

## Introduction

When I was growing up, my father used to make up these fantastical stories every night before bed. I used to lay there for hours fighting the urge to fall asleep so I could make it just a little bit further into the story. I remember, one night, I had tried so hard to stay awake I had manage to make it passed midnight, I usually went to bed around 8 o'clock at that age. As I look back on those times now, I am amazed by my dad's ability to never run out of material, and touched because I realize now how he must've enjoyed those times together just as much as I did. Never once did he cut off the story, he never stopped until he was certain I was asleep, no matter how long it took. He could have spent those hours watching tv, drinking at the bar with his friends from work or maybe even going on dates, but instead, he just wanted to spend those moments with me. I wish I could tell him now how much those bedtime stories meant to me.

Although I can't remember every story, there were hundreds, there was one in particular that always stuck out to me. One, that despite my father's ambivalence towards repetition, I had him repeat often. It was a magical story full of adventure, love and ritual blood sacrifice. I am not kidding, nothing was off limits to my dad, sometimes the stories he told would give me nightmares for weeks. That didn't stop me from wanting to hear more, I always appreciated his talent of weaving real adult themes into stories for a child, giving me glimpses at the ways of the real world in a way that was never too much to handle and some how managed to teach me lessons along the way about growing up. This story in particular was full of these "adult themes," there was violence, romance and swearing, though my dad used to always interject, "It's not me saying those bad words, its the character." Right dad. In that same way though, I appreciate it. He taught me that even though the world was full of these bad and scary things, but it

didn't have to be bad or scary to talk about them. I didn't have to be afraid of having any conversations with him.

This was another thing I hadn't been able to fully appreciate till later. The way, from a young age, he set our relationship up to handle the difficult conversations we would have to have down the line. It was always difficult for a single parent but especially difficult for a single father with a single daughter. For us, it was never hard, never complicated. I never felt ashamed or afraid of whatever I was going through because of the way he had prepared me for anything. The way he had laid the foundation for an everlasting bridge of open communication, ensuring that no topic was too much for him or uncomfortable. I was so lucky to have such a kind, understanding person there for the most difficult moments of my life. If only it could have truly been an everlasting bridge, or at least held up a little bit longer.

The main thing that I loved about the story was the main thing that I loved about any story. The one thing that absolutely makes or breaks a story, the most important thing that propels a story forward, or holds it back: the main character. In this case it was a brilliantly charming, young man, in his late twenties or early thirties, it didn't matter to me at the time, because whatever he was, he was old, at least to my 10-or-so year old self. This young man had many of the admiral qualities you look for in a hero. He was strong, maybe not physically, but he never backed away from a fight. He was determined, he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. But most importantly, he was good, no matter the sacrifice to himself, if he believed it was the right thing to do, he would do it. He was a tall, handsome man, with dark features and hair that always seemed purposely disheveled. He was always scruffy, like he hadn't shaved in a few days, because when you are a big adventurer you don't have time for regular things like shaving. My father said that he had eyes that seemed decades older than his body, as though he had lived a hundred years, but only aged twenty. There was wisdom there not often found in men of his age. I believe my

father was describing himself, although I didn't know him at that I age, I firmly believe he was clearly embellishing more than a few details, but I won't knock him for that. That's what the world of fiction is for, the creation of that which outside the scope of knowledge, a temporary shelter from the chaos of reality, it is a place birthed from embellishment.

Most of my dad's stories were far beyond what is realistically conceivable, full of wizards, dragons and aliens. Things that were clearly fiction, but this story was different. It was grounded in reality. There was nothing that there that I couldn't believe was possible, maybe with an open mind and a little stretch of the imagination, but overall, it was realistic. That was another thing I had loved about it, the promise that it implied, the idea that there was adventure to be had, things to be discovered and love to be found, within our plane of existence, not only in some far away fantasy castle.

My dad called this story, "The Canyon of Creation: A tale of adventure, discovery and love." He always went a little overboard with his titles, adding more words does not always make for a better title. In this case, however, it may have. I always liked my father's personal flair; he never took his stories too seriously but that didn't stop his exploration of serious themes. The Canyon of Creation: A tale of adventure, discovery and love was a story about this young, smart, adventurous young man who worked for a secret government agency tasked with the exploration of the impossible, the study of anomalies. In this particular case, the young man had been tasked with finding, what is ominously, and somewhat humorously to my young mind, known as, The Crack. A splinter in the Earth's crust, hidden by miles of impassible terrain, sheltered by cliffs and massive vegetation, impossible to see from the land or sky but filled with unfathomable wonder.

*"The Crack, a natural utopia hidden deep in the privacy of Earth's most hidden parts. The Fountain of Youth, El Derado, The City of Gold, names once given to this beautiful place, but none of them had done it justice. Its beauty was like that of new born baby, unsullied by*

*the harshness of man's world, protected from the dangers of the rest of the world, unique and perfect."*

## **Chapter One**

"You look especially dripped out today," piped Evan, as we met at my locker, like we do every morning. Evan was a scrawny guy, but he had been my closest friend since middle school. He was about average height, 5' 10" or so, with short, light, blond hair that was thin and wispy, like cotton candy. Evan was a smart guy, always top of his class, he took all the college-level courses he could while still in high school. I loved the guy but occasionally his habit of ironically over-using, and often incorrectly-using, modern slang to the point where it was no longer ironic, was a little bit cringey sometimes.

"It's my father's funeral today," I replied, relishing the way his good-humored expression quickly melted away to a solemn apologetic look, "I hope you remembered that."

"Oh, of course, I was just, uh.... making a joke. Trying to bring a little levity to the whole situation. I'm sorry."

I loved the way Evan turned red when he was nervous, I think the light hair only made his face seem even redder. There was never any hiding his true emotion, it was cute. It was obvious he had forgotten the funeral was today, and I can't really blame him. These last few days have been so chaotic, it's hard to keep track of what's going on. It's hard to even know what day it is today.

"Had you planned on stopping by?" I asked, looking him up and down. He was wearing a striped red and white shirt and deeply worn blue jeans. It was horrible, he looked exactly like a candy cane. This was not out of the norm, I always wondered what had compelled him to dress the way he did. I wondered if he knew that this outfit was

doing him absolutely no favors or if he just didn't care. I had tried multiple times to help him out, give him tips, advice to present a cleaner, less child-with-an-ice-cream-cone look, but he always just brushed me off. He was steadfast and self-reliant, it was one of his more admirable qualities. Although sometime he took it a bit too far. Evan had always been a smart guy, the kind of guy people who hadn't done their homework that night would pester minutes before class for the chance to copy his work. They knew his work was always going to be done, and it was going to be done well. He always let them copy, but because of this long lasting cycle of constant reaffirmation, Evan had developed a bit of an ego. Despite all that, however, he remained my closest friend.

"Absolutely," Evan responded, a little too enthusiastically for the occasion, "I was gonna stop home right after school to change. I'll be there no later than 3:15."

"Good, don't be late," I said as I closed my locker and turned to walk down the hallway towards my next class, leaving Evan standing alone at my locker. Undoubtably a little bit confused about how our brief conversation had unfolded, and hopefully thinking about how he could try and be more tactful in today's coming difficult conversations.

