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# The Blind

*"There's a bad man in everyone, no matter who we are / There's a  
rapist and a Nazi living in our tiny hearts / Child  
pornographers and cannibals and politicians too / There's  
someone in your head waiting to fucking strangle you!"*

- AJJ

## I

The cold, in the South, is very much a place. It's an all-knowing, suffocating thing that locks your two toes in a disparaging wiggle struggle to be felt. But that's cold anywhere. This cold kills cancer, clings to the thought, and whips through the lungs like a bad bowl of tobacco. It doesn't let you leave. It don't care who you are. It wants you to stay in place, sweating until you're frozen.

Duck hunters, as they are, give into the cold's demands. They're in cahoots with the cold; they wake before the night shift worker at McDonald's clocks in; they drive to the wetlands, flooded farmland; they prepare; they put on their waders, their Carhartt caps, their Avery's under their camo, and they march through the muddy brown waters until they get to their blind, where they will sit and wait until noon or until they reach their limit. And when they can't pull the trigger, they shiver.

There are no two kinds of people. People are ugly, people are pretty, people love, and people hate but hunters, hunters are hunters. The hunt makes a man binary. When it comes to hunters, you are either a hunter or not a hunter. Don't get me wrong. It's not just the desire to kill, you and I both have that in spades. You kill spiders because you are afraid, ants because they are small, and worms because you are jealous. But you do not hunt. There is no need to hunt, families are fed at Kroger's Cheep Chicken Monday, and fish is flown in airplanes to become sushi at any given gas station. Survival is both beyond, to the right, and to the left of the red light. It only depends on what mood you're in: Chinese, bar-be-que, or burgers?

You do not hunt. You may shoot squirrels with a pellet gun, but you are not a hunter. A hunter hunts not for the fruit of the family, but because it is nostalgic, because he is superior to the natural world and must prove it, because he has the heart and patience and money to become, for a moment, a child dancing between the boom of rifles.

Dancing keeps you warm, too.

Thomas wondered if he were a hunter. His dad got him a Remington 12-gauge shotgun last week for Christmas, but Thomas didn't know if he was capable of using such a thing. Not that he would hurt anyone, he will, as we all do one way or another, but because he was afraid of

missing all his shots. What good is a gun if nothing gets hurt? It's fun, sure, but in this cold, it's a ghastly thing with a full stomach bulging and waiting impatiently, like Thomas, to be freed.

"I haven't seen a duck all morning," Doug said.

"They'll come around if we're quiet," Thomas's dad said.

"Man, they must be at one of them duck lives matter concerts, or wait, parties, no, protests," Doug said. Thomas's dad laughed with his cousin.

Doug and Thomas's dad were as close as kin could get, always jawing and mucking up their grandfather's backyard, always laughing. Those two men grew up in rival trailer parks, wrestled fat women for money, and attended funerals drunk as skunks. As kids, they flew in tighter formations than the ducks they haven't found yet. Family always does, but time came, and life became as big as their mighty frames, and the men disagreed on their destinations. They parted long ago. One moved to the city in search of a better life, and the other stayed as close to his roots as he could.

But better life's can be found thick in mud or under the locked wheels of trailers. A better life is simply a comparison, like a son to his father or a duck to a goose.

Doug's laughter turned to a cough. He beat his chest.

Thomas stayed quiet, too cold to speak, too cold to stop thinking.

Doug gulped, pulled down his neck gator, and hacked out a lugie. It blended easily with the wet slime caked on the sheet metal floor.

"Yeah, you seen all that shit, though? You know, what's going on? Have you seen what's goin with, I mean, with all these rallies and riots and stuff?" Doug said.

"Oh, I can't watch the news anymore, Doug. Just a buncha bozos and re-tards loud mouthin about social justice and equality and all that bullshit," Thomas' dad said.

"You know, you know what I say to those Black Lives Matter folks? You know what I say?" Doug looked around the blind to make sure his timing was right; "All lives matter. That shuts them up real good. Like a deer in headlights. Right, Thomas?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess so," Thomas said. His words vaporized in the air, became a cloud in the brief quiet between his dad and Doug's whisper wrestling match.

"Thomas," his dad said.

"Yeah?" Thomas said.

"You havin fun?"

“Yeah. It’s great.”

“But, you know, just the guys,” Thomas’s dad reached his puffed-out arm and ruffled his son’s head. Thomas tightened his shoulders to his chin and waited for the ruffling to end. *Thank God I have a neck gator on*, Thomas thought, *he could have seen me smile*.

“Oh, come on. Cheer up, Scout. You’re with the guys, away from all that bullshit we gotta deal with,” Thomas’s dad said. He paused, staring miles through the still and formless brown-brushed land ahead. Thomas heard him sigh, then speak.

“Your mother, man. Your mother. Women. That’s a woman who likes to yap all day, I mean if she just don’t stop yapping my damn ear off, I’ll go, ha, I’ll go get a lesbian and a thunderbird and drive off a damn canyon. Man. She’ll yap me to death one of these days,” Thomas’s dad said. Doug’s numb ears perched up.

“Oh, you’re talking about yappin? Lemme tell ya about a woman who yaps. Whoo-whe. Imagine all that yappin coming through a goddamned lawyer. Hey, you may know him, he lives in Memphis, his name is uh, damn it, what’s his name? I don’t know. But he’s ruining my life, partner. Some job he has, yappin husbands till their pockets drier than that Wolf River. Hey, you been on that river lately? It’s sucked dry. Like I’m gonna, well, you know, if you get the chance to see that lawyer of her’s, well, you remember how we used to fight as kids,” Doug said.

“Doug and I used to play football.”

“Yeah, your dad here was at Craigmont and I played for Haywood County,”

“We could eat whole cows back then,”

“Ha. I still can, brother,” Doug said and slapped his belly, hoping it would bounce more than it did. “I imagine Anna’s got you shoving salads down your throat. And don’t she do that yoga? The hell is that all about, these women and their yoga? Before, uh, Katherine decided to take her little feelings to the big leagues, she would ask me to go with her. Can you believe it? I think I would rather skinny dip out there in that freezing cold muck than have my junk hang on some down doggy bullshit.”

“Apparently, it’s good for you,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, if you like sippin lattes and kissin boys,” Doug said.

“Oh, Thomas’s never been. He don’t have time for that anyway, he starts off-season football training in a week. Right, Thomas?” his dad said.

“Yeah.”

“Oh really? Liftin weights? You excited? You finally gonna start getting big and stong, cause you know your dad and I, we were animals out there on the field. You gotta get them guns lookin like ours,” Doug said. He punched Thomas’s left arm.

“We’ll get em big and strong, don’t worry. Maybe if we hush up and kill a few ducks he could add some meat to his bones,” Thomas’s dad said.

Thomas thought about how his dad must-have dominated on the football field. *He must have*, in fact, he said so. Hunters in the blind, animals on the field. Now that was a man. If only Thomas could be that good at football. Thomas was alright at tennis, but he quit to focus on how horrible he was at reading holes and learning plays and wrapping up and driving his feet and bringing someone crashing to the ground. He wanted to rock someone next year. Really hit someone hard with a great loud thud of plastic so his dad could see how vicious, how dangerous, how big and strong his son was. Doug and Dad did it, but Thomas noticed they never talked about the bench. There was always a peace there, for Thomas, sitting on the bench, knowing his name wasn’t going to be called, knowing he wouldn’t have to go out on that field and use everything in his God-given body to knock someone on their be-hind. The bench never asked for anything. It never asked why he wasn’t as big as his dad was at fifteen, never asked him to lower his shoulder and drive his feet, never asked him to hurt anything, never asked him to shove some more meat and mashed potatoes down his throat.

Thomas’s current bench, though, demanded something deadlier.

It was a small duck blind, built inaccurately, the reeds and grass glued to the top coming off, water seeping in through the shootin’ slit, getting dangerously close to the long outlawed and legendary sinkbox. All there was was a small wet bench, and enough room for your gun in-between your thighs.

The blind smelled of mud and men. Thomas’s world reeked of something old, something with need to fester but no time to decay. It was not malodorous, but it was persistent. Something you had to get used to out of spite and staying alive. This was an aura of misery, and misery brings hatred.

Hate is a strong word because it is universal. A squirrel hates the crow as the crow hates the hawk. They hate just the same as you, and Thomas hated the blind. He hated the cold, too, hated how it stuck him in a cramped place of frigid, nervous sweat and desired death. He was powerless, soggy, and trapped. Thomas sat in the middle.

Doug tapped Thomas on his left shoulder. He looked, and Doug was holding up a camo bag with a single shoulder strap.

“You know what this is, partner?” Doug asked, jolly as can be.

“No,” Thomas said.

“Take a guess.”

“Uh, it’s beer,” Thomas said.

“Hey, you aren’t too far off,” Doug said. He patted the bag. “I’ve been working on making this thing for a while. Been watching a lot of *Naked and Afraid* lately-”

“Great show,” Thomas’s dad said.

“Sure is, partner, and I figured if something were to happen and I was in that situation, I’m gonna be ready, so I put together this here emergency survival kit.”

“Ah, very nice,” Thomas’s dad said.

“I got quick-dry blankets, cans of beans, snack bars, water, the hottest and brightest damn flare gun money can buy, a two-way radio, and most importantly – you cannot make a survival kit without this, partner – a bottle of Jack Daniels,” Doug said.

The father reared his head back, laughing. “All right, way to go, man. Hey, Thomas?”

“What?”

“Isn’t that cool?”

“Yeah.”

“How about this,” his dad said, “if you go on and get a duck, I’ll let you take a sip of whiskey, how’s that sound?”

Doug had to nip this in the bud. “Hold on, man, the whole point of this thing is you only crack her open when you’re surviving, man.”

“I don’t want to anyway,” Thomas said.

“Come on, Doug. We gotta get some hairs on his chest.”

“I’ll think about it. You better get a duck, boy,” Doug said.

“Okay,” Thomas said.

“Alright, son. Now, we better get quiet. Those ducks will get spooked by anything,” his dad said.

Two years could have gone by. The thoughts slowed with his blood. He looked occasionally at the wall of reeds in the distance and tried to focus on the sound they made,

scraping against each other in the perpetual, arctic wind. The barrel of his brand-new shotgun stared into his face. *I don't have a license*, he thought. He hoped a game warden would come from the muck and give them a ticket, or even better, take him to jail. *I bet it's not fucking freezing in prison.*

The quiet was broken, only this time not by jokes of men.

“Shit. Look, there they are. Shit. Stay quiet! Alright Thomas, get ready, point that barrel up, yeah, right there, shit. Stay quiet!” Thomas’ dad whirled around, not even thinking to grab his own gun, but helping his boy with his. He pushed the stock steady against Thomas’ shoulder and made sure the barrel was aimed at the low flying triangle of ducks.

They flew not twenty yards ahead, right in range.

“I can do it, dad,” Thomas said. He took aim. There they were, in perfect formation, quacks and all, life beneath the grey morning clouds, and there they went. Thomas didn’t miss.

“If you can do it, then why didn’t you pull the damn trigger?” Thomas’s dad said.

“They were . . . too far.”

“No, they weren’t,” Doug said.

“Will you shut up for a second, Doug? You’re gonna scare the damn ducks away,” Thomas’s dad said.

“The damn ducks for who? For – oh, sorry Thomas.”

“It’s okay. You can take the next turn,” Thomas said to Doug.

Thomas looked down. He focused on an errant drop of mud-water working its way from one side of the blind to another. Along its path, the small stream picked up smaller flakes of old reeds and dead trees. What propelled it to move, he did not know.

“You ever killed a duck before?” Doug asked.

“No,” Thomas said.

“Well, next time shoot, and we can rub its blood on your face,” Doug said.

“Now wear some duck blood to the football field, no one gonna mess with you then,” Thomas’ dad said.

“Okay.”

They waited for hours. In the cold, its place. Thomas thought about cities of frost covered angles. Snowy like a star quilt on a Monday morning. Fingers ribs and toes. Tall buildings and pretty girls. Anything but the blind. The sea of mud and reeds and brown hollow sticks waited to



bloom. Not dead, dormant. Doug tried not to scare the ducks. Thomas' dad told Thomas to sit on his hands. He did, and his gloves got wet. They waited, and the cold did too.

The cold does not allow boredom. Only the buildings erected from the earth could bite back the cold enough for anything to be bored. After all, man's best accomplishment was burning the virgin cold away so the mind could wander to more noble pursuits, like perfecting the drive-through and the intricacies of the billboard. The cold's very presence is one of danger, antagonism that reminds the body that without the mind the cold would be the dominant species. In this kind of freeze, the mind can only think of escape, can only think of how commanding the cold is, and that's not boredom, that's fear. Both fear and boredom are unstable states, but fear inspires the mind, while boredom, by nature, inspires idiocy or nothing. There's no in-between. Thomas was not bored.

