

## THE HUT

He had seen her earlier while bending down to collect the wood he had cut and placed neatly into piles. The sun had slipped into an empty pocket between the clouds, dipping the bare branches and the few dead leaves which clung to them in a subdued rose-gold hue, and looking up past the mist which emanated from his mouth, his jacket solidifying from sweat and cold and immobility, he saw for a moment something shift between the pines. A spectral figure—a person, bipedal, erect—waded forward round rocks and fallen debris down an old hunting path repurposed and domesticated. He wondered what could bring someone so deep into the valley. Looking after the figure until it passed from sight, he crouched down to gather the smaller sticks of wood, tossing them onto the bent piece of metal to which he had attached a frayed old rope for hauling. The wind increased and the sun moved back behind the clouds and the landscape transitioned from an interregnum pink back to a stark November grey, and he, tucking his head against the driving cold, harnessed himself to his burden and set off down the same path as the figure.

The snow continued to fall in irregular bursts and the edge of the ridge appeared faint like an afterthought before vanishing fully and then revealing itself again in sharper relief with a temporary retraction of the sky. He thought of the figure and of the storm and of the depression of the light and how these things, added to the depth of the figure's journey, were unusual since there were no horses or wagons or the accoutrements of the hunter slung round the shoulder of the figure, and his desire for refusal was a tight burning in his chest as he made his way, ploddingly, down the floor of the valley.

The hut came back into view, looking small in the stark clearing in which it sat. In front of it lay a meadow of wild grass and desiccated weeds, newly frozen and still retaining a semblance of summer's elasticity. He looked around for the figure but saw no one. He searched for tracks but the ground was hard and the snow cover sporadic, and he doubted he would have been able to read them anyway so gave up and dragged his wood behind the hut where the walls would shield it from the wet. With his boots he smeared what snow there was into a patch of dirt which stained dark with wet, and

he tipped the sled upwards and halved wood jolted free and rolled into place. After replacing a few stray pieces to form a neat convex pile in accordance with the shape of the tipped bent metal, he brought the sled down on top of it like a wax piece breaking from its mold in reverse time, tying the rope to a steak which was really a large and rusted nail left by the miners whose hut he in time had found himself using as shelter, they having long since passed on toward richer veins.

The light was fading and the ridge had grown tired of its cycle of occlusion and acquiesced to the sky's entreaties to embrace it. Nothing but white peered back past the dark green of the trees and the man thought there could be anything out there, now. As he made his way to the front of the hut he painted on the white a vast expanse of water which stretch out and up like a blue mound to meet the sun, and he yearned for that place and felt he could almost push through the whiteness, lose his footing, and find himself there amongst the spray; and he could feel it, the soft spray emitting from the sea, spattering his cheeks and dowsing his hair, but it was not the saline of the ocean which the light caught, sparkling as it trickled across his lips; not of the sea, but of pain in the dusk streaking outward with no one to catch it. He swallowed hard and with a clenched fist wiped his eyes and suddenly, blocking his way, was a girl wrapped in black cloth.

Can I help you?

They stood facing each other, she between him and the hut's entrance, and he waited for her to speak. In the semidarkness he could see a black shawl covering her head, rippling violently around her and snapping like a tattered flag as it came loose around her shoulders. A few stray hairs escaped the shawl and streaked across her face as if she were in free fall, head plunging downward, hair trailing behind. She wore a cloak of dark cloth with woven angular patterns traced across it which were indiscernible in the low light.

Her face fractured, but the words fell on her tongue unspoken and she blew them into the wind and shut the diamond of her mouth tightly behind them.

What can I do for you?

This time she did speak but said something he didn't hear and he shouted should we go inside, gesturing with his right arm toward the door. She moved to make way for him and he considered holding it open for her as he

might have done in a different life but instead walked in alone, leaving it free and unlatched behind him, inviting her to enter as she pleased.

A minute later she entered, her face enflamed with cold. Pellets of snow dotted her shawl, dribbling lightly to the floor. Crossing the threshold she stepped from a darkening world into a still darker one and halted, seeming reluctant to close the door behind her since the thin grey light of dusk which slipped through the entryway illuminated her new surroundings and was the only light to see by. As her eyes adjusted to the new low light she saw the man hunched down in the corner, one knee touching a black space of floorboards, and a light flashed and then diminished to a faint orange glow before going out, leaving nothing but an invisible redolent wisp of smoke which smelled of sulfur and the promise of heat. He struck the match again and this time it was covered by his hand and he cupped it and brought it down towards the floor like one placing an injured dove in a linen nest; and he blew on it softly as it rested in its bed and it pumped its wings gingerly first and then with increasing force as it built its strength. He swung a door shut to contain it and dim orange shot through two small windows, transforming the void of the room into a known space.

There we go, he said, raising himself with creaking effort to his feet. Give it another five minutes and we'll be needing to crack a window. He laughed uneasily like one hopping to slacken a taught line.

She nodded and extended out from beneath the woven patterns a slim hand and closed the door behind her. Against its shut back she stood rigid and unthawed. The creaking of the walls and the muted crepitations of the fire peppered and streaked the silence until she chose to once again venture into the realm of the speaking.

Who are you?

That the girl should ask such a question astonished him, and as he answered he attempted to strike a genial, less combative posture, at once both vulnerable and guarded, shifting his weight towards imbalance and cupping his hands visibly in front of him.

I'm just a traveler. A speck in the wilderness, come to live a simple—

Before he could finish the girl stepped further into the room for the first time, her slight boots falling heavily against the hollow boards.

Who are you!?

This she spoke with a force which threatened to blow the hut's light back into its box, and the man suddenly yearned for a mere bareness against the elements.

I'm a philosopher looking to live off the land. I'm not hurting anyone. I just want to live here in peace. Is there something I can do for you?

He spoke this uneasily, pleadingly, as a trespasser in justification of his presence.

The girl failed to speak and even the silence receded as waves of blood filled his ears. A damp, drowning glow rippled vertiginously against the walls. Once again she extended her slim hand from beneath her covering, this time pulling her shawl down from around her head, and he saw her for the first time and felt heavy like one crushed by the vacuum which proceeds detonation. The softness of her neck, the sinuous ridge running up its front which protruded as she slightly turned her head, the dark eyes, her power, which peered out curiously, desperately, lovingly, madly at various turns, looked back at him. Hot metal flew towards him and threatened to penetrate his flesh. After what felt for him to be a great span of time but which wasn't more than a few moments he heard her speak with a familiar whisper which caused within him a deep, ventral burning, and the pain seared and charred him and became unbearable and needed relief.

Who are you?

He shook his head and his body began to shudder. With a few strained breaths he opened his mouth and looked as one about to shriek, but he said nothing and looked everywhere and nowhere with fevered intensity. In his glancing he spotted the door, and with a sudden resolution leapt past the girl, swung open the door, and departed into the great expanse which for him could be anything but which wasn't.