Although I was intending to go towards Mrs. Conway's math class, I had started off walking in the wrong direction, and had no urge to turn around. I allowed myself to be lost in the sea of budding self-absorbed teenagers. There was a kind of peaceful calm to be found amongst the chaos of the high-school hallways. Despite the ever-present cacophony of adolescent voices, I could relax in the knowledge that all those around them are too focused on themselves to ever give you a passing thought. Your average teenagers mind is filled with worries about the English essay due tomorrow that they have yet to begin, the girl that sits next to them in fifth period. Or the budding pimple on their forehead that they are certain everyone is not only going to notice but fixate on and ridicule, when, in reality, they are too focused on their own pimples to even give yours a second thought. If only more of them

would realize this simple fact maybe everyone could relax a little bit and we could all get along a little better.

I don't think that I am separate from these other teenagers, in fact, I often wonder if I am the most self-absorbed of them all. Acting as though I know what makes them all the same, believing that this somehow made me different. Maybe it did, maybe it didn't, in the end I don't really think it matters. We are all going to put into a category at some point, like cattle branded, we are going to bear some invisible, or visible, mark that will tell others what box we belong in for the rest of our lives whether we like it or not. Sometimes I wonder what stereotype I fall in, what is the first thing that comes to the front of everyone's mind when I first meet them. Do they think, "Wow, she's ugly." I doubt it, despite what the little voice in my head is telling me, rarely, have I ever thought that upon an introduction. Still that little voice cries disproportionately loud. I believed it was more something along the lines of, "Try-hard, academic, debate team..." People always made these assumptions of young Indian women in high-school. This time, they weren't exactly wrong.

Since before middle school, I had always cared too much about school. I cared too much about getting the best grades and sucked up the hardest to all my teachers, even the ones who refused to treat me as an intellectual equal to my male peers. I remember one particular instance in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. We were just beginning to study Algebra, the one with all those letters, just in case you had forgotten this vital mathematics subject the moment after the final exam was over. The teacher, Mr. Bartle, dumb fucking name, we always called him Bartle the Turtle.

Not exactly the most creative name, but the guy did everything at a snail's pace, it took him ten minutes just to write his name on the board. It also didn't exactly rhyme, but it was pretty close, close enough for our young prepubescent minds, to preoccupied with crushes and our first sex-ed class to bother thinking of something more original. Bartle

the Turtle was a short stocky man and he was old. I mean legitimately old, not just in his thirties, old to a 12-year-old, but at least in his mid-seventies, why he was still working, I had no idea. He dressed simply, more than simply he dressed sloppily, his hair, or what was left of it, was always a mess, it stuck out in random spots with no rhyme or reason, no clear attempt to style it in anyway. He wore bland, beyond bland, button-up shirts, each a drearier color than the last: picture, faded mustard yellow. Each drab shirt was decorated with a plethora of stains of every sort, from the ever-present sweat stains marking each pit, to the coffee stains whose random splatters reminded me of a Jackson Pollock. There were also dozens ash burns along the sleeves near his right wrist, and a sick yellow tint crawling up the arms and down from the collar. It reminded me of some alien ooze, freed from its glass tube, accidentally touched by Mr. B, now gradually creeping up his body, consuming him slowly. The nasty smell of stale cigarettes and sweat did nothing to help his appearance, Mr. Bartle was a man who had given up.

This day in class, Bartle the Turtle, decided to have a competition to see who could complete the most problems in the fastest time, he had all of us take a place at one of the chalk boards lining the classroom walls and grab a piece of chalk. Then he would have us solve a problem on the board and whomever finished last or got the problem wrong, would be eliminated. Math had always been one of my strongest subjects, from a young age my father had worked hard to ensure I would always ahead. He spent many evenings with a whiteboard teaching me math I wouldn't learn for years in school. Suffice it to say, I was not worried about getting any place other than first in the chalk competition.

Despite my confidence, as I strode to the chalkboard, I could feel my heartrate rising. I looked around at the other kids in my class, many of them joking with each other and laughing together. I saw this boy named Tommy step behind Bartle and raise bunny ears above his head much to the delight of his ever prevalent posse, who burst into a roaring laughter. This display did nothing to draw the attention of the

Turtle, it was like he was completely oblivious to the entire class around him, I had a feeling we could all walk out and he wouldn't even notice, or maybe he just wouldn't care. I imagine after a few decades of teaching, with retirement just over the horizon, it might be easier to just stop trying. What did he really lose in this situation, the respect of a few 13-year-old boys, who would barely remember him by the end of the summer. I am sure it no longer mattered to him.

I grabbed my piece of chalk stood there, waiting in dreaded anticipation. I couldn't afford to take the same lackadaisical approach to this seemingly inconsequential trial of wits. As far as the others were concerned this was just another day in class, a more fun way to pass the last 30 minutes before lunch, a brief distraction, but not to me. To me, this was important, maybe the most important moment hitherto in my life, because I didn't have anything else. I wasn't athletic, I wasn't naturally confident, I didn't have an almost cult following like Tommy, I was awkward and insecure. This competition was all that I had, it was an opportunity to show them that I was more than the quiet, shy girl, more than the butt of the joke. I was going to win.

The class grew quiet as the Turtle raised his hand to signify the beginning of the trials. He spoke pointedly yet softly, forcing the class to remain silent to hear every word, drawing us in, building the tension.

" $21 + x = 27$ ," was all that he said.

The sound of chalk scraping against the board came in a fury, with each student scrambling to solve the equation. Scribbling things like, " $27 - 21 = x$ " or " $27 - 21 = 06$ ." I even saw one kid write, " $27 - 21 + x = 0$ ," I'm not sure where he was planning to go with that one, but wherever it was, it was wrong.

I simply wrote, " $x = 6$ ."

There really was no need to write anything else, it was simple, trivial, actually. Just one step that could easily be done in your head. There was no need to even carry the one, it was essentially just "7-1" a problem so simple we had learned it in kindergarten.



After three entire minutes, everyone had managed to answer this question correctly, much to my surprise. I had known many of these kids since I was in grade school and the fact that all of them could do even the simplest of subtraction, amazed me. But there was still one student who had finished the problem last, Tommy. Tommy laughed as Mr. Bartle told him to take his seat, his spirit seemed to be completely unbroken, almost as if he was glad to be out, because now he didn't have to do any math. Thinking about it now, it was an interesting teaching strategy, those who were already more adept at math, got more practice? While those who were struggling, were allowed, no forced, to sit back and do nothing. The rich get richer, as they say, teaching us the ways of the world from a young age, I suppose.

The next few problems passed by with increasing difficulty, even getting to the point of including multiplication and division. This challenge caused many more to take their seats, and soon enough there were just two of us standing at the board. Evan on one side of the room and me directly across from him, on the opposite side of the room.

Bartle the Turtle, true to his name, was taking his sweet time now. Evan and I stood, opposed from one and another, staring into each other's eyes. Now that there were only two of us left at the board, the peanut gallery had gone silent, everyone was focused on us. The flippant attitude of the class had dissipated, they were all invested now. Any moment either Evan or I, would be crowned master of 7<sup>th</sup> grade algebra, or as I saw it, smartest kid in the class.