Thomas studied the mud-stained marsh. He took note of the geese, the tweetsie birds, and the old man sitting on his throne, staring at him. The old man held a golden pocket watch and smiled. He was far away, but Thomas could see him flick the watch open and closed and he could see the old man's eyebrows raise and his eyes meet his own. The old man laughed between flicks. The reeds blew in the wind, half covering and half exposing the man. Thomas froze, the awe of the unknown locking down his joints. The reeds waved, and the old man stiffened his stare. Thomas, out of options and not bored at all, turned to his dad for help.

"What? An old man? Like out there?"

"Yeah, there's a guy out there on a rocking chair."

"Ha, I thought you said throne. You're seeing things, son. The cold must be getting to you. Sit on your hands again or rub them together or something."

"No. I don't want to. Can't you, don't you see that guy? Out there," Thomas turned to point, but the old man was gone.

"Well, I can't see no one. Now hush before you scare the ducks away," Thomas's dad said.

"But wait, are you sure we're alone out here?" Thomas said.

"What do ya mean, son?" Thomas's dad said.

"Like, what if someone else is hunting out here?"

"Well, I'm not going to lie, it's possible," Doug said.

“Doug, you think you would have at least noticed another truck? It’s flatter than a Rockette on an off day out here,” Thomas’s dad said.

“I know, but you know how these folks are. I mean, well, at least you used to. But these folks get to wake up and walk to their fields before y’all were even halfway down the highway. I bet they eat ducks for dinner every night, them bastards. What a life,” Doug said.

“That must be why there ain’t no ducks,” Thomas’s dad said.

Doug snorted.

“But I saw someone, I really did,” Thomas said.

“See, Doug, now you’re scaring him,” Thomas’s dad said.

“Don’t mean to scare ya, partner. But we ain’t exactly on our land,” Doug said.

“Wait, I thought y’all said you knew the guys who owned this place,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, we do, right Doug?”

“Oh, for sure. Well, it was a bit of a stretch, but it’s more like a friend who lives around here who knows the guy who built this thing way back in the day,” Doug said.

Thomas clinched his buttcheeks and wobbled in his seat. “And he’s cool with us coming down here?”

“Oh yeah,” Doug said; “He said nobody’s used this blind for years.”

“Yeah, see? Nothing to worry about. Relax, Thomas. It’s just cold. Besides, if there were some old fart out there, he would know better than to sit down range of a cold-blooded killer like you,” Thomas’s dad said. He put his arm around Thomas’s shoulder and pulled tight. His father’s squeeze soothed his muscles, but he pushed his dad’s warm arm away.

“You know, Thomas, there ain’t nothing to fear about saying sorry and giving good graces to Southern Hospitality. That’s what my mom, your great aunt, used to always say,” Doug said. Thomas had no idea what that meant and did not give it any thought.

“I swear to God I saw someone,” Thomas said.

“Hey, don’t you use the lord’s name in vain. Hush up, there’s no one out there. Let’s be quiet for a bit and kill some ducks, sound good?” Thomas’s dad said.

“Yeah, okay. Sorry.”

Thomas waited. He searched. He did not find. Could the old man be swallowed by the reeds? Could he be swimming in the swamp? Was he real, and if so, what did he know? Was the land and the water always this cold? Did the waders really matter, did Thomas really need to

wake up before the morning to put on all this cumbersome camo? He could have been a local checking out the fields, or he could be out to get Thomas, or *am I simply seeing things?* The cold makes the mind wander. It must have been another hour before,

“There! I gotta get my call, be quiet, be quiet,” Thomas’s dad said, and he fumbled through his recently bought duck call and blew into the cylinder in a pootin-tootin quashy, snotty too human of a rhythm. It sounded as if he were trying to make a baby laugh.

“Let’s all shoot, let’s shoot, let’s go,” Doug said. Thomas tightened his jaw, hoped, and prayed. The three waved their barrels in the air and shot at the fleet of quackers. The shots rolled through the land. Boom, boom . . . *boom*. Thomas shot last. The ducks flew faster, except for one, who fluttered a little up, fell a little down, fluttered again, flapping its wings against the cold death below, and landed somewhere in the marsh beyond the eyeline of the boy. Thomas heard the pellets patter into the water, wondering what kind of bugs were out there, if there were an old man, and if he felt the shotgun rain too.

“You got him, you got him, you got a duck,” Thomas’s dad said.

“I did? Maybe it was one of y’all,”

“Nope, all you, son. Now go get ‘em.”

“What?”

“You killed the duck, you get the duck,” Doug said.

“Like, walk out there? But it’s cold and there might be something-”

“What you afraid of? There ain’t no gators in Tennessee, I think. Even the mosqueters are dead. Go out and get ‘em, we promise we won’t shoot,” Doug said.

“But before I shot the duck was already,”

“Go on,” Thomas’s dad said. There was no point in arguing, unless Thomas wanted to let them know what he really thought and thinking of that made him squirm.

The echoes of the shells were long gone, and Thomas could only look out into the wetland. A small stick floated in circles not two steps out of the blind. Thomas stared at it, jealous of its freedom, its indifference to the cold slush. Then, a ripple waved through the muck, propelling the stick to swirl away from the blind.

Thrusts of slush pushed away not too far in the distance. It was rhythmic, careful, and made the men quiet, listening.

“What is that?” Thomas said, hushed and frightened.

“It’s no gator,” Doug said.

“Stupid - shush,” Thomas’s dad said.

Power. That’s what it was, a power powering through the mud, much stronger than the resistance the still swamp gave all two-legged things.

“It’s getting closer,” Thomas said.

“It’s okay. Maybe I’ll hop out and take a look,” Thomas’s dad said. The sound was louder, a force exerting its will through the muck, but it was slowing.

“There’s no need,” a voice said.

Thomas felt a warm rush through his body, one that said there was a struggle ahead. Like he was caught with blood still dripping from his gloves. His arms twitched. His body was prompted by something he did not understand, a strength of necessity, perhaps. A strength, whatever that was, he knew he could not use.

The unknown became the primal commander of blood and bone. Thomas thought of all the things he wanted to do in life, like make the crowd go wild after a big hit. He wanted to intercept a ball; he wanted to run it back for a touchdown, and he wanted his dad to see it. He wanted to become something to be proud of. He wanted to look in the mirror and not loathe what he saw. His body felt the need get to that point, to stop this vague voice before it stopped him.

Regret keeps you trapped in that younger self, reminds you of who you are, who you want to forget, where you need to go. Regret encourages life to keep living, lest you die with it. The deathbed does not have room for regret’s tormenting mistress. Thomas felt that now; he felt this voice was the announcement of his destruction, and he wished he had done more before it threatened his future.

Doug reached for his gun and flipped off the safety. Thomas’s dad waved him down, his eyes focused on the direction of the voice.

A hand came around the left corner of the shootin’ slit. It waved.

“Slow down, now. No need for alarm,” the hand said.

Thomas did not believe it. He craned his neck to try and see, but his dad pushed his butt down on the bench.

“Who’s that?” Thomas’s dad said.

The voice became a body. The hand turned to arm, the arm to torso, and a head appeared. It was an old man, his face wrinkled and dry. He wore a button up black suit, his pants tucked under long, muddy hip waders. A gold chain hung from his pocket.

“Oh, I’m simply involved with this beautiful piece of property. You men seem to be enjoying it,” the old man said.

“We were told to go here by a friend,” Doug said.

“Did you, now? What a funny thing. I don’t seem to remember any friends handing out vacation slips. Say, you do have a license to shoot that shotgun you have there in this county, right?”

Doug was silent.

“Oh, it’s no matter. I’m just poking around, anyway,” the old man said. His eyes looked Thomas up and down. Thomas shuffled his body to the back of the bench, not caring that the back wall dripped with mud.

“Well, sorry sir, we were told this was a fine spot to use by someone with land nearby,” Thomas’s dad said.

“Sure, sure. Well, again, I could mind, but who am I to ruin a day for some Hemingway hunters like yourselves? Besides, if I saw correctly, one of you got a kill just now,” the old man said.

“Yes sir. It was my son, Thomas. He shot that duck. It’s his first kill.”

“Dad.”

“It’s okay, Thomas. Sorry for poaching off your property, I think we were misled,” Thomas’s dad said.

“Oh, it’s hardly poaching. I own a lodge in Kenya if you want to see some poaching,” the old man said.

Doug nervously laughed, hands still on the shotgun.

“Sir, do you mind putting that gun away? I’m a careful man, and I don’t want to leave any room for silly accidents, you must understand,” the old man said.

Doug reacted too quickly for his hands, and he fumbled the gun. The metal of the barrel banged with the metal of blind.

“Shit. Sorry about that, partner.”

“It’s quite alright. But I do hope that you now see what I mean about silly accidents, do you?”

“Yes sir, sorry, you walked up on us all funny. We all do dumb things, don’t we?” Doug said.

“Yes, yes indeed, like listening to false friends?”

Doug shut his trap. Thomas got some courage to look at the old man, who looked back. The stare seemed to go through Thomas and time. It seemed to know something. Thomas angled his body to his dad’s shoulder.

“Now, I must apologize for creeping up like that. It is my land, and I did not know if it were rednecks or white trash or whomever, so I had to be careful. You can’t trust what you can’t see.”

Thomas’ dad stirred.

“Well, sir, you can trust us, we’re just trying to get my boy here his first duck,” Thomas’s dad said.

“Certainly. Which, besides curiosity and trust, brings me over here to this blind of mine. I happen to have seen where that poor bird landed,” the old man said.

This eased the two men, but the freeze of fear still stuck to Thomas’s guts.

“Well, that’s just perfect, sir, because we saw it fall, but it was a bit too far to know just where it went exactly,” Thomas’s dad said. “But we were about to send Thomas to go out and fetch it.”

“Great. Perfect, as you say. Perfect. Hmph. Well, I’m afraid it’s actually not quite perfect. It landed quite far, well beyond those reeds there,” the old man turned to point at the reeds, revealing a bald spot spreading against his platinum hair. He turned back, still pointing, slowly, like he wanted more time to admire the grey sky before dealing with his trespassers.

“If you would like, I could show, Thomas, is it?”

Thomas glanced quickly at the old man. With as little movement as possible, he nodded.

“Right. I could guide Master Thomas to where it landed, if that’s reasonable for the father, of course,” the old man said. He smirked, hand outstretched to Thomas. His dad saw opportunity.

“Sounds great to me, didn’t want him getting lost out there. We were going to get out of here after he brought it back, anyway. You know, get outta your hair and this freezing cold

weather once we get that duck. So, if you don't mind, that would be great. Sounds good, right Thomas?" Thomas's dad said.

"Dad, could you?" Thomas asked. The words bounced around his lungs before barreling out. He tugged his dad's camo, eyes begging for empathy.

"You kill the duck, you get the duck," the old man said.

"Exactly what I'm sayin'," Doug said.

"Thomas, it's fine. We're on his property. He probably knows just how to get there. Come on, maybe he can teach you about the land, too. Learn a thing or two, it'll do ya good," Thomas's dad said.

This was a nightmare for Thomas, but seeing as he was outnumbered three to one, complaining would prompt more lectures about learning and becoming a man. There were only so many of those he could take before turning the shotgun on himself, but, of course, he wouldn't. He's smart enough to not want to die, but also smart enough to see the benefits of an early departure from this life. It would take that burden off getting bigger and stronger, but again, the regret of not doing it at all was too powerful for the boy to take the coward's way out.

The old man's hand remained outstretched, now in the blind's space. Its wrinkles folded on top on one another.

*I could run, Thomas thought, but that would just mean I'll be stuck in the cold.* He searched for a way out but found none. *Fuck me.*

"Fine," Thomas said.

"Good lad," the old man said. "Now, take my hand. As for you two, get ready, a bit of water will come rushing in due to the displacement of your fine boy right here."

Thomas took the old man's hand. It felt cold like an arctic snakeskin. It felt like the hand swallowed the environment, even through Thomas's thick Carhartt gloves.

The old man pulled Thomas with great strength up and over the shooting slit, and he immediately merged waist deep in the mire. Thomas scrunched his nose as a look of disgust moved over his face. The resulting splash sent a few droplets down inside his waders, the cold making itself known to Thomas's camo pants.

A bit of water did, in fact, gurgle over the orifice and onto the men's laps. Doug brushed the water off his thighs, and Thomas' dad covered the barrel of his gun.

