

## Return

When Trama and Dee next met, something was gone. Something besides Action. Dee was slipping away from him. Somehow Trama was both painfully aware of this, and yet felt horribly far off and detached. He tried to remember the words that had made Dee laugh, but they came out as a shallow imitation of what they'd previously conveyed. He felt like a fake version of himself. He was sad. It seemed wrong to be talking to Dee and pretending everything was ok. He tried to find a way to explain his state of mind. He wanted to apologize for the mean words that he had used. Instead he found himself voicing sad, empty thoughts. The only thoughts which he didn't voice were the ones which most preoccupied him.

The harder Trama tried, the more he fumbled. He spouted shallow compliments at Dee, as if to make sure that she still existed. She gave him shallow responses. In short, their relationship fell apart as abruptly as it had begun.

At the end of the afternoon, Dee didn't say, "I don't want to see you again." She didn't even say goodbye. She simply gave him a look that expressed as much and then walked slowly, confidently, away. As she left, Trama was struck with a thought. In spite of all that he had felt for Dee, he still didn't know her very well. He watched Dee move away through the grass. A few goats wandered in between them. Dee was barely out of sight, but she

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felt farther away than Frog City.

A few days later Sushi Man came to give his final lecture. Trama ran into Tim outside of the classroom.

“Glad to see someone else looks as pissed off as I am. I can’t believe we have to sit through another round of sushi,” said Tim. Suddenly Sushi Man’s head appeared in the classroom’s doorway.

“You cannot make sushi with a mouthful of wasabi,” said Sushi Man. Tim pulled back in surprise. Sushi Man winked at Trama and disappeared back into the classroom. The students gathered and Sushi Man began his lecture.

Sushi Man said, “The egg sushi is the most difficult of sushis to master. Achieving the right combination of ingredients is only the first step. They must be blended in just such a way, and so forth. Each egg sushi is unique. The smallest variations change the finished product. If one has almost made an egg sushi, and a speck of dirt falls in, the consequence is dire.”

Trama realized he was crying for the first time since returning to Yellow Lake.

“One can attempt to remove the dirt with tweezers. One can attempt to cook the imperfection into the sushi, to later cut out the offending portion. More often than not though, the whole product will fall apart, clumping into unappetizing lumps of eggy dough.”

Sushi Man stood in the front of the room. Trama sat behind four rows of desks. Still, Sushi Man immediately saw the sadness that Trama felt.

“Class, begin measuring your ingredients. Trama, outside,” said Sushi Man.

A few moments later, Sushi Man walked outside carrying an egg sushi. He handed it to Trama. Trama chewed and swallowed it. The sushi was very bland. It was hard to say what, but this slight taste contained quite a lot of something.

Sushi Man said, “I once met a Trama somewhere else. If you are that Trama, you will know: before I made sushi, what did I do?”

Trama responded, “You made kabobs.”

Sushi Man nodded, looked off into the pine trees, and said, “As we grow older we live through challenges. Experience can be disturbing. It can change who you are, and not always for the better. Remember this though: In my life, every time I have lost something, I have gained something. If loss does not kill you, it pulls away part of you and reveals something else. The

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thing which you gain does not compensate for the thing lost. Nonetheless, it is there. It is necessary.”

Sushi Man looked right at Trama. “Remember this too: at the little things, we get better. It is never easy to see life in broad strokes. But at the tasks we perform, at the relationships we build, we get better.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “And we also grow more compassionate. You may leave now, you will have no success with egg sushi today.” Trama heard Sushi Man’s words but, as he left, still felt empty.

Trama was hurt very badly. He tried to forget everything that had happened, but he wasn’t really sure that he should. Even if it moving on was the right thing to do, his mind was intractably drawn to thoughts of Action, Dunton, and Dee. He had trouble sleeping. Time passed quicker than he imagined it would.

Tim left Yellow Lake. New students came. Trama’s first week back at Yellow Lake grew into months. The yellow leaves had fallen long ago. They were followed by a grey dullness. Snow fell. Boots and hooves marked the white landscape and, again, Yellow Lake turned grey. He spent very little time thinking about flying.

One Thursday, Trama didn’t go to lecture. Tommy found him in his bedroom, watching snow fall through the window in his floor.