At this point, I didn't really know Evan, I didn't actually know anyone. I was a loner, I had no friends to speak of and outside of group work, barely talked to anyone either. I sat by myself at lunch and sat by myself at recess. I spent most of my free time reading, or exploring. I had always loved to explore, whether that was through the latest young adult novel to garner my obsession, or through days spent wandering the local wilderness. Gensis was a small town located just on the edge of the Gila National Forest in New Mexico. On one side was flat desert

expanse, and on the other was mysterious wooded mountains. My father trusted me from a young age to navigate the dangers of the unforgiving nature, he taught me survival skills and how to deal with everything from rattlesnakes, to heat stroke. Sometimes I felt afraid, but it never stopped me from going deeper into the unknown because my father had taught me how to overcome any obstacle I could conceive of. But at that moment it wasn't a snake or a setting sun that was throwing me into fight or flight. It was the battle on the chalk board. Me against Evan.

I had known Evan was smart, but I was still fairly confident that he did not stand a chance. No problem to this point had taken me longer than a few seconds to get the answer, and I hadn't needed to do anything on the board except write that answer down.

Just when I began to think that Bartle the Turtle was never going to say the next question in his same monotonous tone said, " $-2 = x + 2 / 6$ ."

I didn't even bother to write down the problem, I thought about what he had said for a moment, then without further hesitation wrote, " $x = -14$ ." I turned around, Evan was still writing, " $-12 = x + 2$ ." I had done it, I had won. I would finally get the respect from my peers that I deserved, as their proven intellectual superior. I would no longer be the loner with no friends, and in a way, I was right, but before I could celebrate any longer, Mr. Bartle had allowed Evan to finish his problem and then began to announce the winner.

"Congratulations to... Evan. For solving his problem, the correct way, in the shortest amount of time. Evan you can come grab yo-" What the fuck did that mean, "the correct way," I had the right answer, I had written it, right there, entire seconds before Evan had even begun to conceive it, what made his way correct? Was it the fact that it was slow? Just because you are incapable of thinking beyond the pace of land's slowest reptile, doesn't mean we all are Mr. Turtle.

I thought all of this, but I said nothing. That was who I was, I didn't speak up, I didn't protest the injustice, I just accepted my fate and

slowly marched back to my seat. All the while the class whooped and cheered for Evan's triumph, and he claimed his prize, a single jolly rancher, green apple.

After class, Evan approached me and apologized, "You deserved that Jolly Rancher, you had the answer first."

"I didn't do the problem, the correct way, remember?" I replied in a snarky, sarcastic tone. Undeserved to the apologetic Evan, but I was young and very frustrated.

"You shouldn't be punished because you're smart enough to do it in your head," Evan continued.

"I am not sure that was the only reason," I said, Mr. Bartle was always short changing me, and it wasn't just me, but the other girls in the class. He always called on the boys first to answer questions, and actually gave them higher marks on the same work.

"What do you mean?" Evan asked, clearly not used to noticing the rampant patriarchal bias in the world, especially among old out-of-touch men.

"Nothing, it doesn't matter." But it did, it had matter to me. It mattered every time my opinion was ignored, every time my correct answer was further "corrected" by a man, it mattered every time I was told to dress or act a certain way. Unfortunately, by the time I was 12 I was already acutely aware that this was just the way of the world, and was told time and time again that we just had to play by their rules. I never did, not after that moment, never again.

One good thing had come from that day. After Evan's apology we became acquaintances, then friends. As I became more confident and began to figure out who I was, I made more friends too, but none were quite the same as Evan, he had made the first move. While he hadn't fully understood the situation, he had known I had been cheated, he had apologized for winning, I don't know many others who would do the same in his place.

Although after this day I stopped taking undeserved shit from biased teachers, I also started to learn to play by their rules. Show my work

where I didn't need to, answer in more detail than I wanted to, and leave nothing to chance. Make my success undeniable, I had to work harder, much harder, but there was no way anyone could deny the accuracy of my work now.

Despite years of reinforcing this behavior, and rarely a stray thought beside it, now as I walk through this unremarkable hallway, full of unremarkable people, I was beginning to feel that school isn't as important as we all make it out to be.

## **Chapter Two**

I didn't go to the rest of my classes that day. While this was out of the ordinary for me, a regular perfect attendance student, I didn't think anyone was going to care. Gone were the days of "toughen up," and "don't be so emotional," today was all about understanding, or so they preached. In this case though I was certain they would understand,

at least some of them. Loss is universal, but that was not a comforting thought.

Most are given time to learn to process loss slowly, a pet dies when they are just 5 or 6, then a grandparent or two dies when they are a little older, then maybe a classmate dies in some accident, then a parent dies. But by that time, they are supposed to be prepared, they have already been touched by so much death, that they have a better understanding of what it means to lose. They are more prepared. Prepared. Ironical isn't it, all my life my father spent time preparing me for the dangers of the real world. Showing me survival techniques to live in the wilderness, and self-defense techniques to live in the city. He knew that the world was a harsh place, and he wanted to prepare me as best he could for it, but he had never prepared me for this.

How could he? No one expected him to die so suddenly, before the heart attack, he had just had a regular check-up with his doctor. His cholesterol was a little high, probably from the regular bacon in his daily breakfast, but the doctor said it was far from anything to worry about, yet. We always believe that we have more time, we rest easy every night knowing we are going to wake up the next day, but we never really know. There are infinitesimal number of variables responsible for keeping a single human body ticking, and even greater number of variables in the randomness of the universe. The world is so unpredictable it's incomprehensible to our logical minds. We think that because we have antibiotics or because we can semi-reliably predict the weather that we are invincible. That we alone are immune to God's indiscriminate wrath.

We know this is not true, each and every one of us knows on the surface that we will die, but I think deep-down, we all believe we are different from the rest. Every human whose feet touched the dirt, whose lungs breathed the air, whose mouth drank the water died, but that can't be me. How could it? I am different. I will not die. But in the end, they do, every time.

I think it's this belief that makes death so difficult to deal with, the contradiction to that belief is shoved right in our face. We are forced to stare death and the face and somehow still refute his awesome power. It's hard, it makes us uncomfortable, this cognitive dissonance can be more uncomfortable than any physical discomfort. How can you come to terms with your own mortality? It opens too many doors, asks too many unanswerable questions, it is easier to adopt unquestionable self-importance and to disregard the rest.

That's exactly what I was going to do, disregard the rest. I didn't want to be in school, I didn't need to be in class, so I left. I had grown tired of the monotony anyway, the triviality of the modern educational system. I had learned all I was going to learn anyway; I was in the last semester of my final year of high school. Most of my teachers had turned to pseudo education videos and some had even given up all pretenses entirely and just began showing Hollywood movies as we prepared for any remaining AP tests and finals we had to take. I wasn't going to miss anything.

