

## The Shortcut

Kansas, Late Summer, 1988

The boys moved quietly through yellowing stalks of foxtail and bluestem, exhausted from a day at the hidden lake, the little green pond just beyond the ancient farm, the one at the edge of the woods which lay in ruins like a fallen temple. It was where the two had played together for years, ever since the days when they surveyed for treasure in the stone cellar of the old barn. It was in trees of that property that the boys had built houses of their own from the lumber they had stolen around the neighborhood. It was in the trees of that property where they dreamed that they were child kings of all the wild and mysterious things.

But now it was late August—the peak of summer before the fall—and on this hot muggy day, the heat and humidity stirred the heavens to violence, inciting a riot of clouds which now raced fast and loud like a legion of white unbridled horses across a field of hazy, sticky blue.

Bob and Tommy had stayed later than they should. Their mothers were probably worried, calling in worn voices from darkening porches while their fathers sat tired in vinyl recliners in order to catch the news, more of the same, if it bleeds it leads, murder-death-violence filtered through the glass screens of analogue tv, the fathers watching passively while eating microwaved dinners from plastic trays—watching and watching and watching—trying to block out, to forget the day.

Meanwhile, in the tall grass field, which concealed old secrets beneath the gentle sway of dying blades, the boys walked in the same old way that they had walked many times before, on a narrow meandering dirt track cut by the soft young feet of children looking for something in the fields and forests, some kind of magic in the isolation and escape, in the day of just being, experiencing life in its raw form, no filter or structure, living for the moment, life as it happens, in the now, a universe of one, present, without the intrusion of the adult—the boys all alone—able to do whatever they wanted.

The thin winding path followed the falls and bends of a creek, a little muddy stream that cut through the limestone like a metaphor, a life lesson, for in the detritus of sediment one could see that all things harden then break with pressure and time. The water of the creek was cloudy with the chemical debris from city streets, but still it spoke in soft lulling tones, babbling as it rolled over the sand and stone towards destinies unknown up around the bend.

Bob, in his ripped denim shorts and white skater t-shirt, led the way through the pale green fields, whacking at weeds with a branch fallen from a tree. Tommy followed behind, drifting and watching the sky, which looked ominous in that clash of blue and white, the now towering clouds looking like anvils, gigantic and awful, poised to let loose something brutal—a wet heavy sudden violence—now presaged in the unsettled silence.

The boys walked until they came upon a colossal oak which had fallen like a mythological giant across the foot-stamped path. The boys used it to sit and to rest, to take in the gathering storm and dying sunset.

“Did you see Dunston barehand that ball to Sandberg who turned it to Grace for the double play?”

“How about Dawson crushing that one into the apartment across Waveland?”

The boys had grown up watching the Cubs play on cable tv. It was standard afternoon viewing on those hot oppressive days when the people of the neighborhood scurried like bugs into the dark cool corners of their air-conditioned homes to hide from the weather behind curtains drawn and doors closed.

“When school starts I am going to ask out that girl from the pool.” Bob packed a box of cigarettes against the palm of his hand as he stared forward and talked into the absence.

“The one in the pink bikini?” Tommy said sort of automatically, still lost in his own thoughts.

“Yeah—Jenny.”

“Really?”

“What do you think she’ll say?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey—do you want one?”

Bob had lifted the cigarettes from his mother’s purse, digging among the bag’s contents—the lottery tickets, pills, tampons, receipts, and loose change—to get them. He knew that his mom wouldn’t notice their disappearance as she burned through pack after pack each week.

Bob struck a flame from the matchbook he had picked up at the gas station, where he and Tommy had ridden their BMX bikes—the ones with the white plastic spokes and fat aluminum pegs—earlier in the day to get a couple blue raspberry slushies. It was their ritual, to drift that summer before freshman year, doing everything and nothing, the city theirs to run and roam, to do what they wanted, reporting to no one, rulers of their own.

