowledgement to the implications. "Us. Not while still part of this misfit's troupe though?" he asks.

"No. They would be supportive, accepting, don't get me wrong. They would accept or at least ignore the obvious, but I think we would strain the group's dynamics. Too much... weird and misfit-ness."

"I think you're right. I've probably known it for a while too. It means leaving them. Are you willing?" Harry reaches out to Jack, asking when already knowing his own answer.

Looking both excited and sad, Jack answers, "I think I'm ready. I'd miss the fun with them, but I think I'm ready for us. For our fun."

"We'd make our own fun for sure." A wink and a smile follow Harry's reply.

"About time!"

"You'll miss their odd personalities, you know." Harry is serious again. Still, he laughs as he reflects on those very personalities.

"Yeah, I would miss them, but we would carry on on our own, our way."

"Are you thinking of that valley we passed a few days ago?" Harry asks. "It had a certain majestic beauty to it."

"Yes," Jack answers without pause. "I fell in love with it the second we cleared the ridge. It just laid there, pulling at my soul, calling to my essence."

"We would become the valley's guardians."

"Sounds kinda cool, don't you think?" A glint shines in Jack's eyes as he asks.

"Do you want me to break the news to the others?"

"I think they sort of already know," replies Jack. Still, Harry tells the others.

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The others accept the news and are openly supportive.

"You saw this coming" Manny asks Freddy.

"It was a long time coming," Freddy replies. More to himself than to Manny he adds, "they'll prosper and thrive; they'll be fine."

"We could do more, reach more in need if we branch out anyway. Cover more ground, you know?" Beto tries reasoning through what is proving to be a difficult change. He knows he'll miss the two buddies.

No one questions or give any thought to the couple's ulterior motives. Why would they? All their motives have been good and pure.

"Not genetic dead ends. Neither are they failures or shirkers of their reproductive obligations." Manny points out that Harry and Jack both have produced offspring before going off alone; before ending up with this group of misfits. Neither one has ever been allowed any parental privileges by the mothers."

"Deposit and go," had been the women's way, which gave rise to the two wanting to do and serve better, as they feel they've now done and plan to continue doing.

The goodbyes are quick. Dry and simple.

"We'll come visit."

"We'll be waiting."

"Stay safe."

"Do good."

"Be good."

Few words needed to be exchanged. They know each other. They have grown close in their travels and adventures. There is a strong, deep peace in their bond. Even with Squirrely.

And they will see each other again. They will stay in touch. Freddy will make sure of it. He'll lead the rest back around.

More personally, Freddy feels proud of the two. He is proud of their choice. He admires and respects the couple's choice for independence and commitment to each other. He is proud of them for taking on such a heavy responsibility. (There is some envy too.)

And then they are a troupe of four.

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"You knew?" Beto has pulled Freddy aside.

"Yes," answers Freddy. "Your connection with her was instantaneous. Hard to miss it."

"You don't mind?"

"Mind? Change is always a hard thing." Freddy is looking around and at the remaining travelers as he speaks. "Without change growth is nearly impossible."

"Will you guys be okay? I mean, Harry and Jack's voices still seem to echo among us."

"And now you're going your own way too," Freddy states the obvious.

"Ouch." Beto tries at a smile.

"We will go on," Freddy says, sure that it is what he will always choose to do.

"I could tell her no," Beto says the words but knows they aren't true.

"No. No you couldn't." Freddy says with a smile. "Nor should you. This is right. Right for you. Right for both of you. You know this. I see it in your eyes."

"Thanks," is all Beto says. An offered hand is suppose to say all else that might need saying.

Freddy passes on the offered hand and wraps his arms around Beto. A hug leaves nothing unsaid.

Before any tears or some ghastly emotional outbreak spills out, Freddy tries to move things along. "Big job," he says, "guardians and stewards of this brood and valley. Hope they can handle you."

"You'll visit?" Beto asks.

"Keep a place ready for me. I'll be by so often you'll regret the invitation."

'Change is growth,' Beto thinks on Freddy's words. He already feels a change, from choosing to break from the group and stay. 'Only the beginning.'

"Omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis," Beto remarks. The others wait for more, nonplussed. Beto smiles and adds, "Latin, for 'all things are changing, and we are changing with them.'"

As a final goodbye, Manny says, "but a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home."

They go separate ways.

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Later, walking in no particular direction, Freddy looks over at Squirrely and Manny and says, "now we're only three." Squirrely at least still looks full of energy, mischief, and wonder. 'He feeds me energy,' Freddy reflects. Then there is Manny. Mister "make you fishers." Manny and his odd ball sayings.

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment." Manny had offered that in response to Beto's announcement. Looking at the remaining travelers, Freddy wonders, "who's the old garment?"

The dusty path lays ahead. Beto would have said, "forsant et haec olim meminisse juvabit."

"Meditate and pray," is what Manny had said. He went up a small hill to be closer to the heavens, to meditate and pray. Alone. That was seven days ago.

"We should go to him," Squirrely kept saying. "Maybe he wants us to."

"We could. He might."

"But we won't," Squirrely says with dejection.

"No."

"He isn't coming back."

"No, I don't believe he is. Not until he's ready," Freddy tells Squirrely. For a while now Freddy felt a change in Manny. There was a distraction, like someone or something kept calling his name, luring him in another direction. Manny did not appear to be

distressed or surprised about the calling. The meditation and praying was more for accepting the break from the group. And Freddy felt okay about the imminent separation.

"Love your neighbor as yourself," is what Freddy offered to Manny as parting words.

"Indeed," is all Manny offered back.

Now it is just Squirrely. "We two," Freddy declares to the path ahead.

"No change in what we do," Freddy tells the still excitable youth. "We do as we've done." Squirrely just nods, accepting the suggestion without question or comment. His way is still onward, blithe and unimpeded.

'What would Beto have said?' Freddy wonders as he sets foot to ground, moving forward.

'A peregrination to forfend and offer benevolence to all,' is what Beto would have said. (And Manny would counter with something like 'feed my lambs' and 'take care of my sheep.')

"Are you good?" Freddy calls out to Squirrely.

"Yeap," answers Squirrely. Quick and light is his reply, for a question burdened with sorrow, hope, and love.