Our school was fairly strict about security and attendance, but most doors stood unguarded and unseen by any faculty so I just picked the door closest to my car and just walked out. Regardless of my own personal mood, the city of Gensis, New Mexico seemed to be shinning today. The sun was high in the clear blue sky, the temperature was in the mid 70s but there was a nice cool breeze, that made everything dance. I could hear the birds in a nearby tree chirping a wonderful song. That did nothing to alleviate my mood.

In such a sad state, even the things that used to bring happiness or temporary joy, served only as painful reminders of happier, more joyful times. The chirping birds reminded me of the mornings that my father and I had been spent camping out in the Gila wilderness, where there were only the sounds of natural world. When I was younger, I used to be afraid of the unknown sounds permeating from every direction of the impenetrable darkness. However, as I grew older, my father taught me to recognize the sounds and to attribute them to

specific animals, this mental connection was comforting. I no longer had to assume every chirp or breaking branch was a bear, but could identify the specific animal that made it, and most of the time it was just a rodent, bird or insect. Ninety percent all the sounds you hear on a night trip in to the woods can be put into one of those three categories, there was never much to be afraid of out there. That was not the case at the present, on my short walk to the car, there was plenty to be afraid of.

After a few moments I reached my car, a 2005 Volvo V70, red. It had been a gift from my father on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. We hadn't had a lot of money but he had been saving for a while to get me my very own car. The Volvo was not the most glamorous car in the world, it wasn't a convertible, or a sports car, or bright pink, but it was unique in its own way, and I loved everything about it. It ran like a dream, there was never a serious problem with the car, even after close to 200,000 miles, the thing was unstoppable. The two front tires lost air at a slow but never ceasing rate, so I had to carry a tire pump in the back of the car to occasionally top them off, but I didn't mind, it added character. Just as the dents along the sides and the numerous scratches that covered the car, added character. The dent on the front bumper, on the passenger side, I had gotten trying to go through a tight McDonald's drive thru for the first time with Evan and my other friends Sasha and Courtney. They all looked at me, color drained from their faces, worried I was going to freak out, or cry. But instead, after a brief pause for dramatic effect, I burst into laughter, and after their looks of concern and confusion subsided, they joined in. It was a good memory, despite the eternal mark left in my car, or maybe because of it. If I had never hit that curb, I doubt I would even remember that day.

There were plenty of other good memories in that car too. It was never a dull moment in the Party Wagon, that's what we had come to call it. Evan had come up with the name after seven of us had piled into the car, with five in the back stacked like sardines, there were only three seats, and two in the front, all to go to a drive-in movie and save a few

bucks. I think it was never really about the money, I think we all just thought it would be fun, and it was. Although Evan had coined the term, I had grown to love it, somehow this beat up car had become something of a hangout spot in my friend group, like the soda shops in the 50s or the basements of the 70s, or the coffee shops of the 2000s. It was more than a car; it was a location for coming together. We would all pile in and just cruise, drive with no destination in mind. Sometimes we would take it to the forest, or a dead-end back road, and camp there, a couple sleeping in the back and a few in the front.

I thought this as I stood there with my hand caressing the handle, almost like an exchange of soft touch between lovers. Now I wasn't sure I would consider myself the Party Wagon's Lover or vice versa, but I certainly did love that car. It went beyond the good times with friends, it went deeper. The Party Wagon was my light at the end of the tunnel, my life boat on a sinking ship. As much as I had loved this small town, I had never been satisfied. I wanted more from life, I wanted to see the world, to explore, to fall in love and now, to escape. The Party Wagon was the key to that dream, all I had to do was open the door, get behind the wheel and drive. But not today, today I had somewhere to be. Today was my father's funeral.

That date wasn't for a while though, I had time to go somewhere else before hand. I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do though, or where I wanted to go. So, as I had done many times before, I just started the car and drove, no particular destination in mind. I just needed to feel the vibrations of the road and watch the scenery pass me by in unacknowledged blur, and most importantly allow my mind to get lost. I have found that is easiest when you too are physically lost. At the point when I no longer know which way is home, I feel most at rest. All of my problems seem distant and irrelevant, they can easily be ignored when completely surrounded by the unfamiliar. Why would Mr. Johnson's Calculus test matter to me when I couldn't even tell you where my desk was from here?



Although in today's world you are never really lost, are you? The entire culmination of human knowledge is safely tucked away in everyone's pocket. If I wanted to find my way home all it would take is a quick search on Apple Maps and I would be in my driveway in no time flat. It clouded the feeling a little bit, but I was able to put that aside and allow myself to feel lost, that is until the floodgates had opened and the texts started to pour in.

"What time is the funeral?"

"Where is the funeral?"

"Are you okay?"

I couldn't understand why people would think it was okay to reach out to me with such inconsequential questions on a day like today. What had happened to respect and sympathy? Couldn't they reach out to someone else? Someone less attached to the ongoing situation, someone who wasn't me? The truth was, probably not. I was the only left, my mother had left us when I was very young and I had never heard of her or her family, and all of my father's family had passed away long ago. It had just been him and I. Now, it was just me.

## **Chapter Three**

To my surprise, I was not the first to arrive at the funeral home. Keekuk Nez, my father's closest friend since his own childhood, was there when I drove up. Keekuk, or Keek as my father called him, was born into the Navajo Nation in the northwestern part of New Mexico. Keek was a big guy, from what I heard he had always been that way. He was close to 6'5" and at least 250 pounds. He had this imposing presence that went beyond his size too, many people seemed to shrink away when he entered the room. Keek wore his hair long, he kept it braided into a long pony tail that extended to down his waist. When I

was young, I had asked him why he did this and he told me, “To many Navajo, hair is our memory. It is something we all share with one another, taking turns washing and brushing each other, it brings us closer together.” I then asked if he would do my hair sometime, and he did, many times. He always had such a delicate touch, unexpected for a man of his build. It had always reminded me of rattlesnake slithering through the grass. Silent, and undisturbing, barely moving the individual blades. You had to look hard to even notice it was there but, in the end, the braid or bun would always come out perfect. Far better than the other girls in school whose moms did their hair every morning.

His family had left the reservation when he was no more than 4 years old, in search of a life beyond the small, poverty-stricken community. He had told me one time that it had been a very difficult decision for his father to leave behind all his friends and family, but he needed to provide a better life for his own family. Somehow, they had ended up here, in Genesis. Maybe there were more opportunities here than on the reservation, but I had a hard time believing that. This town had been dying from the moment the mines dried up a hundred years ago. If it hadn’t been for the factory the town would have already died, but instead it limped on, like some sorry stray hit by a car but too stubborn to die. In a way it might be admirable, but I had a hard time seeing it as anything other than depressing. Eventually your time just runs out and drawing it out any further just means living in pain.

Keek had lived on the same street as my father when they were young. The section of town that had once tried to imitate the suburban communities of the Midwest with green grass lawns, small yards, even the occasional cul-de-sac. My father used to tell stories about the adventures Keek and he would get up to when they were younger. They would spend their summer days exploring the wilderness, building forts and getting into trouble.

One night as I lay in bed, fighting the urge to sleep, so I could listen to one of my father's stories, he asked the question he always asked, “Do you want to hear a story?”