The boys took tiny hits of the cigarettes, but never fully inhaled, just let the little vaporous clouds sit in the back of their throats until they exhaled the smoke which rose in thin drifting wisps that dissipated into nothingness without a trace of their existence. To smoke was something, a small rite of passage, a dance on the dark side by being rebellious, toying with something dangerous, something that could kill.

Looking to the woods and sky, the boys sat on the fallen tree and contemplated in silence, smoking their cigarettes which dangled from their fingertips, the little rings of red fire burning up the white paper, leaving small crooked columns of gray flimsy ash.

Bob thought about blue sparkling pools and young tanned girls; he imagined what it was like to be with one of them. He was curious. He thought about it, about Jenny, about how if he could just get with her he would be more of a man, would be put on the map, be more than just a freshman, would be someone the other guys at the school would look to, get him into the parties, get him introduced.

Tommy, on the other hand, in his ratty khaki shorts and green banlan shirt, reflected on the summer and returned to the past, to the days when he and Bob rode their bikes to play games of catch, when they ran free and burned with energy like two tiny golden suns, seeking and exploring—full of light—boundless in their freedom, beautiful in their flight.

They sat like that for awhile—the two friends since elementary school—each now in their own worlds.

They then sort of simultaneously noticed that the storm had gathered force—the sky transformed—now green and evil like the eyes of a wizard poised to strike with lightning and thunder, its face twisted and angered, ready to unleash its furious temper.

“Maybe we should take a shortcut through the woods?” Bob pointed to the trees as though it was the one true way to avoid the storm now approaching closer and faster than before.

“Are you sure? We’ve never been that way before.” Tommy looked at the path and into the woods, assessing the situation and gauging the mood.

“Maybe we can beat the storm.”

“I don’t know.”

“What do we have to lose?”

“Alright—if you say so.”

The boys stumbled up a rocky embankment towards the dark tangle of limb and leaf. But as they summited the small precipice of jagged limestone to make their way into the woods, a rusty strand of barbwire hidden in the tall yellowing grass coiled around Bob’s ankle.

“Goddammit.”

The pointed metal teeth sunk into Bob’s leg, and Tommy ran to help Bob undo the knot of steel from which dripped the young boy’s blood onto the hard brown soil. The old wire had once kept outsiders from trespassing across the fields of the farm, but now the old fence lay in

rot, time having vanquished it, the wire left to die, buried amongst the weeds, anonymous, out of sight.

Tommy put his hand under Bob's arm to lift him to his feet, and the two resumed their shortcut into the woods, following the dying sun west through the canopy of trees from which the boys could see through the snarl of branches a soft metallic light, the faint shine of a steel roof, a crown on a tower of wood—an old grain silo—the castle of the Midwest erected by hunters and herders who built structure from wilderness—brute kings of barbarous fields and forests—farmer-astronomers—whose eyes looked to the skies with hands fixed in dirt, who dug for their dreams, worshipping both weather and earth.

The boys ran against the trees and through the woods like phosphorescent ghosts backlit by a sky of green and orange, the bodies of the boys like white fire burning with silver smoke, as though their shadows were their souls, trailing behind in one long luminous glow.

Just then an animal darted from the trees and cut across the boys' path, scaring the boys nearly to death, stopping them in their tracks.

"Jesus, what was that?"

"Some kind of antlered beast."

The boys collected themselves and pushed further into the darkening trees, racing against time, against the storm and the night, the shadows of the trees becoming long and mean, like strange black beasts nipping at the boys' feet, trying to catch them, to lash and grab at them, just like the sticky webs and thorny branches—the woods animate—poised seemingly to trap them, to bind and capture them, to prevent them, the boys, from ever finding their way home.

But they plunged further into the thickening woods of indeterminate depth for what seemed forever perhaps when just then, without notice, the woods opened, giving way to a secret place carved from the trees, a hidden clearing which the boys had never seen.