“Oh, one more thing, gentlemen. Could you hand over Thomas’s gun there? It would be a shame to see another waddling of ducks with nothing to kill them with, you understand,” the old man said.

“Sure thing, sir,” Doug said. He scooted from the bench and grabbed Thomas’s gun. Crouched and limited by the confines of the blind, he awkwardly handed the weapon over to the old man, who took it one handed with superb ease and care.

“Thank you, sir. We’ll be back shortly,” the old man said.

He gave Thomas his gun. Thomas forgot how heavy it was, having put the memory of the hours ago journey from the truck to the blind way out of mind.

The old man turned towards the reeds and began to walk almost as if on solid, dry ground. Thomas glared at Doug and his dad.

“See ya later,” Doug said. Thomas’s dad smiled.

“Have fun, son!” he cheered, happy to have something to brag about.

Thomas could have spit. In fact, the cold had sucked the moisture out of him, and if he were to choose, he could’ve had the prime time, plasmic, iron clad spit of legends. The kind you chew instead of swallow. The kind that alarms the mind. This spitball could have travelled all the way back to Thomas’s cozy, heated home, or straight into Doug’s stupid face, if he wanted it to.

The old man was moving well towards the reeds. Thomas couldn’t bear to look at the men anymore. You can’t blame him. He instead faced the old man striding away, and knew he had to go. Had to. Or else... what, exactly? He didn’t know. He didn’t want to find out, either. Best spend your energy walking through mud than taking disappointed criticism.

Thomas trudged, gun raised with two hands above his head, and he trudged. The muck worked wonders to make the watery walk as difficult as possible. This was the workout he needed to get big and strong like his dad, and if this is what it took, Thomas would rather be a tennis player.

Now there was real, hot sweat. The cold tries its best to stop moving things, but men still move. The old man, however, stopped. He was a good fifteen yards ahead of Thomas and had the same still cadence when he sat on his rocking chair. Or was it a throne?

“It’s in your knees, Master Thomas,” he said.

“Okay,” Thomas said, “coming.”



Thomas trudged still, thrusting one hip, then the next, fighting the bitter, bleak slush. He rested his gun behind his shoulders, as if he were carrying chains that bound him.

“Thomas, boy. You’re not listening to me. But you will. You will, or else, well, or else you’ll see the worst to come. At least listen to me now, will you?”

Thomas nodded.

“Good. It’s in the knees, that’s all it is. Lift your knee high, extend your leg, then lift the other knee higher, high enough so you can see it break from the water. Then you repeat, and do it again, and you’ll move through this mud like the fluid it is. You can move through most of life’s worst challenges by simply lifting your knees above the water. Remember that,” the old man said.

Thomas listened. On his next step, he raised his knee high enough to see the gravel-textured knee pad on his waders, and he extended that leg as far as he could against the silt, powered his foot into the mushy bottom, and continued. He moved faster, though awkwardly, but faster through the mire with enough ease that it was no longer valid to complain. Complain about the logistics, anyway, the cold was still in every item for what seemed to be years and years of dim, gray miles.

“Better?” the old man said.

“Yeah, sort of,” Thomas said. “Thank you.”

“Sort of? You can’t even begin to say what you really think. That’s a pathetic trait that smart men will most certainly smoke you out for, you do realize,” the old man said.

Thomas was mere feet from him now. He was panting, and the old man stood still. This sudden accusation sat unwelcome.

“Okay. Sorry. But, back there, my dad asked you who you were,” Thomas said.

“Yes, he did. Quite the acute observation. With a mind like that you’ll grow up to do great things. Great, terrible, things.”

“Right. But you didn’t answer. I feel like you should’ve at least introduced yourself or something. Isn’t that polite?”

“Yes, I suppose. It’s not always wise to introduce yourself, young Master Thomas. I notice you did not introduce yourself either. How strange is that?”

The first bit of suspicion scrunched Thomas’s eyes. “I think you’re lying. This isn’t your land. I saw you out here earlier, playing with a watch. You were sitting on something, and you

were staring at me. That's really weird. You don't sound like you're from here either," Thomas said.

The old man smirked.

"You don't sound like you're from here, either. I bet you don't really know where here is, exactly. If I left you out here and told your dear relatives to go on home, you would be lost. You would be afraid. You're afraid now, and nobody will help you. But I can. I can turn your fear into your power. I can make you fear itself."

Thomas moved the gun to rest it along his chest. This old man wanted to get into his head with vapid semantics. He was sure of it.

Unconsciously, Thomas widened his stance, sounding small waves and petty splashes through the water. A bit more muck found its way to the inside of his waders. Thomas smelled the decay of the land.

"To be honest, I don't know exactly what you're saying, but that sounds bad, I think. I, uh, I did see you, though. I just want to know why, that's all. But it's cool, uh, sir. It's fine. You could probably point to where the duck is now and I'll, uh, I'll get back to the blind and get these guys off, your, uh if it is your land and we'll be out of here," Thomas said. His head worked to find holes, dangerous holes in the old man's words, and his body prepared for struggle.

"Right. Fair enough. Fair enough. How about we keep moving, and I'll let you in on a secret or two," the old man said, motioning Thomas to follow him as he began his effortless stride. Thomas trudged to keep up, and he tried his best. The old man slowed down for him. Soon, they arrived at the tall reeds. The old man held the dormant plant open like a gate, and invited Thomas into the symmetrical line of brown, crackly sticks.

Thomas turned around. The blind was smaller than it was; its haphazard camo failing to hide the heads of men in their stinky metal box. At least in the blind he was surrounded by jerks he could trust.

"Come in, Thomas, there's only mallards and truth in here. They'll be here when you get back, I promise. You'll be back in no time. In fact, no time at all. You'll return a bonifide killer, better than those that lie when they say they love you. Like you always wanted and will always be," the old man said.

His words wove a net around Thomas's reason and stripped away his wants. If he got the duck, then *I could tell them to fuck off*. He would be able to go home, and he'll have something to

show for himself, enough evidence to finally demand respect. Maybe this man was onto something. *Get the duck, get out, get Dad off your back.* Thomas turned and sulked into the stalk. The reeds were rough and thick but weak enough to force a path. Despite their desire to swallow you. He wondered what connected them to the land, why they grew so close.

The old man paced a few knee raises forward, and soon Thomas found himself surrounded by the reeds. What seemed like miles and miles of sticks blotted out any sense of direction. They were an enemy army surrounding their target. The reeds consumed his vision and would wrap coolly around his body and take him. The sound of the old man moving through the reeds faded, and the sticks came closer. Their density was a threat.

He couldn't see the old man; he couldn't tell which way from what and holy fuck was he turned around and terrified. He raised his weapon. This could be it, the old man could be anywhere, whatever devious plans he had could be coming to fruition right now, and this was the time as any to be on your toes-

"Master Thomas," the old man said, from somewhere in the stalk. There was nothing to see but stick and nothing to smell but mud. The only thing to hear was the old man's odorous, calloused voice.

"What? Where are you?" Thomas said.

"I'm here, well, around here. That's not important, but you are right. I did withhold some information. I had to; you must understand. I didn't want to alarm anyone, and besides, I need you here, so I can show you who you are meant to be," the old man said.

"Show me, show me what? Dad! You're freaking me out, just show me where the fuck the duck is, and I'll leave your land. I promise," Thomas said.

"Master Thomas, you sure do have a way of letting your doubts win you over. This is just a fraction of my land. You knew that. My land, well, my land is everywhere, always, omniscient, omnipresent, and it is my greatest burden and most spectacular achievement. I intend to give it all to you. To let you sit on my throne. Oh, I am tired, Thomas, and you will let me rest. I can taste the hate in your heart, and it makes me swell with joy to know that I have found my worthy successor. You are fear, Thomas, and you can't see it. Those men, that pathetic excuse for a father and that babbling, racist buffoon he calls a cousin, they will try to put upon you their version of morality, and you will become in their image the weak coward. I will free you from that path, and instead give you everything, my power that I have wielded for too long."

The old man's voice crackled like heat lightening. Thomas aimed his gun, spinning in the stalk until he was aimless, directionless, and dizzy enough to drown. There was that unknown that filled his bone with the will to fight, or, at least, run.

"What the fuck are you even talking about? I'm leaving, I'm going back to the blind," Thomas said, anxious and out of breath.

The old man emerged silent from the thick stalk behind Thomas's neck, and calmly put his cool, arctic snakeskin hand right on Thomas's nape. Thomas froze stiff, the unknown's rage inside him lost to the power of the old man's conscious, cold hands. His cracked, knife-slit lips came a kiss away from Thomas's poor, bloodless ear.

"You will see your full potential soon enough. My power will be yours. Others will kiss your feet, and you will be king," The old man whispered. "Look. There's that duck of yours. Look."

Thomas' eyes thawed, allowing them to meander down to a small, floating duck, barred in limbo by the reeds.

"See you soon," the old man said.

## II

Thomas sunk. He sunk till the mud mashed his hair, till the soybean gunk covered his eyes blind. He thrashed his arms. Mud snuck in through his terrified lips and he tasted the salty afterglow of pesticides and years of what men use to beg the land for growth.

*Think.*

The thrashing slowed.

*Feet.*

He kicked but felt no bottom.

*Gun.*

It was now a paddle, and he tried to use the gun to push his way up. His chest thumped, air running low, he was close to gulping the land into his lungs.

*Gun.*

Thomas stopped paddling, and instead pushed the gun, holding it by the barrel, as low as it could go. He strained his waist, reaching down, and his chest thumped again. His skull began closing in on his brain, and he shifted his shoulders, just to get the butt of the gun a few inches lower. His face swelled, no air left. Thomas twisted his body to what he thought was down, extending his arms, and he felt the gun hit bottom. He swung his legs, using the gun as a fulcrum, until his feet hit the bottom too, and he jumped with all his fear, and shot up.

The cap had succumbed to the struggle along with the neck gator. Thomas emerged with short, brown hair no different than the errant sticks floating in the marsh. His face, now exposed to the world, was caked in that thick mud, the only parts not wet and brown were his struggling-to-open eyes and the darkness of his mouth. He screamed for air and waded, gun still held by the barrel, kicked, and barely holding himself afloat, coughed up the old mud while sucking in as much air as possible through his nose.

There was no sun to greet him. The grey sky made adjusting easy, and he soon made out what he thought were the same reeds the old man led him to just ten yards ahead. The blind was nowhere to be seen. It must have been beyond that flooded, dormant forest.

But the marsh wasn't supposed to be deep enough to completely submerge a growing boy. Well, a once-growing boy. Thomas grew to a monstrous five foot eight from fifth to sixth grade, easily trouncing all the kids he didn't want to be compared to. He was well on his way to inheriting the reputation of being the big, broad-shouldered man his father and all his kin carried. He was going to be big enough to be a lineman, just like his uncle, just like his father. But seventh, eighth, and ninth grade came along, and he stayed still, and others didn't, and got used to, again, looking up to all those kids he resented. Blame your mother, his dad would say, blame her short genes. All you got to do is stop complaining and eat some more.

If he were taller his feet may be at the bottom right now, and how he wished that his dad was here to tell him that. The knee trick that freak show taught him wouldn't work here. He had to swim. Before doing that, he had to get calm. Fighting with yourself is like playing chess with a chicken. *Disengage*, Thomas thought, remembering the Iraq war YouTube videos his dad would watch while driving. Once Thomas could drive, he decided he would spit in his father's face, be better, and not prop up his phone on the dash to see some soldiers laugh at explosions. Eyes on the road. Eyes on the road.

*Eyes on the road.*

The mud was mostly out of his lungs, and leveraging the buoyancy of the dirt blended water, he slowed his arms, his legs, and took a deep breath in, held it, and slowly released. He wondered what the men would say because of how long he took. And where that dead bird was.

*Fuck that duck.*

The euphoria of surviving that close call began to wane, and Thomas started to notice the cold again. His skin stuck to the camo, hard and bubbly. The mud on his face felt like ice, so he wiped what he could off with his gunless hand and decided on breaststroke to get him back to the reeds. He found his breath. He matched its rhythm to the extension and retention of his arms. He would think about the old man when his feet were back on the soggy bottom.

Thomas knew that old man wanted him to be lost, to be afraid. But fuck him. What that old man's endgame was, why he was there, why he picked Thomas, those were all mysterious, but Thomas wasn't going to give this man another inch. Thomas has been thrown around all day, shoved into muddy metal boxes, told to shut up, told to shoot, told to kill, and he hasn't fought back. This, Thomas concluded, was far enough. Sometimes it's better to be pissed than to piss your pants.

Lost in angry thought, Thomas was surprised when his foot finally scraped some ground. A few strokes and tip-tappings later, he was standing again, and just feet in front of the reeds.