I don't remember ever answering no.

*"It was early in the summer of 1981; I had just barely turned 10. Keek had woken me up at the crack of dawn by knocking on my bedroom window. He did this most mornings during the summer, and sometimes during the school year too, when it seemed I was going to be late for the bus.*

*'Hey Indian brother,' Keek called out through the window, never stopping to bang on the glass, 'Wake up, let's get going.'*

*He always called us the Indian Brothers; I think he stole that from the Mario Brothers. We were not really brothers and we weren't even the same kind of Indian, though people always treated us the same. I suppose that's what made it funny to him. Eventually, the nickname grew on me too.*

*At that age, I never had any desire to sleep in, the moment I was awake I was ready to go. I quickly threw on my tattered denim shorts and my faded brown shirt with one big white strip towards the bottom. Then I grabbed my beat-up sneakers, each one so filled with holes, it was a miracle they still held together. The whole time I was getting ready Keek never stopped banging on the window. This was our average morning routine during the summer. I slide open the window and climbed out. Back in those days parents were less concerned about where their kids went during the day and what they did. My parents knew I used the window to get in and out of my room but they didn't mind.*

*We hopped on our bikes and set off down the road, each of us peddling furiously, trying as fast as possible to get away from our parents. After we got out of the neighborhood, we took a right and headed toward the old mine. Our parents had always told us to stay far away from the mine. "Old mines can be dangerous," "The wood has been rotting for decades," "You never know who might be hiding in there," they would say. You know how kids are, you know how you are, that only made us want to go there more.*

*There was this one outbuilding in the mines that we used to always go to. It was our little club house. We always assumed it was where they stored the explosives back in the day, it was far off from the rest of the buildings and had the big steel doors with heavy chains around the handles and a padlock the size of your head. There was this loose board around the back, we would tilt a little to right and it would make a hole just barely big enough for us to fit through.*

*The inside was fairly empty when we first found it, but over the years we had brought in all sorts of toys, comic books and whatever furniture we could salvage from the rest of the mine. The floor of the shack was dirt so whenever either one of us walked across it, we would end up kicking up a lot of dust. I distinctly remember the way the light from the gaps in the boards on the wall would slice through the clouds of dust, creating these beautiful swirling patterns. Sometimes I would just sit there and watch the dust move through the blades of light for what felt like hours, it was bewitching.*

*That day we were just sitting there reading comic books and eating some cracker jacks when the old shack began to shudder. The sunlight disappeared almost in an instant and the room surprisingly dark. As my eyes began to adjust I looked over at Keek, who had put his comic book down and was staring right at me. We held each other's gaze as the walls began to shake violently. Within seconds the sound of wind was replaced with a downpour of rain. The old tin roof of the shack amplified the sound of each drop to the point of gunshots. Since the onset neither of us had moved or said a word, but then the thunder began. There was a bright flash of lightning and for a second the whole room was illuminated with white, the shadows cast by the wood in the walls shown an array of disorted crisscrossing lines. The room, which we had spent hours a day in for the past few weeks, was unrecognizable. Then came the boom, the incomprehensibly loud crack of thunder, like God's whip snapping at us straight from the heaven's. The shack shook hard and we could feel the ground rumble. I let out a*

*stifeled yelp, and saw a look of complete despair on Keek's face, the color had been completely drained and he was sleek with cold sweat.*

*Somehow, we had been lucky. This was the first time we had ever been out in the mine when a storm like this one hit. We had seen rain plenty of times and occasionally the far off burst of lightning, but never anything so close or so violent. It rocked us to our cores, here we were at the mercy of the elements and there was nothing either of us could think to do. It would be more dangerous to go out without protection and expose ourselves fully to the elements. So, we silently decided to stay, each of us afraid to mutter a single word. Afraid that by speaking we might reveal ourselves to the mighty smiter above and by doing so subject ourselves to his wrath.*

*We sat there for what seemed like an eternity, but may have only been five or so minutes, all the while taking comfort in each other's calming gaze, knowing that if we died, at least we would die together. Indian Brothers to the end. When, out of nowhere, there was a rap at the door. Subtle at first, I think we both thought it nothing more than the fury of the storm, but then. Then it grew stronger. It's hard to describe exactly what it was about this particular knock, but there was something about it that made me certain it was not the natural noises of an old shack in a torrential storm. There was something more. The rate of knocking was not regular there was no beat or time, but there was something patterned about it. There is this indescribable human ability to regocinze a pattern undefined by math or logic but it was absolutely made by man, or something who thinks almost as man does.*

*I didn't think it possible for Keek to look any more afraid than he had the moment before, when it was just the storm that we had to worry about, but now, now there was something there. I could see it, deep in the black of his eyes. There was a recognition, he too knew that this was no ordinary branch scraping at the walls, or knocker blowing in the wind, this was something else.*

*Keek made a move to open the slot in the wall we used to come and go, and I stood to stop him. There was no way I was going to let him let whatever thing was out there in.*

*"What are you doing?" I shouted over the unsuppressable sound of the wind and rain.*

*"I'm going to go see what it is!" Keek responded in a voice no quieter than my own, but I still had to strain to hear him over the maelstrom raging beyond the thin walls.*

*"You'll die out there!" I said. Maybe a slight exaggeration but I was scared out of my mind. I didn't want Keek out there in the storm and with that thing. The imagination of a child knows no bounds, you know. Everything from C'thu'lu to the second coming of Jesus Christ flashed through my young mind. I didn't know what it was, but whatever was out there had come for us. Keek and I, the Indian Brothers, no one else. It was here at the small out building, a few dozen yards from the mine and miles from the rest of civilization. It was knocking at the door of our clubhouse, and I was determined to keep it there. Keek, on the other hand, didn't seem to be.*

*He ignored my admonishment and started to move the plank away. The moment he did I could feel the wind push its way into the shack. It worked around to fill every single corner it could find, swirling up the dust in the process. It gave glimpses of some fourth dimensional, psychedelic, tapestry every time the lightning flashed. Accompanied by the unearthly symphony constantly playing with earth-shattering forte. But Keek pressed on, I reached to grab his belt, just before he slipped through the opening, out into the darkness.*

*Moments later the banging on the doors ceased and only the sounds of the storm remained. I was certain that Keek had been claimed and now that the entrance to the clubhouse had been shown, it would only be a matter of time before I followed him. Moments later, the wood piece, the only thing that stood between me, and certain death, was pushed to the side. A ferocious beast came barreling in, at such speed! All I could see was teeth, so many sharp, white teeth, in an open maw,*

*preparing to devour me! My short life flashed before my eyes, as I wondered about all the things I had never been able to do, kiss a girl, leave Gensis, see the world. But then, instead of biting me, the creature of the storm, was licking me?*

*I couldn't believe it. It must be teasing me, playing with it's food like a cat and mouse. I sat there dumbfounded, patiently waiting for the unimaginable pain to come, but it never did. I opened my eyes to get a glimpse of the terrifying hellhound that had burst from the chaos, but instead I saw an ordinary golden retriever. It was regular sized, and very friendly. My sobs of horror quickly turned into giggles of joy as this dog continued to happily lick my face. I started to pet his wet fur, and even embraced him.*

*"He must've gotten lost out there in the storm," Keek had said, with surprising non-chalance, as though he knew the whole time that it was nothing but a lost dog.*

*"I can't believe it, I thought the devil, himself, was knocking at our door," I replied, breathless and still in shock.*

The story ended there, although I considered my father a phenomenal story teller, most of his stories ended with me wanting more. Maybe this was his way of preparing me for current eventually, because although his story has ended, I have never been left wanting more.

