Don walked through the rushes, his boots squelching as they sunk through the thick black mud that stretched the expanse of the marsh. “FIDO!” he yelled, his hand cusped to his mouth, “FIDO COME HERE!”. It was to no avail, the dumb dog had gone off and gotten himself lost again. Last time this happened Fido went missing a whole week. He ended up being found in a garbage can across town later that week. Dumb dog. Don whistled with his fingers, the sound shearing through the crisp blue fall sky, To his surprise, Don heard the gruff bark of his Labrador Retriever from across the marsh near the far woods. Fido might not be that dumb after all Don thought.

His remaining friends always bemused him on the fact he called his dog Fido. Don didn’t care. He had never been very creative, and he might as well have an easy name to remember going into his old age. He didn’t want to think about his age though, and yet as he travelled the muddy clearing to the woods, the thought kept reemerging. He was in the middle of his fifties and not getting any younger. Not to mention having been divorced for the past five years. He was surprised his wife lasted that long, having finally gotten tired of Don’s personality. That didn’t mean it didn’t hurt when she dropped the divorce papers on him. In the past few years, Don too had finally gotten tired of his personality and started to change. But habits were hard to change and the work was slow going. But Don had time, all the time in the world. He had inherited a small paper mill from his father in his twenties. Don had a knack for managing and that small paper mill became one of the largest paper and pulp production companies in the world. He had quietly stepped down as CEO in his late forties, netting a hefty profit from some of the stock he sold.

Still on the board of directors, he managed to make the meetings once in a while but his attendance had declined sharply after the divorce. Not to mention it was tough to get to the meetings. After the divorce Don had moved to quaint town in the middle of nowhere. Close enough to the ocean to still have the sweet smelling air but still inland, and that worked for Don. It didn’t work for relationships though. A few years after the divorce Don tried to get back into the dating game. A lot of good that did, Don thought. The total quantity of women who were past there forties and unmarried in the small town totaled an even zero. He even tried some of those bullshit online dating websites. But that’s what they were, bullshit. He had ended up driving to a few dates he had received off these websites but they all ended horribly. Not even his new personality or vast array of wealth did any good. All the women were looking for their ‘soul mate’ and he just ended up not fitting the bills. They sounded like his ex-wife. Figures.

Don broke away from his reprieve as he stepped under the shadows of the willows on the far side of the marsh. “FIDO!” he yelled, as his feet crunched on the branches littered across the moist dark ground. Luckily, Fido barked back and much closer this time too. Don made his way to the sound of his dog, pushing past the lower branches from the new saplings that blocked his path. As he brushed off a broken branch on his shoulder his eyes turned to behold Fido sitting patiently on the ground. That surprised Don, Fido was not the type of dog to do nothing, and yet here he was with his butt plump on the ground. What was more surprising however was what was nestled within the large mound of earth directly behind Fido.

Apparently, someone had built a seemingly stalwart cabin, using the hill of ground as a foundation. As Don walked up to the structure he thought about how he could have passed here a hundred times and never realized this was here. The entire structure was extremely disguised, as over the years is seems the forest had taken back what was hers. Trees were abundantly located all over and around the petite building, as if it were part of the forest itself. It looked a bit like an overgrown Hobbit hole from one of Tolkien’s stories Don thought as he reached the door. The old lock that had been securing the door had completely rusted away and with one good shove from Don’s shoulders the lock gave away. Fido followed obediently as Don pushed the door open and stepped inside, ducking as he did.

The strong, damp smell of earth hit him almost instantly as he entered, and he breathed it in as he let his eyes adjust to the light of the room. As his retinas grew larger he was able to grasp the shapes of the room. From what he could tell the room had been cleared out. All that was left was an old timber table and chair, with a small bookcase on the other side of the room. Don walked over to the bookcase hoping to find a tidbit of information of the purpose of the structure. Don slid his hands over each shelf but turned up nothing except dust. Don sighed and walked over to the old timber chair and slowly sat down. No Hardy Brothers story for me today he thought. As a boy Don had dreamed of being just like his childhood idols as he grew up. But then childhood past, life took hold, and Don’s childhood dream was lost. Just one of many Don thought. He wasn’t alone though. Of the few friends Don had, the line he heard most often was “What if?”. Don knew it was no use to dwell on the past but every now and again the thought popped into his head. What if he had taken the road less travelled? He would certainly be more fulfilled than he was now. Still, as bad as it sounded, he did enjoy his affluence and the life that it brought.

Don slid his finger over the moist wood of the table, travelling the knots in the woods with his fingers. As his hand brushed over the bottom of the table it recoiled as it contacted cold metal. Don, intrigued, took a step back and bent down to inspect the underside of the table. What he found was small metal hatch container, which had been screwed onto the table. Don clicked open the container and among many cobwebs a sheaf of paper fell unceremoniously to the ground. Don picked it up and placed it on the table. Maybe I might get to be a Hardy Boy after all he though. After untying the purple ribbon, which held the sheath together, Don spread the paper using his full hand. Unsurprisingly, in the dim light Dom couldn’t make sense of any of the shapes on the paper. No good Hardy Boy travelled without a flashlight Don thought chuckling as he took his cell phone from his pocket. For the first time ever Don opened the flashlight app on his phone, and traversed the aged disheveled piece of paper. Beneath the light the figure on the paper began to emerge, and what Don saw excited him. Not an easy task to accomplish. The paper displayed a map of what appeared to represent the park Don was currently in. The marshes, the pine grove, the cliffs overlooking the mudflats, it was all here. In the far right corner of the map were two purple lilacs intertwined together creating a cross. An interesting take on the cliché red ‘x’ that usually marked an treasure on a pirate’s map Don mused.