He looked at the sky, trying to gage what time it was. There was no way to track the sun through the overcast, but he figured it was about damn time to go home, to the warmth, to ask his mom for dinner, and neck-craned trying to find the sun, a withered, long hand reached from the reeds. Thomas didn't have time to dart his eyes down before the stick fingers clasped around his neck. The hand choked whatever mud was left in his throat back into the land. Thomas grabbed the hand as fast as his cold body would let him. He was too weak to push it away. The grip tightened. Thomas gurgled. Only the black sleeve down to the elbow was visible from the reeds, and it spoke.

"You will play with flames in the lake of fire while your foes burn around your ankles. Let me rest," the old man hissed. His cold steel grip lifted Thomas to his toes, and the resolution to anger immediately went away with his breath. Fear was back in full force. Thomas squawked, begging. The hand pulled him into the reeds, but no body emerged, just more reeds brushing

against his desperate body, wiping off some more mud, terrorizing his already petrified eyes. Tears swelled to fight the sting of the sticks but blinking away the pain was hardly a priority.

In the ambush, his body locked, including his grip on the gun.

*Gun.*

He weakly lifted the weapon in the general direction of the hand and fumbled for the safety. There was no use in grabbing the old, evil arm, so he let that hand go to help his other. He found the safety and hoped he switched it off. The gun was heavier with all the mud.

Thomas wretched, panicked, and pulled the trigger. Just a click, nothing. The hand began to shake him sideways, Thomas's lower half becoming a ragdoll. But he remembered that after you shoot, you must pump the shell out. Makes you think before you fire twice. Thomas reached for the pump of the shotgun, missed with his other hand from the force of the shaking, reached again, grabbed the pump, put the butt of the gun against his waist, and pulled the pump. His eyes fluttered, and he saw that the empty shell meant for a duck had only come halfway out of the chamber, trapped by mud. He clawed at it, like a dog trying to get into the dining room, and eventually swiped the shell out the chamber, and pushed the pump back into position.

Butt still on his waist, barrel pointed at the old man's elbow, Thomas fought consciousness, and pulled the trigger. The gun fired. The shaking stopped. The old man's wrinkly white fingers slowly loosened their grip until Thomas fell, landing with his knees on the bottom of the marsh. The hand stayed in its outstretched position, as if it were now choking the air. Thomas gulped and gasped, and his blood swirled through his body, warming him for a second.

He focused on pumping another shell into the chamber. He pulled the pump towards his body. The empty shell clambered out, but there was no other. He had only loaded two. His dad told him to load three. Thomas didn't. He only loaded two.

Shrill and rhythmic laughter crept from the deeper reeds, like a cymbal scraped by a metal file. The fingers turned into a fist. The elbow retracted. The arm took its time to disappear into the surrounding thicket, and the less the arm was seen, the more laughter was heard.

His heart tried to break open his chest. Scared sweat made him colder. His hands twitched, and he was surrounded again by fear and misery.

A prickling numbness washed over him, caused by his erratic breath. Limbs were threatening secession. His body was not his own, his own breath too greedy, *I am going to die.*

The laughter stopped. Bits of reeds torn to shreds by his shotgun floated like flakes of gold and stuck to his cold hard face.

In his panic, there was a brief peace. The reeds were still and quiet. There was beauty in this land. There must be. The way the reeds met the water, their geometry, the dense smell of mud. To certain men this is heaven, but not to Thomas, who was beginning to understand. All land is governed. The old man must rule this place and shoot the misery that's inherit to the cold into the hearts of all.

The reeds rustled and shook from a direction Thomas couldn't discern. The water moved. The stillness was gone, and something was out there.

He stopped himself from screaming. A favorite prank of his was waiting until his mom thought he was asleep, then creeping down the stairs, listening to where she was, in the kitchen, reading in the den, the laundry room, and stalking silently until he was a breath away, then going 'hello!' so to hear her yelp and nearly jump out of her drawers. To which his mom would threaten to kill him, and Thomas would laugh, and laugh. I'm only just saying 'hello,' he would say, why are you so mad?

*If I ever see you again, I'll finally say sorry.*

"I'm so sorry," Thomas squeaked, unaware he was sobbing, unaware his words made it to the reeds.

As if she were listening, a woman's voice, even keeled and calming, replied; "For what, Thomas?"

Thomas lurched, standing as tall as he could. Five eight with shoes on, he would tell people.

"Who are you? Where are you?" he demanded, spinning around, and seeing nothing but sticks.

"I'm right here," the woman's voice said. Thomas turned towards the sound, and as promised, there she was.

She wore a sleeveless white top with ripped up jeans hidden underneath muddy hip waders. A single scar went vertical from her left wrist to her forearm. It looked as if it weren't allowed to heal, bubbly in some places, cracked in others. Her smile seemed wider than it should be. Her presence was warm. Thomas began to loosen his tightened shoulders. He exhaled. Then,



her smile grew longer. It stretched nearly off the crest of her sharp jawline. You shouldn't trust anything in this cold.

Thomas, quick as night, picked up his empty gun and pointed it at the woman.

"Don't," he stuttered, "come, any, closer." His teeth chattered. Her smile shrank but did not disappear.

"What are you going to do, Thomas?" she asked. Her voice gave nothing away, and this terrified the boy. "You're not supposed to hurt me yet."

"Yet?"

The gun shook in Thomas's hands. The woman inched closer. Her chin pointed down, and the reeds brushed her blonde hair back, revealing a pimply forehead. Thomas backpaddled. Each step he took crunched a bundle of reeds down into their roots. Some crushed reeds floated back to the surface; their roots too weak to hold them in the land. Thomas was unsure if the water dripping down his nose escaped from his hair or if the winter drizzle returned like it always does. Either way, he didn't think he could be any colder.

She gracefully moved those hollow sticks away from her face when she stopped. Thomas continued to creep backwards, still aiming the gun, but blindly walking through reeds does nothing but get you scared and stuck, and you would change everything if you had the chance to retrace your steps, but every passing second means it's always too late. So, Thomas, eyes trained on this taller woman in the white sleeveless top, did eventually stop. He did not lower his shaking hands, curled around the tool of demise.

Thomas asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm someone you don't know yet. Call me Helen. Yes. I like that name. Call me Helen."

A droplet of water birthed from her forehead made its way down to the bridge of her nose, and she used her scarred arm to wipe it away. There was no doubt the drizzle was back.

"What do you want with me? What do you, what does this, what's happening? Tell me what's happening. Fuck."

Thomas's frigid stance cracked. His arms trembled. The old fear consumed him and wanted answers. "What's happening?" he cried.

Her smile was softer, shorter. Her face pitied him. He shivered. His body feared the cold.

“Thomas, it’s okay. I can see you’re scared. I’ll know you to be a scared man, and you’ll act no different. But this is now, and now you’re scared as any boy should be. It’s okay. I’m here to help, Thomas. You really need my help,” Helen said.

“How are you helping? What? Do you know that man, the old creepy fucking guy who’s fucking with me, fucking, God! Get away from me. Get away from me,” Thomas said. Helen smiled. “Please,” Thomas said.

“I’m here to show you the way out. To prevent you from being lost,” Helen said. A reed was in her hair, and she revealed her scar again while moving it. Thomas traced the scar with his vibrating eyes. She saw him do it and giggled. Thomas thought that would have been cute if he weren’t so afraid of death. Dying from the man or the freeze, he had no preference at this point.

“You see this? I’m just now noticing it too,” she said, studying it. “Kind of funky, don’t you think? Horizontal for attention, vertical for results, as that old *Family Guy* saying goes. I won’t have seen that show in ages by the time we’re through. By the time you cause me to do this,” Helen said. Her face became ice-stern, as if she were ruminating, and she held her arm so Thomas could look at nothing but the gnarling, screaming scar.

“This will be your fault,” she said.

“No. I, what? I don’t get it. You’re fucking with me,” Thomas said. His voice quivered, and he didn’t notice that he lowered the gun.

“You’ll be drunk,”

“I don’t drink,”

“You will,”

“All the people that drink are assholes,”

“How old are you now?”

“Fifteen,”

“That will change,”

“Yeah, I’ll get older, no shit,”

“And you’ll find your vices. You won’t be able to control yourself,”

“Yes, I will,”

“That’s what all boys think,”

“But I will,”

“No!”

She raised her voice. It was no longer warm, but a dagger of dirt-stained ice. Helen approached Thomas now, slowly, and this time Thomas didn't dare to move.

"No, you will not," Helen said. "All of you, *especially you*, think you're different, better, that you won't do anything wrong because you simply won't. How fucking stupid, Thomas, how fucking stupid." Helen was a mere foot from Thomas's stone face. Her breath felt vicious on his skin. It smelled like black, rotting meat. Every exhale was a juggle between resentment and pity. Helen glared at the mud stuck around his flared nostrils, the blemishes that Thomas couldn't wipe away. His fear pushed him to accept, stand in hopeless ground.

"I'm sorry," he said, and did not know why he meant it. Helen couldn't let him continue. As if he had anything else to say. If he could make sense of the present.

"No. Not yet. There's no way to be sorry, and you'll think just because you're sorry you're suddenly innocent again. But Thomas, it will become you, and it will become me, and it will bring us so much pain. So much resentment. So much regret. So much guilt. And I'll try to make the pain tangible, and you'll try to apologize, without ever thinking about how much I'll bleed because of you."

Helen's nose was just inches from Thomas. Her harsh breathing slowed, and she closed her eyes.

"I wish things will be better for you," she said. "He wants you, but I don't think you're a good fit. Not now, at least." She opened her eyes, and they were kinder. Thomas had his back and neck arched back.

He said, easing, "Thank you? I'm..." He stopped to think. "I want to get out of this shitty ass swamp."

Helen perked up. "Great. Follow me, if you will," she kindly commanded, brushing away the words as she did the reeds. Thomas watched her trudge through the stalk. His fear, the old fear, waned after the verbal onslaught, and a curious confusion scratched the mind. He wondered why the reeds were so good at hiding things that moved through them. Helen's back disappeared with every strong step. He snapped out of his observant trance and followed.

"Are you really going to help me?" he asked.

"Yeah. I really am," Helen said. She laughed to herself.

“Oh, cool. Um. What you just said, I, uh, that doesn’t really make any sense. I don’t know you, right? Like, I don’t know you at all, so,” he said, trailing off. Helen held a particularly thick bunch of brown reeds down so Thomas could pass by.

“So?” she asked. Her brevity, Thomas thought, was simply insane.

“So, why the fuck are you saying that shit? What did I do?”

Helen stopped her slog through the stalk. She thought for a moment and continued walking as she began speaking.

“There’s good in your heart. People will see that, and they’ll admire you. I’ll like you for many reasons. And you’ll eventually throw that all away. My existence, now, in this swamp, is tied only to you. He took that part of me that has to do with you and put me here. And the you I get is just a fucking kid. It’s agony. You are agony. You are capable of horrible things you won’t understand now and will barely understand then. But there’s still some good to salvage while you still can.”

They pushed through more reeds. Helen seemed to know the way.

“I don’t know whether to say fuck you or thank you,” Thomas said. “This is a lot, like, a fuck ton. You’re weird. I’m not fucking agony or whatever you’re saying. I won’t hurt you because I don’t know you. You’re freaking me the fuck out. Like, I don’t believe this is real.”

“In many ways it’s not. This is his doing. I am, this version of me, is just a puppet for his desires. I know there’s another me. I can feel her missing. I can’t find her, but the longer I’m here, the more I know what’s gone. I don’t think she would help you. I think she would drown your puny ass. Consider yourself lucky.”

“Okay, I get it. I’m a piece of shit. I’m sorry.”

“He brought me here to show you that. Wants me to convince you to submit and take his place. He said my pain will go away, but that’s all I feel now, that’s all I am. Just a fragment of your actions. But I think the way out isn’t with him. I think it’s giving you a chance to fight for yourself.”

“The old man. You and him, y’all are in cahoots.”

“That’s what you’re worried about?”

“The guy who’s been trying to kill me for the past hour? Fucking obviously!”

“Has it really been an hour? Hm.”

“Why is he doing this? Where is he? What is he going to do to me? You’re freaking me the fuck out.”

“What he’s going to do to you is up to him. And if you have the heart to fight.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Good. Maybe this version of you won’t fuck up. That’s my stupid hope I’m holding out for. We shouldn’t talk so loudly. He may not like what he hears.”

Thomas’s legs moved on their own. He wanted them to go faster, but their pace was set in stone. He didn’t care if a stick smacked his face, and he whispered,

“I want to go home so fucking bad.”

“Do you really say the f-word this much at your age?” Helen asked.