## Chapter Four

“Gimme a hand with this,” Keek ordered me as I casually walked toward the funeral home. He was currently struggling to lift a large covered box out of the back of his 1995 Chevy C/K 1500. It was a beat-up old truck, mud-splatter-red and rust eaten along every edge, he had bought it new and used it every day since. That was the way most people were out here. Cars were more than just a tool for getting around. A car was a necessity, when most people’s driveways are longer than an airport runway, it becomes hard to imagine life without a car. Keek was no different. He loved that truck and it loved him, he took great pride in its upkeep, and despite its appearance it ran like a dream.

“What you got here, the coffin?” I asked, hoping he wouldn’t hear the stifled pain in my voice and be too focused on my sad attempt at dark humor.

“It’s a box of your dad’s things, pictures and what not. Gon’ set it up in the reception room, so folks can remember who’s feedin’ em.” He responded, completely ignoring my joke. We carried the box in together without saying anything else to each other the rest of the way in. “Drop it here,” Keek said when we reached a small table near the



chafing dishes, which while empty, had already been setup in a neat organized row, with small cans with fuel underneath for sustained warmth. Those chafing cans always bemused me, I had no idea how such a tiny flame could do anything to keep that dish warm, especially when it was concentrated on such a small area. It seemed impossible that such a seemingly inconsequential agent could be of any consequence at all.

Keek, again silent, began to open the box and pull various trinkets out of it. First, he pulled an old picture I had never seen before. It was framed in a simple, black frame. One of those you can get from the dollar store with a black and white stock photo of a happy family already tucked neatly into the picture slot. But instead of the fake, photogenic, gleeful family, this frame contained some other kind of family. There were five of them, all crowded together, embracing one another, it was immediately clear how close this group had been.

An Indian man no more than twenty-five or twenty-six stood off to the left. I recognized him instantly as my father. His face was unmistakable, and yet, so much younger than I had ever seen him. His curly black hair was longer than I had ever seen it, it was almost down to his shoulders in the back. There was no style, it was just pulled back out of his face. It looked like he hadn't shaved in quite a few days. None of it seemed intentional, but it didn't seem like he cared either, he looked so happy.

His shirt was tattered and worn. There were dark sweat stains under both of his arms. All his exposed skin seemed to gleam with sweat, only broken by patches of dirt. Everything he was wearing was dirty, from his boots, caked with fresh mud, to his hat, once a bright tan, now dark and stained. He looked like he had been through hell, but there was that smile. I had seen him look happy throughout the years, but I had never seen him look this natural. He just looked comfortable, completely confident in his surroundings.

Hanging around his neck was a white woman. She was taller than my dad and stunning. Her dark blonde hair had been pulled back

into a tight ponytail, and her face did not suffer from the extra attention. I had seen many women try to hide parts of their face with their hair, using it as shield to defend against sharp judgmental stares, but this woman was proudly displaying every detail. Her skin was flawless, perfectly bronzed and glistening with sweat in the sunlight. She was also covered in spots of dirt and mud, she had not taken any precautions against it, and she wore it well. She was tough and fearless.

There was something else too. This woman was pregnant. It was still early, but there was an unmistakable bump. She was out here deep in the wilderness, carrying a child. It was at that moment that I recognized her. It was my mother. I had seen a few pictures of her throughout my life, but over time I had stopped looking at them. They only caused pain and anger. As I grew up, I started to better understand my father and the true nature of her departure. She had abandoned us, left us alone shortly after I was born, without sympathy or remorse. As the years dragged without so much as a post card from her, I slowly lost my desire to meet her, it was clear she didn't want to meet me. Then that apathy began to turn to anger. This picture, her wrapped around my father, smiling and happy, and pregnant, only made me madder. I can't imagine going on such an adventurous, most likely dangerous trip, while pregnant. Had she even cared so little for me at the time that she would take such a big risk, with such disregard for my safety, for her own? Maybe she was hoping she would miscarry, praying that she would slip and fall on her stomach. Too cowardly to abort, or perhaps too influenced by my father, but still wishing that child away.

Next to the happy couple, was a large man, dark skin and long black hair, tied back in a neat braid. It was Keek, though he looked slightly younger, he really hadn't changed much over the years. His hair had remained pretty much the same length and his size hadn't changed too much. While in this picture his bulk really showed through his beige button up with torn off sleeves, I was sure that he hadn't lost much of that to the years. He wore long sleeved flannels now, with only the top button unbuttoned, unlike the three in this picture, but underneath it all,

it was obvious he was built. Years of working on a ranch does not make a soft man.

Slung over his shoulder was a black strap, from the top of his right shoulder to the middle of his left side. Now, I couldn't make it for certain, as his hulking body was blocking most of what was attached to this strap, but over his shoulder there was a small black rod poking out, I was convinced it was some sort of assault rifle. They must have been on some serious adventure to need any kind of fire power, let alone a rifle of that caliber. I briefly considered asking Keek about it, but I didn't think it was the right time to dredge up the past and bombard him with the hundred questions exploding in my mind.

To the right of Keek, were two people who I did not recognize at all. A woman, I thought she might be Chinese, but I was not confident enough in my ability to distinguish one Asian from another to say for certain, as bad as that sounds. She stood right against Keek with one arm resting on his shoulder. The stance was comical, she was so much shorter than him she had to raise her elbow almost above her head to get it onto his shoulder. She stood there with pride, she looked no less happy than the rest, but there was something else to her smile, something indescribable that separated her from the others. It was almost unease, as if the smile she wore was just a mask, hiding her true feelings.

She too, had her hair put up into a ponytail, although it was less flattering. While undeniably beautiful, she lacked the perfect symmetrical features that benefit from such a hairstyle. Just like the others she was splotted head to toe with flakes of dirt and fresh splatters of mud on her lower half. They all wore beige or light green clothes, as what I could only assume was an attempt to blend into their surroundings. They looked straight out of an Indiana Jones movie, the only thing missing was a fedora and a whip.

The final man, on the far right, stood slightly apart from the group. He had short black hair, cut into an almost military like buzz. He was much better groomed than the rest as well. There was not a patch of

scruff on his whole face, either he was unable to grow a beard or unwilling to let his appearance falter in even the direst of conditions, as the others had. He wore a thick pair of black rimmed glasses, that, along with the large white sunhat he wore, managed to obscure most of his face.

His clothes also appeared to be much cleaner than the rest of the group. Though large patches of sweat were still visible under his arms, there was a distinct lack of mud anywhere but his boots. I had a hard time believing that the other members of the group had gone out of their way to traipse about in the mud, so that must mean that he had gone out of his way to avoid it. I had a difficult time understanding why someone with such an obvious distaste for dirt would be out there at all.