Trama said, “Sometimes I think about writing a letter to Dee. Some sort of apology. The idea seems nice to me, but it also seems like something a poetic goblin might do.”

Tommy sat down on the foot of Trama’s bed. She gave Trama a sad smile. “Goblins aren’t real, Trama.”

When Benny left, Trama had done a poor job of comforting Tommy. Tommy did a much better job with Trama.

She said, “remember those speeches from right when we arrived at Yellow Lake? At the time I thought they were stupid. Now I’m not sure. I think I like that type of sappy, sentimental quote. I heard one recently. Some guy named Kenneth Pattengale wrote ‘freedom comes from being unafraid of the heartache that can plague a man,’ or something like that.”

Tommy lightly punched Trama’s shoulder, getting his full attention.

She said, “leave the past alone. You should do whatever makes you happy now.”

Trama’s face lifted as if a light had been turned on. He turned towards Tommy. He did his impression of the scrunched up face Benny used

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to make. Soon they were both out of breath with laughter. Afterwards, Tommy put her hand on Trama's arm. He returned the gesture. She looked in his eyes, but they were looking elsewhere.

One night, Trama had a vivid dream. In his dream, he found himself reliving his first week at the house on stilts. In his dream, Action had left a note for him, and blueprints for an incredible glider. Action's note requested that Trama advise him on the glider's wing flaps as soon as possible. Trama had a clear picture of what Action needed. He headed towards Joe's observatory to get to work. On his way there, he ran into friends.

Tommy called out, "We just got one of Action's kegs!"

Benny called Trama over, offering him a mug of beer. Trama tried to tell Benny that he had to work. Benny didn't understand, and pushed the mug into Trama's hands. Trama drank. As he drank, his friends began to take on green hues. They called him onwards, urging him to drink more. By the time he had finished his beer, Tommy, Casper, Tim, and Benny had all turned into goblins. The goblins started cheering and lifted him up on their shoulders. They carried him down towards the lake. He tried and failed to break free. The goblin's cheers morphed into jeering catcalls. He struggled as they lowered him into the water. The goblins stood above him, holding his head under. He ran out of breath. He woke up. He lay in bed and, before the falseness of the dream overtook him, wondered if drowning was punishment for disappointing Action.

The sharpness of events fades. As Spring came Trama laughed more and more. He was interested in the world around him. The places beyond the borders of Yellow Lake seemed distant. Before Action, before Dee, before the train from Yellow Lake, Trama had lived for himself. Maybe even more than before, he found himself wrapped up in a mostly self-centered reality. He thought about the different things Sushi Man had said. He thought about the ways in which experience had changed him. Occasionally he would think about something Dunton had said and chuckle under his breath. He passed the days in the library, in the workshop, and alongside Tommy and Casper. His remaining time at Yellow Lake was eventful and in many ways fruitful.

The night before he graduated, Trama spent an hour looking around at each hall and corner of the house on stilts. He cleaned his room. Then he went up on the roof with a stack of postcards and a pen. He wrote thank-you notes to Action, Dunton, and Dee. He folded each one up into a paper

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airplane and threw them into the wind.

Late that night Trama fell asleep at the foot of a redwood tree. He slept deeply and didn't wake until the sun rose. When he woke, he walked the road from Yellow Lake. He sat on a log in the clearing where he had arrived two years ago. Over the next few hours Tommy and the others joined him. They all talked for a long time. Eventually, a new class of students stood in front of them. Trama spoke first.

He said, "it is a Yellow Lake tradition that each graduate gives the newcomers a short speech on a topic of their choice. Graduates then walk down the road from Yellow Lake alone."

He turned towards the new students.

He said, "experiencing loss makes you weaker. It makes you less you. You tell yourself that loss has hardened you; that if you could go through so much, nothing else should be a problem. That is far from the truth. Loss doesn't ever make it easier to get through the day. Loss doesn't even make more loss any easier."

Trama wandered away from the clearing. He had no destination in mind. He couldn't think of any place that felt like home.

Tommy spoke next. She said, "giving yourself to someone you love is easy. Knowing that you're not meant for them and letting go is tough."

Their words were sad. But a quiet, simmering happiness lay over the proceedings.