“I’m scared, okay? Apparently, it’s not the worst thing I’ll do, Jesus fucking Christ.”

“And using the lord’s name in vain? You’re already a lost cause, aren’t you?”

“You’re just trying to get in my head, just like the old man. You’re the fucking evil one, how about that? Huh, you’re the, uh, fucked up one in this situation.”

“That was a joke,” she said. She stopped Thomas. An icy rush emanated from her hand on his chest, like it was made of the cold mud that held the land together. “But I mean everything else. It’s stupid seeing you like this. I don’t like it. It’s not fair. And it’s not all nice of me to get you out. Once you’re out, I’m out. I hate this place. I hate this version of myself. I need to get back to my missing piece.”

She slid her hand off his chest. The touch lingered, and they kept sloshing through the thick.

“I never wanted to go hunting. My dad made me do it. It fucking sucks. I hope your other version or whatever is doing okay, though. I really don’t know what you mean by all those things you said *tbh*, but thanks for the heads up, I guess. You’re weird, but you seem like you would be, uh, cool to hangout with or whatever if the old man wasn’t fucking with us, you know.”

“Don’t ask to hangout with me,” Helen said. She pulled a reed and let it go right as Thomas moved by it, and it swiped his head.

“Oh, right, cause, uh, yeah, fuck, uh, sorry.”

“All good. You don’t know. It’s fine. You can be good. This is a chance for you to be good. And if you blow it, and if he doesn’t get to you first, I’ll cut off your balls and make you choke on them before you bleed out. People don’t get chances like this.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Don’t fuck up.”

“I’ll fucking try.”

“Do or do not, there is no try.”

“Wait a minute, that’s Yoda. That’s literally Yoda. I knew you were full of shit.”

“Yoda?”

“He’s – maybe your other self knows who Yoda is.”

“Maybe. It doesn’t matter. We’re almost there.”

If the reeds went on forever, Thomas would walk forever, no matter how sore his thighs got, no matter where his thoughts went. But they had to end like every moment. Helen dodged sticks. Thomas trucked through them.

“Here,” Helen said. Thomas squinted through the thin lines where the thicket allows you to see ahead. There was brown water and where it stopped at the levee, and no golden-brown reeds, no false forest. The blind was somewhere out there, and so were the men. *They’re gonna be so pissed.*

“Thank God,” he said. “Thank you so much.”

Helen’s lips slithered up her cheeks. The wide smile returned. Her head would split in half if she tried to talk. The stench of rotting flesh made Thomas gag, and a cold wind blew Helen’s hair, so it hit Thomas. When it landed, her hair covered her face as the reeds do with your destination. All he could see were the creases of her lips under her bleached ears.

Thomas didn’t feel the fingers sneak around his boots until he tried to move past Helen. His knees bent, but his feet were sucked into the mud, and he used the butt of his gun to jab and jab the tightening fingers around his feet. The water splashed with every strike like a fish fighting against the rod and reel.

Her voice was much older, and the cold wind seemed to blow from the cracks in her long smile. “One more thing,” she said.

She reached her scarred wrist towards Thomas’s gun. Fountains of blood gushed from the scar, but it seemed more like sludge, and Thomas was too terrified to determine if it was dark red or brown. What leaked from her body molded with the mud.

The fingers pinning Thomas down walked their way up his waders until he could see them poke from the water. Thomas hit the fingers with the butt of his gun, but in the middle of a

strike the gun froze in place, stopped by a great force. Helen had grabbed the weapon, and though Thomas used everything his arms had to offer, the gun was the sword in the stone, and he was not worthy.

“What do you want from me?” he screamed.

The hand growing from the land made its way up his chest and to the gun, and the fingers found Helen. Its arm grew, and wore a clean black suit jacket sleeve, and Thomas was thankful that it lurked its way across Helen’s scarred, gushing arm. The arm wrapped around the wound like a snake with its prey. The blood stopped dripping into the mud.

The hand stretched over her face and palmed it.

“This is your key, take it, or you will never find a way out. Do it and go,” she said, and the hand grew to absorb her entire head. She screamed, then gurgled her words. A cold blue light shone from her, and Thomas realized his arms were free to move when he desperately covered his eyes.

He saw a flash of himself twirling his hair while sitting on the old man’s throne. Somebody hugged his legs and begged but Thomas spat in their face, and he felt that person’s fear, and he felt the power.

The sound stopped and the light faded. Thomas’s feet could move. He cautiously lowered his arms and slowly opened his eyes. There was no Helen. No gun. Only a dead duck, floating at the edge of the thick.

### **III**

As Thomas emerged from the reeds, some hundred yards away, Doug was saying something like:

“How many people do you think are playin ‘Free Bird’ in their cars right now?”

“It’s a popular song, Doug. Probably a good bit,” Thomas’s dad replied. Maybe he shifted his be-hind around the bench, maybe he craned his neck over the shootin’ slit to see if

Thomas was back yet. Doug wouldn't've noticed if his attention was elsewhere. He had what must have been an original idea.

"But, think about it, partner. That tune playing simultaneously throughout the land to thousands of folks, all of them wishing to be as free as a bird at the same time. Jamming to that fuckin' godly gee-tar solo, bout ready to lose control. Man, oh man. I wish I could join them. I really do," Doug said, eyes glazing somewhere towards the grey above, towards wherever his mind was wandering. If it had the capacity to wander at all. It might, but with men like that, you never really know.

"Well, Thomas will be back soon with that duck, and we'll get out of here and put it on in the car. Thomas showed me how to hook up my phone to the stereo without any wires or anything. He's a smart kid," Thomas's dad said. It hasn't been long enough for a calm man to worry, but he couldn't shake the strange anxiety of his son being out of sight. He wished he had gone out there with him, and

"Something's not sitting right with me, Doug," he said.

"What? That more people are probably listening to that damn rap these days than actual, real music?"

"No. I remember you listening to Ice Cube back in the day."

"Me? Hell no!"

"With Katherine."

Doug turned his neck all the way right and gave the father a look he hadn't gotten in what must have felt like a lifetime. The father knew what it meant. He wouldn't forget – that bad look preceded fights, wrestling matches in patches of zoysia, preceded what he now remembers as the good days. But these aren't those days, and those fights eventually took forms much worse than scabbed knees or grasstains on freshly washed button-downs.

"Doug," he said, fiddling with his gun, trading one bad feeling for another, "I'm sorry."

Doug let the look stand for a moment, then sighed, and looked down.

"I came out here to get away from all that," Doug said.

"I know," Thomas's dad said.

"It hasn't been easy, the divorce and all. Seeing you and Thomas, it just, I have nothing, man. Except this peace and quiet, for now."

Doug looked up, and he felt the frigid drizzle on his face.



“You were there for me when my dad died. I can’t repay you for that,” Thomas’s dad said. “She doesn’t know what she’s doing, and she sure as shit wouldn’t appreciate something like this.” He motioned to the still, silent marsh.

“I tried to show her my survival kit so many damn times, man, and she didn’t even care. I would tell her that if a tornado came through, or a hurricane, but one that’s more inland, a big storm, I guess, you know, lightening and shit, and we had to live on the land, I bet she would care then. That’s what I would tell her, and she would just call it a ‘cute little project’ or something. That’s when I should’ve known she didn’t love me.”

“I think your survival kit is very nice, very nice. I know Thomas didn’t care, but I do. Between you and me, I think he has some woman in him, but he likes that reading. Very smart, always reading stuff on the phone about things going on,” Thomas’s dad said. He loudly exhaled, and twiddled his fingers, trying to find a way to say something he really meant.

“I’ve missed you, Doug. Thanks for calling, I think this is exactly what y’all both need, some macho stuff to take your mind off the bullshit. Lord knows Anna’s driving me crazy. But I mean it. Thanks for calling. It’s been too long.”

“No problem, partner. I read stuff on my phone too, you know. Like how the Clintons would go to that island and do some diddling. That’s messed up, man. And did you hear that they would take babies from mothers who didn’t go to college? Yeah. They take those babies, paint them whatever color they craving that day, bring them to that Epstein island, and touch ‘em. This world is messed up, man.”

“Uh, I don’t know about all that, but yes, brother, this is one messed up world.”

Knowing what he does now, Thomas thought that’s exactly how that conversation would have gone. Some woes shared between grown men. He became momentarily envious. They were so deaf to his troubles, to the things that want to keep him here, to the man those things want to curse him to become.

*And they’re just shooting the shit.*

Thomas worried he would never have grown men woes. The cold had cracked all his defenses, and the drizzle had begun to intensify, reinforcing what he feared was rigor mortis.

But he had to keep moving. He had to get back to the blind, *of all fucking places*, he thought. He was just feet from the reeds, a duck’s beak away, *too fucking close*, he thought.

The blind, from this distance, blended only minimally with the water. The brown rust and decay of the metal were unnatural enough to spot it from a hundred yards away, and Thomas knew how much those few reeds glued to the top of the blind didn't belong.

He saw the two heads bobble as if they were round branches in the water.

Help, he tried to say, but couldn't. His lungs were snapped shut, by dread and the lingering breathless shock you get when your blood takes the form of ice. Helen melted him enough to speak, but he wasn't sure if he should trust her words. Thomas looked at the duck in his hand and wanted to apologize, wishing it would fly away. The blind called, and he could barely make out the men's movements through the curtain of what was becoming rain.

He remembered to pick up his knee towards his chest and only then extend your leg, and he did. The water was shallower on this side of the hellish, hollow forest, and his knees broke the water quicker than in the thick. He could see them shake, but they were phantom limbs. Any feeling other than fear was a mirage.

He picked up knee after knee and was at the very least happy to be moving towards something he could comprehend. He held the duck by its neck. It was limp and wet in his gloves, and Thomas noticed the poor bird's eyes were shut. Maybe it had time to accept its death, maybe it didn't want to see what was coming, maybe it wanted to think of better days above some other farmer's flooded cropland. The rainwater curved around the dead head. What didn't stick to the hackles dripped into the marsh.

*It couldn't have been her.*

The floodwater erupted in small explosions, like a thousand shotgun pellets who didn't find their targets. The drum shush of endless splashes reverberated in Thomas's eardrums. Even if he could cry for help, nobody would hear him now. The rain had arrived. The cold now forced its way from heaven down to what Thomas had long ago decided was hell.

The blind's rusted sheet-metal showed some mercy. Thomas could make out the sharpness and quick echo of rain meeting metal. He loved that sound, always had. It reminded him of summer camp in North Carolina. The Pisgah National Forest, the counselors explained, was the closest America had to a tropical rain forest. The Appalachian Amazon. Where the mountains once rivaled Everest, where the land withered itself down, bowing to time. There, in the comforting cradle of the once great hills, Thomas would lay in bunkbeds under sheet-metal ceilings and listen to the rain patter safely away and that would rock him to sleep while he

wondered what adventure would come next. When not at camp, he would play the sound of rain on metal roofs from his phone, and it would help him sleep, but it was never the same.

He could recognize that sound in an instant, through the screaming of a storm, and he pulled his knees and trudged towards it. The duck's yellow feet dragged in the water, dipping below, rising above.

There was a murmur, and Thomas thought he saw one of the sticks blow off the top from one of the periodic rushes of cold air that comes down to take whatever warmth is left. But that stick tilted back and forth on a fixed axis, and the murmur sounded more and more like his name.

"Thomas? Thomas?" somebody said.

It was his father, waving, standing tip-toe on the bench to greet his son, who was cold. Thomas could only manage a groan.

"What?" his dad called, "I can't hear what you're saying, son."

The roof and the rain were deafening, but the father's voice was loud, confident but concerned, and cut through the fifteen or so yards to reach the son with clarity. Something stirred in Thomas's stomach. He breathed in and let it out.

"Hey," he said. It was a whimper, but a word. There was no chance of his dad hearing it. Thomas heard himself, though, and that encouraged him enough to try again.

"Hey," he said, a little louder.

"Speak up," Doug said, before noticing what Thomas was holding, or, more accurately, dragging. "Hey, look-ie here! Look what Tom's got."

Thomas's dad noticed as well and let go of his gun as he threw his camouflaged arms up in victory. *Only a few more steps*, Thomas thought.

"You found it! Way to go, son, way to go!"

Thomas reached the blind. He felt his saturated face could break from the bone and drip like the rain to mold with the mud around the men's boots. It probably would've fallen more like an icicle and shattered, and Thomas would not have cared either way.

His dad and Doug offered their arms to help the boy back in the blind, and Thomas rigidly raised his own to meet theirs. Their arms took him, and he stepped a foot on the metal lip that separated the men from the marsh. As if he were still trudging through the mud, Thomas lifted his leg into the blind, and gravity took over. He crumpled on the bench with a clang and

started shivering uncontrollably. As soon as he sat up, he violently rubbed his shoulders, as if that would help.