There was also no detectable trace of happiness anywhere in his person. His face was stern and emotionless, not just the trained faux ambivalence so many girls my age practiced, but a seemingly real lack of care. It didn't appear that he was unhappy, just empty, a statue of stone among the fleshy, soft living.

He had a large, dark-green pelican case pulled over his shoulders and a small camera dangling around his neck. Despite his collection of nerd-like accessories, he was far from built like the stereotypical computer guy. He was tall and strong, not as large as Keek but by no means small. His skin was white, but tan, the color of light stained wood in the evening sun. His face, well what I could see of it, was sharp and handsome. I was beginning to understand why he wouldn't want to hide any of it behind long hair or a thick beard. Still, he struck me as a strange addition to the group, the rest seemed to belong, like a family, and he was the black sheep. Alone.

"That was the last trip we all took together," Keek spoke suddenly. I had been so entranced by the picture, absorbing its every detail, I had momentarily forgotten where I was, who I was with. Keek's words brought me back. "I had no idea Dad had done any traveling like this, where on earth were you guys?" I asked a full minute

later after my racing mind calmed and I was able to process the situation.

“That was taken in Brazil, deep in the Amazon jungle. If I remember correctly, that was taken about two weeks into our trip.” Keek replied, answering my question but also seeming to hold back more information.

“What were you guys doing down there?” I pressed further, desperate to uncover this new mystery about my father that had popped out of nowhere. Perhaps desperate for a distraction, or a way to be closer to him, understand him in a way I hadn’t been able to before, when he was alive.

“It was a vacation,” Keek said, with practiced nonchalance, while he continued to unpack the box of mementos. “Nobody just picks up and goes to the Amazon on vacation, especially armed with machine guns,” He momentarily stopped unpacking the box at the mention of the guns, but quickly caught himself and resumed. I was now certain that there was something more. There was another pause as I waited for his response.

“The jungle can be a dangerous place,” is all that he managed to say. “But why were you there, did this have anything to do with Mesa?” I pushed further. My father had mentioned Mesa Biotech a few times in passing, and over the years I had gleaned enough information to sort of understand what it was. Although, before this point I had never stopped to wonder why he had been so discreet about it. He had worked there for over a decade in his youth. I didn’t know much about it, but from his slight descriptions I had assumed he spent most of his time buried underground in a lab, only surfacing for air to sleep. Nothing like this had ever crossed my mind. I couldn’t imagine my father anywhere in the field, let alone deep in the heart of the most infamous tropical environment in the world.

At the mention of Mesa, Keek promptly stood up and grabbed the box. He walked away without even responding to my question, in any other situation I may have protested, commented on the rudeness of

his actions, but this had not been a normal situation. This was a funeral, my father's funeral. In my curiosity I had forgotten this fact. Prying deep into the relationship of Keek and my father and their mutual past now seemed ruder than Keek abruptly walking away. While I was in mourning and eager for a history lesson, a new avenue to further my connection with my father; Keek was also in mourning and I would be right to allow him to mourn in his own way.

I placed the picture frame on the small table with the rest of the remnants of my father's past and stood up as well. Though I did not make to follow Keek, I thought it best to leave each other alone for the time being and fulfill the rest of my daughterly duties and prepare for the event. I made my way back over the chaffing dishes and began to unpack the various boxes of disposable utensils.

Forks, knives, spoons, plates and finally napkins. Forks to pierce the flesh of the recently departed chickens, knives to cut it into manageable pieces. Spoons to scoop bites of defenseless vegetables. Then there was the plate, an essential instrument in the ingestion of a meal, yet often blameless in the symbolism of its consumption. Without it there would be no pressure for the fork to stab, there would be surface for the knife to cut. Essential, yet quickly dismissed and forgotten. Finally, the napkin, the most unassuming. A tool whose sole purpose is to cover up and disguise any evidence of the gluttonous massacre. Taking no part in the offense itself, but integral in its continual coverup. A true celebration of life would be incomplete without the industrialized destruction of it. Life can only exist with death. A balance, or so we are told, but I doubt should those chickens speak, would they agree.

The arrangement of the dishware took longer than it needed have, my mind remained elsewhere. I had become fixated on that picture; I had spoken to my father many times about my burning desire to see the world. To experience something outside of my small town desert bubble, but he had always approached that subject with marked aversion. I had always assumed he had been afraid, a man who had

never left the neighboring states, a man who had spent most his life at home, or hunched over a bunch of test tubes in a lab. That picture though, had meant he had at least been to Brazil, and done more than just stayed in a beachside resort, much more. Why hadn't he told me? If something had happened out there, why hadn't he cautioned me about the dangers, why had he just avoided the topic altogether?

The more I thought about it the more questions I came up with and the fewer answers I remained confident in. After an indeterminable amount of time standing hunched over the chaffing table, lost in my own head I heard a voice come from behind me. "You okay there?" It was Evan.

"It's my father's funeral," I replied not directly answering the question but come on, context clues. "Right, sorry," To be honest I was getting a little annoyed at his lack of sensitivity. I had to remind myself that he had not lost his father, in fact, as far as I knew he was completely unacquainted with any kind of loss. His grandparents all remained spry and happy, his parents had a long and loving marriage, even his dog had been there since he was a toddler, this was all new to him. But it was new to me too, it was frustrating, I was tired of being the understanding one, for once I wanted to be understood.

"Need any help with anything?" Evan postulated, eager to change the mood. Despite his empaphnesia (Forgetfulness of emotion and mood), he was not totally oblivious and could tell that I had at least been annoyed by his ignorant questions.

"Could you start setting up the chairs. Just line them up with a lane down the middle." I replied. A simple enough job, I couldn't imagine that anyone could mess that up, even Evan. Finished with my delicate arrangement of the wares, I opted to help Evan set up the chairs. We worked together to build the long lines, taking great care to align the feet of one with the feet of the other, parallel to the casket at the front of the room. The casket. Since I had been here, I had tried my hardest to avoid even glancing in that direction, but now I had no choice. All the chairs here, empty, sat patiently, facing the wood box I,

myself, dared not face. It was easier for them they had the good fortune to be empty, I wished I was. I wished I could take out the thoughts, the memories, the feeling, but I was not as lucky as the chairs. It took more than standing up to be free of burden, it required sacrifice.

"Alright, I think we are all set here. What else can I do?" Sam said. In that moment I had forgotten entirely about him. I was so absorbed with folding-chair envy I had forgotten that he was there. A nice reminder that it was possible to forget, although I wasn't sure yet if I wanted to.

"I think we are all set here," I told him. "You want to go sit outside with me for a second? I don't want to be in here right now."

"Yeah... Of Course, you, uh want to go out back, or..."

"Sure." I cut him off.