“Hey, hey, stop that, let me get a look at that beauty,” his dad said. He grabbed Thomas’s arms, held them down, and took the duck. It was beautiful. A mallard with the classic green head and the sharp white tail, though darkened by the journey. As soon as his dad focused his body and mind on examining the duck, Thomas took back to shaking himself out of this nightmare. Doug looked over his dad’s shoulder with a wide-open smile. His tongue shuffled to and fro the corners of his cracked mouth.

“Wow, now, this is great. You did this. This is awesome. This makes me proud. I’m proud of you, Thomas,” his dad said, but nipped his upbeat tone in the bud once he noticed how Thomas was fixated on a corner, how his body shook, how his arms tried desperately to warm himself up.

“That boy looks like he’s about to have a damn conniption,” Doug said. This time, he was right on the money, no doubt about it.

“Thomas, you alright? Thomas, you’re soaking wet. What got into you? Did you fall or something?” his dad asked, worried as a bug about to cross the interstate. “Where the hell is your gun? Doug, get that blanket! What happened to your gun? Are you alright?”

Doug, excited as ever, said, “From my survival kit?”

“Yes, you dolt,” Thomas’s dad said. This seemed to make Doug a little serious. After all, you’re only supposed to use a survival kit in serious situations.

The chattering of Thomas’s teeth rivaled the symphony of the rain, and his head was filled with all sorts of things bouncing around, all sorts of fears, but soon the most pressing of them, not freezing to death, not drowning standing upright in the rain, but the old man, out there, on his throne, somewhere in the reeds, became the loudest.

“He,” his teeth chattered, “wants me. He wants me.”

“What are you – Doug, get me that blanket.”

Doug, after carefully searching through his survival kit so to not get anything out of order, which would’ve been disastrous, produced the promised quick-dry blanket and handed it over to the father, who didn’t waste a second in wrapping it around his son’s pulsating body.

“Here, there you go. Now, what on earth are you saying?”

Thomas brought himself to look up. His thoughts far outpaced his words, but if there were a time to say what he thought, it was now, and he knew it.

“He wants to,” a shiver quaked through his body and interrupted him, “he wants to keep me here, that guy. I think – I think he wants to keep me here – I think – I think he wants to kill me, or something else. He’s – he’s coming. He’s going to come here. You need to help, help me.”

“Golly bill, what? Doug, hand me the whiskey,” his dad replied, honestly not knowing what else to do. Doug, never knowing what else to do, grabbed the whiskey from the survival kit much quicker than the blanket because, like any smart man, he knew you might need the whiskey before anything else. Thomas’s dad snatched the bottle, bit his glove, yanked it off, unscrewed the cap, and put the bottle to Thomas’s lips. Thomas tried to angle away, but

“Here, it’s okay. Drink this. It’ll warm you up, just trust me. I got you. It’s okay.”

“I – I – I -”

“Just trust me, son, drink it.”

Thomas decided to trust him and allowed his dad to angle the bottle up. He tried to gulp the drink like water. He swallowed what he could before he finally knew for sure why everyone in the movies winces after drinking whiskey. A cloudy burn torched his mouth and made its way up to his nostrils, and he spit out what was left so fast some of it ricocheted off the slimy walls and back into his lap. The warmth of whiskey rushed from his throat to his arms and toes; he coughed his chest off, and color returned to his cheeks. The burn was more than welcome, and Helen was right, he will drink.

“Good, good. That’s okay. That’s okay. We won’t tell your mother, deal? You took that like a champ,” Thomas’s dad said.

“Way better than our first drinks, I’ll tell you that. You a tank, brother,” Doug said.

Thomas’s cough was raspy, full of phlegm, and he hacked out a lugie between lurches.

“Nice,” Doug contributed. Thomas’s dad gave Doug a shut-your-ass-up look, much less weighty than their previous looks, and turned back to his little less shivering child. He grabbed Thomas by the shoulders and looked him dead in the eye.

“Now, what were you saying? He’s trying to get you? Who? That old man?”

“Yes, the old man. He lives in the reeds, and he sent some weird woman after me and she told me all these horrible things, and, and he wants to keep me here to do, to do. . . He said he

wants me to become him, or something, or he wants to kill me and he's coming to fucking kill us!" Thomas said.

"Whoa there, sailor," Doug said.

Instead of looking, Thomas's dad said, "Shut your ass up." He continued, back to the matter at hand, "Did he do something to you out there, is he why you're all wet?"

"Yes, he grabbed me, and tried to drown me, and sent this woman-"

"He did what to you? What woman, is she still out there?"

"Yes, no, I don't know. We have to get out of here right now, right the fuck now, please dad, please get me out of this fucking shit box or he's going to kill us, he's going to take me, he's going to take me," he said. Thomas was now sobbing. His words honked, and his tears felt hot on his cheeks. Another welcome warmth, but terror had gripped him through his core. His dad's eyes were about to pop his cap off, astonished that his son was cursing like a priest in prison, absolutely ready to take his kid at his word.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise. Thomas," his dad said. "You're telling the truth?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. We have to leave, please, we're leaving now," Thomas said. He sucked in his sobs, and snot rolled inside his nose. At that, Thomas got up despite his dad's hands around his shoulders and tried to push past his father. But it was no use. The massive man, standing up, completely stuffed the small wet box wall to wall and himself became stronger than brick when Thomas tried to push through. His dad kept his hands on Thomas's shoulders and guided him back down to the seat, which Thomas aggressively rejected. He shook against his dad's grasp until all that was holding the blanket on the boy were the father's hands, forcing his dad to use real strength to get him back on the bench.

Thomas kept squirming.

"Well, I'm going to have to have a word with this man-"

"No, don't. This is your fault. You let me go with him. You brought me to this shithole. You made me go with him and now I'm about to die and it's going to be your fault," Thomas screeched. His eyes twitched with hate. They stared down his father. "I fucking hate hunting, and I fucking hate you. I hate you! Let me go, let me go."

“No. That’s nonsense,” Thomas’s dad said, and like he was trying to save some horrible breakup, shook his son some more. “I much more than hate you, son. I-”

The sky cracked, and the rain thickened. There was an inch of standing water in the blind and rising fast. Lightless thunder boomed directly above, causing Doug to cover his ears.

A bellowing laugh cranked from the marsh.

“The hell is that?” Thomas’s dad asked, easing his grip on his son, who knew the answer to his question, without any doubt, with many strings of anxiety.

The laughter seemed to bounce, ricocheting off the walls, only to be slightly absorbed by the mud and the now two inches of water trapped at the bottom of the blind. The rain became buckets dumped from the sky, like that biblical storm Doug so hoped and feared of.

Then, as if the valve of heaven shut itself off, the rain stopped. Thomas felt the last drop on his soaked scalp and waited tensely for another. But it didn’t come, not now. The sky was no less dark and grey, but it was quiet. The laughter had ceased too, making Thomas wonder if this were all just a dream, just another freak-out to make him seem stupid. Stupid is all a boy can be sometimes. Stupid can be all that makes sense, and Thomas wished like no other that he was just stupid.

“Well, maybe some more ducks will come out now that the rain’s stopped,” Doug said. *Stupid is all you are*, Thomas thought.

“Can we go now?” Thomas asked, getting some courage to peer over the shootin’ slit. The marsh was still, as it is most of the time. The water began the process of calming down. The reeds did not wave, as there was no wind to encourage them to make any sort of faux-polite gesture.

He scoured the marsh for any sign of danger. Look ahead and not behind. To better things. *To leaving this fucking place.*

He wondered if his head were dripping from the previous rain. Something slid from his scalp, and he hoped that it was nothing more than leftover mud from his misery, and not the rain, but he didn’t check. There was one direction to stare. Only forward. Only to what’s in front of you.

He didn’t need to check, after all, because soon he saw tiny splashes return to the water. His eyes widened and his heart raced. The drizzle had returned. Meanwhile, Doug had slung his gun over his shoulder, and was figuring out how to exactly haul his survival kit, as he thought he

did it wrong on the way out to the blind. The father also had his gun over his shoulder, and was facing the back of the blind, gathering all of Thomas's stuff. Which excluded his gun, to his dad's probable chagrin. Not the ammo, though, at least. An old song came to mind, and so did the fear.

*Through the graves the wind is blowing.*

"He's here," Thomas said. "He's coming."

## IV

The sky responded before the men could. Somewhere in heaven somebody made a mistake and was banished back to this hell in the form of a heaping, hazy deluge. They must have turned that valve back on, and through another loud, lightless crack in the clouds the rain came back in a force the men couldn't comprehend. But the boy could. This storm couldn't be his last. *No shot.*

A voice that surrounded the land and stuck to the darkest of hearts made itself known and said, "That boy is mine now. I must thank you for bringing him to me. I've been looking for someone exactly like him, raised by men exactly like you. In fact, I must thank you, so I've brought you gifts, to remind you just who you are, just how much power I can bestow upon the boy."

It cut through the rain. It replaced thought. It stung, colder than space.

"He's talking to us," Thomas's dad said.

"Run," Thomas said.

The three men were more than willing to listen, and Doug forgot his survival kit and vaulted himself over the shootin' slit, only to stop immediately in his wet tracks, staring at something ahead. Thomas's dad, without hesitation, grabbed his son by the straps of his waders and hauled him towards the marsh, and Thomas held the edge of the blind, took over, and got himself over. He then saw why Doug had stopped so dumb in place.



The old man sat on his throne in the reeds, and he clicked open and close his pocket watch. He must have made the rain torrent but transparent enough for them to see what he wanted the men to see.

Thomas's dad hopped over the edge, and like Doug, saw the old man, stopped, and saw his trick.

"Katherine?" Doug called. The name came out quick and raspy. Doug looked as if the only thing keeping him standing upright was some invisible string tied to a cloud. Thomas had never seen Katherine before, but he knew this couldn't be her, at least not the Katherine that Doug knows and loves and hates so well. Doug only believed what he saw, and in this cold, that's more dangerous than frostbite.

She stood at the edge of the reeds and wore a church dress, blue and latticed, but the dress didn't seem to conceal skin. It stuck to her in some places, drooped off in others, like she was made of mud and hiding it. Her face, too, had that same too wide smile Thomas remembered from Helen. It curved just too far for a greeting gesture, and Katherine looked into Doug's eyes with her chin tucked down.

"That's,"

"Katherine?" Doug called again, this time louder.

She approached the men, slowly, taking her time in the mud, not lifting her knee to her chest. The old man behind her in his throne clicked his pocket watch closed one last time and let out that same hyena laugh that traveled above the water and through the men. He spoke,

"And it would be a shame not to share my gift with the father."

He crackled and aimed his hideous high screech towards the sky, and once it was quiet, he turned to look through the father.

"I'll have the boy yet."

"Like hell you will," Thomas's dad replied. He automatically got his shotgun into shooting position, tried to find his target, but the old man had vanished. In his place, calmly pushing his way through the reeds, was a man Thomas's dad long forced out of his constant memory, long before Thomas.

Thomas saw his dad's face drop like he had never seen before, his posture waver from aggression to submission. The man was not halfway visible through the reeds before Thomas's dad knew what name to call,

“Dad?”

The man stopped, now visible enough to see his brown button down and how it was torn across his right side and the snapped pieces of rebar sticking from his flesh.

This was Thomas’s grandfather he never knew. His dad never talked about him, except that he died in a car crash, and how he wished Thomas could meet him.

“Brett,” the grandfather said, aiming at Thomas’s dad; “I think I’ve had an accident. Brett, do you mind telling your mother I’m bleeding? Brett, I’m bleeding.”

And from the impaled rebar sticking from holes in his skin, the grandfather bled brown ooze that, though it was hard to tell from this distance, only seemed to turn red when it returned to the marsh.

“You - I will. Wait. I – Doug!” Brett yelled, shifting his focus from one man to the next. Doug had started trudging towards Katherine, who was now holding her arms open at the edge of the reeds, inviting him, her smile only growing longer.

“Dad, it’s not real. Doug, it’s not real, Doug, it’s a trick, Doug, stop,” Thomas said.

“I have to,” Doug said, snapping his head back for only a moment. Katherine’s mouth didn’t seem to move, but the men could hear her say,

“Come back to me, D. I’ll take you back. I’ll forgive you like I always have, just come to me, let me hold you once more.”

“It’s a trick,” Brett said under hushed breath.

“I love you, D.”

“It’s a trick.”

“I know the women you sleep with. I’ve seen their faces and I will forgive you.”

Doug kept walking.

“It’s a trick...”