We made our way through the eerie walls of the funeral home, the place seemed to be mostly closed for the day. I assumed there was still a mortician, or whatever you call them, there somewhere, but he was nowhere to be seen. We walked through endless halls; the building had seemed so small on the outside. A little more than a small event space, and a room for showing off the merchandise. But these hallways seemed to tell another story. The twisting and turning was giving me the creeps, I wasn't sure if it was actually a maze, or if the confusion and other emotions were spilling over. If Evan hadn't been there, I am not sure that I ever would have made it out, I can imagine myself stuck, in this endless labyrinth, orchestrated by some malevolent force, enjoying my unending suffering. However, eventually we found a door marked exit. I made a quick check for any security-fire-door type alarm and pushed it open. My vision flashed white. In the maze I hadn't realized how dark it had been in there, I pictured the light slowly dimming as we made our way deeper. Now, the air was fresh. The sun was bright, and the day was beautiful. I was insulted.



## Chapter Five

The back of the funeral home was no more or less than what I expected. There was a thin, gray, pavement road for what I assumed were deliveries. It had large cracks emanating from the edges, overgrown with weeds, and a few not-small potholes. There seemed to be no maintenance done to this area. I am sure the bodies they brought in didn't mind. Off to my left there was a large green dumpster, pressed up against the beige brick wall, and then the woods. The home backed right up to a forest, there was no view, only dense foliage, an ugly dark green. While I had never left the southwest myself, I had seen pictures of the rest of the US and everywhere else the vegetation just seemed brighter. The greens were vibrant and full, uninhibited by the harsh desert sun. They been given the opportunity to grow in the way that they wanted. In the Midwest it wasn't a constant struggle. The image did little to console my racing mind.

I immediately went to take a seat on the curb and watched as Evan jumped onto the small brick wall surrounding the side of the dumpster. He had a habit of sitting in the strangest places possible. It was endearing, he couldn't be satisfied with sitting on the curb, he wanted more.

"Sooo..." Evan began, long and drawn out. It was clear he had not thought beyond this stellar conversation starter.

Once again, I, like Spider-Man, swung in for the rescue.

"Do you ever think about Styrofoam?" I asked.

"Yes, all the time. Sometimes I lay awake at night for hours, unable to sleep because I just can't get Styrofoam out of my mind. " He said with sarcasm so thick Sir-Mix-A-Lot would write a song about it.

"No, I mean seriously. Do you see that cup over there?" I pointed to a Big Gulp discarded by the side of the concrete. It had been crushed, multiple times maybe, I couldn't tell, but it was practically flat. The unnatural white was almost entirely gone, replaced by various dirt and colored stains. It reminded me of a Jackson Pollock, splattered in an almost random fashion, reds, browns and greens. The colors of blood, fire and earth. He turned his attention to the edge of the road.

"How long do you think that cup has been there?"

"I don't know, maybe, one, two, weeks? I don't think they would just leave trash out here for years?"

"I think you underestimate the apathy of the mortuary workers. I can't imagine that their biggest concern is the trash behind the building where they spend hours a day face to face with the deceased. I think that cup could very well have been there for years. Styrofoam is one of the worst things for the environment that man has ever created. When it is manufactured, out in those Styrofoam factories, it releases dozens of harmful chemicals directly into the air. Those chemicals lead are greenhouse gases that lead to the destruction of the ozone layer and global warming." I pause there for dramatic effect. I glance over to see Evan staring off, slight perplexation plasters his face as he wonders what direction this will go.

"And this is just the making of it. When you want to get rid of it you can either burn it or throw it away. Burning it is obviously not a good solution, all those harmful chemicals that didn't escape to clog up our atmosphere in the manufacturing process, made it into the actual finished product. So, when you burn it more dangerous smog gets released. And if you don't decide to burn it, then the only other option is to throw it away. It takes up millions and millions of cubic feet of

landfills. Then when it eventually breaks down, surprise surprise, it breaks into more toxic chemicals called pyrenes. Those chemicals seep into the ground and water and then get ingested by animals and humans and can lead to sickness and disease.”

“Yeah, we all know Styrofoam is bad. What’s your point?”

“My point is, Styrofoam is bad, bad for the animals, bad for the air, bad for us. But it is also good. Good at keeping things cold or warm, for example, there’s a reason that they have been making coffee cups out of it since the day it was discovered. It is also good at one other thing; it lasts a long time. Like a really long time. It takes over five hundred years for a single piece to completely decompose. That’s longer than the entire United States has been, well, United.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think most people consider that a good thing, I mean that’s why it’s taking up so much space in the landfills right, because it never goes away.”

“Exactly, it only endures at a great cost to the environment. Maybe that is the only way to last, through destruction. Maybe, at some point, we will have to make a decision, us or the planet.”

“I think that decision was already made years ago, when fossil fuels started the wealthiest industry in the world.”

“That’s not what I mean, I truly believe the wheel started turning in ignorance, and only perpetuated from established necessity. You take oil away and the whole world dies, even with the rise in sustainable energies, we are one body, and our blood is oil. My question is, one day we will be presented with a choice, dying or the complete destruction of our world or even perhaps another planet. When we need the resources from the ground, we stand on to spread further, grow larger, endure, do you think man will hesitate?”

“Of course not,” Evan responds without hesitation.

“Why?”

“Well, because humans are selfish and unwilling to change, we are always going to choose our comfort over sustainability.” Evan says with wavering conviction.

“Disregard comfort, think for a moment down the line, way down the line. As far as we understand it there are a finite number of resources in this universe. Even with our sustainable energies, the wind will someday stop blowing, the water will boil away, and the sun will die. Then we will be forced to leave our nests and fly to some other planet, disrupting their atmosphere and environment to make it hospitable for us.”

“We could just go to a planet without life, a planet that’s nothing but rock and ash, by that time I am sure we could figure out a way to make it livable.”

“You aren’t thinking big enough. That might work, for a while. But eventually, there will be no other option. If life exists out there at all, which I have no doubt it does, there will be other species who make it as far as we do, so as the number of planets in the universe decrease, the density of life will only increase, until every planet is occupied, and survival will be entirely dependent on our willingness to genocide another population.”

“We could just build a new planet, or a big ship and drift through space.”

“Again, that requires resources and energy, you can’t build a ship out of nothing, and you certainly can’t fly it without power.”

“So, what’s your point?”

“No matter how hard we try to convince ourselves we can live a sustainable life, and become one with nature, it is not possible. Sacrifices must be made on the part of nature in favor of us, or on us, in favor of nature. My point is, is it worth it?”

“You mean living? Of course, it is.

“I don’t mean living per se, I just mean unnatural propagation, living beyond our roots. Extending life beyond its natural conclusion.”

“Like medicine?”

“Like everything, guns, cars, the steam engine. It’s all unnatural, an affront to the natural order. We killed Mother Nature centuries ago and we haven’t stopped pissing on her grave since.”

“But where do you draw the line, the wheel is technology, a spear is a tool made by man, without the most basic tools we would be nothing.”

“Maybe that’s what we deserve.”

“Are you saying if there was a cure for your father you wouldn’t have taken it?”

“No, of course I would have. But there wasn’t.”

There was a pause, as we both sat there trying to understand what it was exactly that I was saying, because to be honest, I wasn’t that sure myself.

“I guess, I just wish it was more fair.”

“What was more fair?”

“Everything.”