Thomas carried his dad voice where it could not go. “She’s not real, it’s not her that’s saying that, trust me, please, just stop for a second, please,” he said.

Doug took a few more labored strides, but the closer he got, the slower he moved. He then took a step back and turned to Thomas and said,

“You don’t know nothing about what’s real.”

“I know for GOD-damned sure that that shit is a trick and if y’all take a step into those reeds then you’ll be fucked,” Thomas screamed, powerful enough to launch the cloud of his

breath well before him. He panted, calming the vapor of his words for a moment, before launching them again; “And if y’all are fucked, then I’m fucked. So, stop.”

Doug stared at Thomas, then to apparition of Katherine, then to the father, who had sludged a few feet closer to the reeds, closer to his father, who bled and asked for mercy.

“I’ll tell you all the things you’ve always wanted me to tell. I meant to give you the world son, and now I finally can. Come to me, Brett, and I will show you like I should’ve how to fall sound asleep in this world,” the grandfather said. His voice curdled and was thick. Thomas saw that his face was younger than his father’s. He had only heard stories, few and far between, and wondered if you outlive someone by age or by wisdom.

“No,” Brett said.

For the first time, the grandfather looked at the grandson. Thomas’s dad always said he would have loved his grandfather. He would take you fishing to every pond in the world if he could, he would say. The apparition reached a smooth hand to the protruding rebar, twisted the metal rod, and his face remained blank. Mud spilled from his wounds.

“He looks just as you did. Just as you were so young and scared. And he begs of you the same you begged of me. I have made a generation of weakness. But I can fix him. I can fix you. Come, bring your son, and I’ll make our blood as it is meant to be.”

Brett stood taller in the marsh. He kicked up silt from the flood bed, shifting his weight from foot to foot, but from the ever-pounding rain to the months of stagnation, the water would never reveal what was happening below the surface.

“You’re not my father, and you don’t know my son,” Thomas’s dad said. “He’s in peace, and his ideas were simple, and I always knew what he meant. He doesn’t owe me a word.” He took a step closer to Thomas. “You’re coming nowhere near my son.”

Doug nodded.

“You ain’t Katherine,” he called through the muck. “You can’t be.”

The two figures in the reeds looked at each other. The grandfather’s lips became snakes and they stretched to the outer limits of his jaw to match Katherine’s long grin. Then, they chuckled, and the men stood watching, and they began to laugh through the curtain of rain.

“Thomas,” his dad said, “You stay right behind me. We’re going to move to the car. Doug, get your gun up and follow me.”

Before Doug could spout a reply, their laughter cut sharply off, and in unison they said,

“Don’t run.”

And they began to walk towards the men. Their smiles stayed wide and with each step they took a new wall of reeds sprouted from the floodwater, popping up like a child playing with a pin art box.

“Thomas, scram!” his dad said. Doug slushed through the muck and thrashed his hips as hard as he could, trying to reach them before the reeds reached him.

Thomas raised his knees and booked it towards the blind, and he looked back. His dad wasn’t keeping up, and the reeds came closer.

“Pull your knees up and kick, come on!” he said.

He couldn’t see the apparitions. Either Katherine and the grandfather were gone, or the sticks had consumed them. Either way, it didn’t matter. His dad took his advice and pushed on quicker.

“Don’t just stand there, son, move!”

Thomas did, but not for long. He heard a loud splash and a grown man grunt in the distance and hoped it wasn’t his dad. It was Doug. He fell in the muck and tried to use his gun to push himself up, but the reeds were coming and coming quick. Doug didn’t even get to his knees before the sticks swallowed him. Thomas stared. Guilt tried to wash over him but was knocked out of his mind when his dad charged from his blindside and wrapped up, drove his feet despite the mud, and tackled him.

*This is it*, he thought, expecting the ice of the old land to consume him and the old man to take him, but he fell onto solid wood and sheet metal.

They barreled into the blind. The entire structure shook. His dad crushed his lungs. Thomas coughed and was thankful that his head hit Doug’s stupid survival kit rather than the hard, unforgiving bench.

His dad rolled away from his beaten body, and they both saw the wave of reeds break and surround the blind. In every direction were tall, dense sticks that covered the clouds. Except for right here, the only place in this hell that they could see the cold, grey sky.

Thomas closed his eyes for a moment. He tried to count each drop of rain. He imagined there was a sheet metal roof over him. The blind groaned, and he stopped feeling the rain on his face. Nothing else to count, he pried his eyes open to his father standing over him, and the reeds all around. He gasped.

“Doug’s out there, dad. We gotta get him.”

His dad looked a thousand miles away. The reeds dampened the splashes from the rain. His dad let his arms go limp and stared at nothing.

“Dad?”

“Yes, yeah. He’ll be fine,” he said.

“Dad, he needs our help.”

“He’ll be fine. He’ll be fine. Let’s go to the car.”

“Dad.”

“What?”

“That man is out there.”

“I know. And so is – ah, come on. Up and over.”

Thomas resisted. Doug was dumb, sure, but *he doesn’t deserve that*. And if he were gone, really gone, then they,

“We’re as good as dead, dad,” Thomas said.

“The car is a ten minute slog that way,” his dad said, and pointed to where he thought the car was. “All we have to do is get there, get some cell service, and we’ll be fine. I’ve been through worse.”

“Like what? Like what? Some demon trying to kill you?”

“Well, uh, not exactly. No, I haven’t. Just do me a favor and keep your head straight. If we see that guy, you have me, understand?”

“But, what about-”

“We’ll get on the phone with somebody soon as we can. Doug’s a grown man. He’ll be fine in there, don’t worry. But we should hurry.”

The father vaulted calmly out of the blind. He grabbed a reed for help, but it snapped, and he didn’t flinch. The car was somewhere behind them, and he was going to lead the way, gun slung over his shoulder, safety off, through the reeds.

“Come on, Tom. Grab Doug’s kit there.”

Thomas put the strap of the kit around his shoulder, then stepped on the bench. He reached for a reed to help, and it only bent. Up and down and cold again had gotten him used to struggle, but not to his fear, which rose as he sunk back into the flood, back in the reeds. His dad looked at him and didn’t say a word.

“What if we hear the laughing?” Thomas asked.

“This way,” his dad said.

“But, if he comes, and it’s me or you,”

“Get moving.”

“You don’t have to wait for me. You can just go and come back for Doug. If I stay then you’ll be-”

“You’re not staying. You’re not doing a damn thing anybody but me says for the next god-damned eon. I know this seems like the whole world to you right now, but it’s not. You got your whole life in front of you,” Thomas’s dad said. He grabbed Thomas by the strap of his waders and began walking into the reeds. The thing that was in front of Thomas was the fear and wondered if his dad could see it.

His dad was wrong. This was his world. Submission to the cold could save it.

“Learn to fight for things,” his dad said, but in these reeds, he wasn’t sure.

*Am I worth fighting for?*

His dad yanked him by the strap, and he had to clamp his eyes closed to avoid the roughness of the reeds, though it dried his face, wiping off the combination of rain and solid, frigid mud.

*It’s not over.*

The wind picked up, and the cold air cut easily through the men’s camo and made friends with their bones. Thomas’s dad froze in place like he saw the Medusa of winter and put his palm on Thomas’s chest.

The reeds swayed in the cold, and there was nothing but them, the waving thick, a young man’s fear, the growing wetlands, the old man, out there, growing impatient.

His dad canvassed the area. Thomas did too. He looked back to find the blind, but no joy. There was a faint rustling ahead, but it could’ve been the rain, what can’t be the rain, now?

But the rustling had no order. The rain comes from the sky in one direction and can only go on for so long and therefore has order, but this rustling panicked, and put a feeling in Thomas’s feet that conflicted with his reason. His feet wanted to go, his skin wanted to slip, his hands wanted to squeeze his throat, his brain wanted to kill. There was something out there, and *I must kill it*. This wasn’t some checkbox activity anymore. There wasn’t something to apologize

to out there. There was nature, and there was him, and Thomas knew that his hunt had finally begun, that the fruit for this family needed to be ripped from its tree with shotguns and fire.

Thomas breathed and his feet listened and his hands relaxed. *Work together*, he told his body, *the hunt is on*. Now, his vision cut through the rain and the reeds, each window the wind created clear as a summer day, all sound focused on the rustling, which became a raspy gasp, which became terrified gulping of air.

“Who’s there?” Thomas said.

“Don’t play games,” his dad followed.

Thomas heard a wet heave and unlike the rain a solid stream of plasma meet the mud. And a groan, and a painful,

“Thomas?”

The father whipped the barrel towards his son’s name.

“Get that name out of your mouth,” he said.

“Brett?”

“You got ten seconds to show yourself before I start pulling.”

“It’s me! Don’t shoot!”

Twenty yards ahead, Thomas saw a naked hand tremble, get swallowed by the reeds, and on the exhale of the wind, a camouflaged jacket, and a cold face caked in mud.

“Dad, relax. It’s Doug,” he said.

His dad darted his eyes towards the sound, but Thomas could tell he didn’t find anything.

“Oh, thank God. Doug, it’s us, where are you, brother?”

“I’m here, but I don’t know. I can’t see y’all, I’m fucking drenched, man, what the hell is happening?”

“Doug,” the father said, “I can’t see you.”

Thomas pulled his waist and thrust in front of him.

“I can see him. Follow me,” he said. The father looked at his son and nodded.

“Okay, Doug. We’re coming. Just keep on talking,” his dad said, and let Thomas pave the way before following behind.

“Okay, okay. These damn sticks came out of nowhere, man, and pulled me straight under. I lost y’all, man, did y’all make it back to the blind?” Doug said, barely squeezing out the words.

“Yehp, keep talking,” the father said. Thomas saw Doug blink away the mud a thousand miles an hour and turn around even faster, like any direction would lead to safety.

“I could hear voices under there, man. There’s worse shit than gators in this swamp. Katherine and your dad and this voice man, this voice said-”

Thomas pushed away some reeds, and there was the dripping Doug a first down away. He swiped mud off his face and shook his hands by his side. While he shook, he saw Thomas.

“Tom, oh thank the lord.”

His dad appeared not too long after.

“Oh, thank the lord,” Doug said, and began to trudge towards them, but stumbled on something below, and barely caught his balance.

“Pick it up,” Thomas said. Doug did, and pulled his gun from the flood, which to his momentary amazement had little to no mud, nothing to jam the shells.

“Can’t afford to go anywhere without this thing these days,” Doug said, and the father laughed.

“We were worried sick,” the father said.

Doug smiled, as there was nothing else to do.

“That would warm my heart brother,” Doug said, “if it weren’t already frozen.”

Now, the men were as close as they wanted, and were together. Doug looked at Thomas, and any hint of joy faded from his face.

“What did the voices say?” his dad asked.

“It was about Tom. They said he didn’t belong with us, that he supposed to be here, supposed to inherit something. I tried not to listen, man, but, but, man, I think it’s time to start moving.”

The father’s knuckles were white on the handle. Despite the cold’s efforts to turn blood into slow mud, his face became red. But there was another matter, and Thomas was finally clear enough to see it.

“We were going to the car,” Thomas said. This put a spark in his dad’s chest.

“We were,” his dad said; “You got caught up in the opposite direction. How’d you get over here?”

“I didn’t move an inch,” Doug said.

“You swim or something?” the father asked.



“I went down, and I came up. Maybe y’all went the wrong way.”

“I know which way we’re going, you had to have-”

“It doesn’t matter,” Thomas interrupted. “I’ve been in here before. There’s no direction, there’s only-”

“You saying we trapped?” Doug asked.

“You aren’t. I am. This is between he and me. This is all about me,” Thomas said.

“Enough with that nonsense,” his dad said; “We’re leaving this place together, and we’re going to do it now. Doug.”

“Yeah?”

“Your gun loaded?”

“Sure is.”

“Son, we’re going to blast this guy halfway to hell, and you’re gonna stay stuck to me, got-”

The wind swirled and the reeds smacked the men from this way and that and the rain now flew without order from the thick and stung when it hit their faces. The scraping of the reeds against themselves sung like Satan’s fiddle, and once again the hunt was on.

“He’s here,” Thomas said.

Doug and his dad stood shoulder to shoulder and lifted their weapons.

“With all the luck in the world,” that hideous voice clambered, “I have now the worthiest of successors, the rival to all expectations.”

The hyenas screeched from the reeds. There were flashes of the man on his throne flicking his pocket watch and whatever way you looked he could have been there or here, and sometimes the men saw Thomas sitting on that throne, smiling, laughing, and flicking the pocket watch open and closed, as if time would be his toy.

“Which one do we aim at?” Doug said.

“We shoot on my call,” Thomas’s dad said.

The slideshow stopped, the wind died, the rain loosened, back to its drizzle, back to coming from the sky.

“Behind us!” Thomas said.

Doug and his dad whipped around with their barrels aimed and safeties off.

There was the old man on his throne. He put his watch in his pocket, and lifted himself into the marsh, only seeming to grow rather than sink into the land. The needles of his words dripped boisterously from his lips.

“Can you not be so blind to the evil you have made? You should be proud, for this boy’s heart can only become power. Oh, I am tired, and I’ve been waiting for this for time immemorial. This is Master Thomas’s destiny, don’t you see? I was there at your pathetic father’s deserved death; I was holding her hand when she learned of your cowardly infidelity, and I put that boy’s name in your head when you first held him. The life he deserves is immortal, and it is here, all around you, and he will become greater than even I, and you should be proud. Be the men you claim to be and give him to me, for we are beautiful, and you and I will have created God, and you will fear him.”

The old man looked at the father and his arm stretched like puddy towards Thomas, who stood behind his father, who knew there was a strength he could use, who wondered what was true.

His father glanced quickly at Doug, and the old man’s arm inched closer to the boy.

“Fuck that,” his dad said, “go to hell.” And that was pull.

Doug and the father squeezed their triggers and the land erupted with the booms. The pellets flew into the man and ripped his corporal body apart like paper thrown into a fire. They pumped and pulled their triggers again, and the dammed sound rocked Thomas’s brain back and forth, and what was left of the old man’s hand flew towards its source. Every shot shredded pieces of the body into the reeds, and instead of blood, gold flakes sparked from the impacts and floated towards the sky.

The old man let out a thunder of laughter. His crooked smile evaporated. He trained his eyes on Thomas before another boom turned them into flakes of golden dust that did not have the sun to make them shine like the prize it should be. Doug pumped, pulled the trigger, and the gun only clicked. His father’s last shell fell into the mud, and the water took it to the bottom.

The reeds in front of them were torn to bits, and that gold-plated throne sank into the land. Soon, all Thomas could hear were the breath of the men. There was no body in front of them, nothing floating like a dead duck. Just a thick cloud of gold flakes taking slowly to the sky.

“Now that’s what I call getting killed dead,” Doug said.

Thomas tracked the flakes. They seemed to dance around each other. Another cold breeze came from the reeds. The flakes swirled in the wind, a vortex of unilluminated gold.

“Full of shit, full of lead,” the father said. He high-fived Doug. “See, Thomas? I ain’t letting nothing, nothing get to you.” He eased his grip on the gun and let out a labored sigh of relief.

But Thomas didn’t take his eyes off the flakes, which swirled above them. They whooshed in the air, taking the shape of a well-defined spiral by the second.

In the cold, nothing stays dead. The land absorbs itself. It must always be against men.

The flakes swirled fast enough for Doug and the father to notice. A reed grew slowly and silently from the mud and wrapped softly around Doug’s leg. The spiral became a spear. The men watched with lead feet and cold lips. Another reed grew and curled around Doug’s waist. When they took him into the mud, he screamed.

“Doug!” the father yelled, but his pruney fingers slipped below the brown. The only sign of Doug were the bubbles of his terror.

The red in the father’s face drained. Thomas saw the petrified white, his dad’s neurons shoot blanks, grapple with the cold, the old fear of the father becoming truth, and his dad told him with tears forming that he may not be able to protect his son from the world.

The old gold phalanx commanded their attention, and his voice that said: “Capitulate to my will!” threw the spear at Thomas. The form of the gold shattered into flakes and flew into Thomas’s gaping mouth and numb nostrils.

Thomas screamed, and from under his feet a throne rose, begging him, calling him, and Thomas saw himself hold a child he despised and throw a limp, bloody bird in the muck for a young boy who declared war on the world to find. He felt the cold in his blood become his only friend, and he saw strangers bury his mother.

But those visions slammed shut like the door to his room when he was angry, and his screams dampened against his father’s hand that covered his mouth. His breath stopped when his father’s fingers pinched his nostrils.

The flakes parted as a river to rock when they met his dad’s hand. The gold flowed around the boy and could not find an entrance, so they reunited in the air, swirling around the generation, and began to take a form.

First, they became platinum hair and then mashed together to imitate flesh, but they could not hide the trick. A cruel head dripped to a neck and like a bored, cold kid making a man out of mud shoulders slid from the neck and soon became arms and a starving, naked body.

Here he was again, in his true form, a skin-colored candle melted and forgotten in the pantry. The old man's stomach stretched around bulging, pulsating ribs. His hunger had long been revealed, but Thomas saw his pathetic form and knew that the present can no longer lie to him and who was prey and who was predator was not a question.

"You fools," the old man said. His voice sounded like it was trapped in a throat made of razors.

"Leave him alone," the father said, still covering Thomas's mouth and nose, and Thomas remembered he had to breathe.

"You only protect the idea of a better you. I will turn your fiction to reality. But you are not worthy of the boy, and I must force upon you the old truth," the old man curdled.

"And what bullshit could that be?" the father said, letting Thomas breathe. The old man's melted face shifted, and he slugged to the men, absorbing the land rather than moving through it.

"Death. I will unshackle you from the boy, and he will be free to become me," the old man said, and lunged at the father. Thomas's dad put his hands up, but it no use. The old man had wrapped around him, and his dad's great strength could not pry the primeval sludge from his body.

"No!" Thomas said.

"Run, run," his dad choked.

But if he ran, then *where would I go?* He would never stop running. No, his past would force his feet, and Thomas could not accept that future. He reached behind him, into the survival kit, and felt around until he found what he was looking for. The old man did not see, but spoke again:

"Go forth and freeze the world with your wickedness, ha! You think that's what you desire, but no, a future laid on my golden platter, everything put on your lap, the will of the world, of all these people unworthy of your hate bending to your will. Together, we can become the very God, or otherwise you rot and succumb to the curse placed on all men. There will be no fear, only you."

Thomas hid the thing behind his back and ignored his dad's muffled grunts. He tried to fight, writhing, and writhing, but the old man had pinned his body. The old man's eyes met Thomas's, and he saw a shallow pool filled with fallen leaves. Thomas felt the calm that you can only earn after years of battle with the land and the cold.

"Nobody ever listens to me," Thomas said; "everybody deserves the cold fucking heart of my hate. I hate my dad. I love seeing him squirm like bitch in a rat trap. But let's make a deal, you and me. Let him go, let his cousin go, and when I'm in your throne I will deal with them however I fucking want."

The old man hissed, and his face bubbled.

"Yes, yes. So, you see me now. I can't be more pleased," the old man said. He eased his plaster maiden grip on the father until he slid from him and landed on his knees. The mud came to his chest and flowed into his waders. The father said the only words the fear would let him say.

"Thomas, don't, please. You're all I-"

"Shut up, you stupid excuse for a man," Thomas said. "I've wanted to make you feel as shitty as me for a long, long time." He then looked at the twisted form of the old man.

"We have a deal, right?" Thomas asked. The old man hissed again, and his stomach shifted around the center of his hollow, begging belly.

"Certainly. Their fates will be in your hands, and I expect terrible greatness to rain from your rule." He opened his dripping arms. "Come to me, Master Thomas, become the self you were born to be."

Thomas looked at his father and pitied his helplessness.

"I am anxious to enjoy your power, come to me now, and take what's yours," the old man said. The throne had risen to its fullest height and began to glow gold.

"Please, Thomas, please," his dad said. His tears returned to the mud. Thomas only gave him a glance before making sure the old man saw that he raised his knees to his chest. He never moved his right hand from behind his back.

The old man hissed and extended his body. It began to mold around Thomas. He was embraced by wet cement, giving his body to the cold, and the old man's head rested against Thomas's red cheek so his lips were where the old man's ear should have been.

"This is love, this is truth, and now I give you the power of the old fear," the old man said, softly into Thomas's ear.

A kaleidoscope of images flowed through Thomas's head. He saw the kid who told him to die, he saw the disappointed linebacker coach, he saw his mother take his phone, and he saw a duck dodge a bullet and quack when its mate fell into the land. But Thomas took those visions and killed them. He pulled his hand from behind his back and put the loaded flare gun into the old man's malleable stomach. The hottest money can buy. Thomas pulled the hammer back with his thumb until it clicked. He whispered into the old man's ear.

"I am none of those things. I will always be better, and I hope you always fucking burn."

Thomas pulled the trigger. A hot flare shot from the gun. It went deep into the old man's stomach. Now, it was full. The old man growled and hissed and tried to squeeze Thomas into his self, but no, Thomas was stronger than his pain, and he dashed backwards.

The old man flailed his wet limbs. A hot red light shone from his stomach. The flare burned. His hisses broke sound, and the father covered his ears, but Thomas wanted to hear him scream, and scream he did.

The old man's excuse for arms and hands clawed at the hole in his body, but that only made it bigger, and he caught fire. A searing red flame sprouted like the reeds from the old man and his screeches boiled. His wax face dripped. The droplets floated in the mud. He tried to cup his hand to catch himself but that too began to melt.

The fire filled his stomach. It spread to his chest, then to his chin. What was left of his hollow speech cauterized when the flames took his neck, and the only sound now was the rush of a roaring fire. The flames yellowed. They consumed his face, and broke into hot rods of blue, and his platinum hair sizzled.

The confused, lonely reeds met the flame and the cold could not help them as they burst. Not dead, dormant, and they burned, and the fire spread from one stick to another. There was no freeze that could fight a fire sparked by the sheer will of things insane enough to survive. The land was reminded of who profits from its destruction. The reeds crackled around the two and succumbed to man's greatest invention.

What remained of the old man burned above the mud, and Thomas knew what force propelled his remains to move. He stared at the flames against the muck and was the furthest thing from cold.

His dad had gotten up and grabbed Thomas by the shoulder.

“Which way you want to run?” he asked. Doug appeared from the burning reeds behind them, drenched in sweat.

“What y’all doing? Hop the hell out of here!” he shouted.

Between crackles of flame-soaked reeds, Thomas heard fast splashes all around them and saw the reeds afraid of the flame pull themselves back into the flooded land. One by one, then hundreds by hundreds, the forest on fire rushed to safety, and Thomas saw the blind between flashes of flames, and beyond that, Doug’s truck parked on the levee.

“This way,” Thomas said, “follow me, and don’t y’all dare stop.” He pointed at the car and tugged on his dad’s now bone-dry camo jacket.

“Heard that,” his dad said, and the three charged like chickens let loose from the pen to the truck. They madly pushed through the fire, some reeds exploding in flames, others dashing into the mud.

Thomas took the first step onto dry land and turned to help his dad and Doug get out of the muck. The mass of his father almost sent him back into the swamp, but his strength was successful, and they were out of the reeds.

## V

They came with three guns and plenty of shells, got one duck, and left with nothing but the skin of their teeth, which all were more than grateful for. Doug said that Thomas could sit up front, and he did.

“Buckle up, boys,” Doug said.

He cranked his truck, it started, and in no time his wheels launched pebbles from the gravel, rural road. Thomas looked in the rearview mirror and saw a pillar of smoke. He rolled down the window and stuck his head out.

The flames were gone. The reeds had stopped disappearing and were back to where they originally were, where the duck went down. He didn’t feel the cold rain on his face. The sun had cracked the clouds and glinted through the smoke off the metal of the blind. He put his head

back in the car and rolled up the window. He looked only ahead, waiting for the fields to be cut by the highway.

“God bless America,” Doug said, looking at himself through the rearview mirror; “I ain’t got no eyebrows.”

“Well shit,” his dad said, doing the same, “me neither.”

“How you going to explain that to the misses?” Doug asked. The father laughed.

“I’m not. Right, Thomas?”

Thomas smiled.

“Right.”

“Well, lesson learned,” Doug said; “Never hunt on someone else’s land.”

“Amen,” the father said. Thomas shook his head.

“Hey dad, back there-”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t hear a thing.”

“Okay.”

They drove in silence for some time. Thomas thought of how he would explain this to his friends, but he didn’t think they would believe him. He will, though, when he sees them, give them *one big ass hug*. He counted his fingers, ribs, and toes, and he was happy he could feel them. One thing after another. The truck’s heat blasted, and he was warm. Thomas put on his favorite song and didn’t care what they thought about it. The smoke faded from the rearview mirror, and what was gone was gone, and what was ahead was nothing more than something that would one day be gone. He thought of the throne and hoped it burned. Doug said something stupid, and he didn’t have to force himself to smile. He thought of the old man’s cold hand around his neck and put his hand to the car’s hot vents and laughed.

“Hey, y’all want to stop and get some Mexican food?” his dad asked.

The men never agreed on anything more.



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