"What is this place?"

"It looks like the back lot of a horror movie."

Tommy stepped from the woods with a nervous cautious gait, timid, afraid, eyes scanning the space for any signs of life in the splintered light which filtered through the trees in broken beams dimly illuminating a hut across the clearing constructed of crisscrossing branches which gave it the look of a pagan outpost, a wooden temple to celebrate the gods of the forest through rituals of bones and blood in order to summon the spirits of the dirt rock leaves, to call them from slumber with chants and dance, to raise them from their graves.

Bob was wired, pumping adrenaline like a drum, his senses heightened, alive, all kinesthetic, feeling the sense of adventure, of being on the verge of something spectacular. "Let's check it out."

“What about the storm?” Tommy wanted to play it safe, to get home, feeling something was a little off, maybe even a little sinister.

“Come on.”

“I’m not so sure.”

Bob skipped towards the hut, hands above head, making strange noises, playacting like some kind of savage, while Tommy walked more quietly, surveying the hut and the stone pit in front of it which was filled with grey ash and black wood of ghost fires probably burned under full moons, the smoke having risen up through a jangling menagerie of glass bottles which dangled from a fishing line that had been strung from a branch to the hut like some kind of crude dream catcher.

“Look at this!” Bob raised a hatchet above his head which he found in the weeds on the edge of the clearing. “I wonder what it killed.” The rusty hatchet was crusted in brown blood with a tuft of hair along its chipped blade, and Bob stared at it and studied it, almost coveted it, feeling sort of transformed in the moment.

“Bob, let’s go, the storm is getting close.” Tommy’s tension showed in his stooped posture and scrunched nose, in his eyes which glowed with nervous energy, scanning the shadows for any sign doom lurking.

“What do you think’s in there?” Bob pointed to the large darkened hut which had been fashioned from vines and branches.

“Probably some homeless psycho or deranged killer.”

“Well, let’s find out.” Bob crept closer past the rusty aluminum chair and crushed cans of beer, and then he looked over his shoulder and smiled, feeling confident, like an explorer at the threshold of something significant, feeling the high of fear and excitement, and without further delay pulled back a soiled sheet which served as the hut’s entryway to a narrow corridor that spiraled inward like a nautilus towards an obscured center covered by a blue nylon tarp.

Bob crouched, tucked his head, and leapt forward, and Tommy reluctantly followed, closely just over Bob’s shoulder, apprehensive, uncertain, worried about the consequences of their decision, about what they would find just around the corner when they entered the inner chamber of the sylvan structure.

The boys’ feet shuffled carefully in the dust which was peppered with broken shafts of dusky light that slipped through the bindings of branches above them. The boys couldn’t breathe; the air was tightening, claustrophobic, the boys moving slowly, deliberately, as to not disturb whatever lurked in the dark interior, the center of the hut, where, when they reached it, they stopped in silence in order to collect themselves before Bob held a finger to his mouth, took

one deep breath, and wrenched his neck around the corner to glimpse nothing but a musty yellowed mattress on the hard dirt floor.

Bob's shoulders relaxed, his face softened, his voice was self-assured, almost cocky. "It's nothing but an old dirty bed—here, take a look..."

"Yawp!" A loud violent yell ripped through the silence.

"Jesus." Bob screamed—panicked—the boys now clawing and scraping—frantic—fighting through the narrow corridor, their bodies lacerated by bark and thorn, stumbling towards the small aperture at the front of the hut, their lungs pumping thick choking breaths.

Tommy dove through the door, but Bob tripped as he exited.

"Get up, pussy." A senior from the high school slapped Bob on the side of the head.

"What the fuck you think you're doing?" A friend of the senior crawled from the hut and joined in the taunting of Bob.

"We were just curious." Tears welled in the eyes of Bob, and his voice trembled with embarrassment as he stumbled to his feet.

"Look at this faggot. What? Are you going cry?" The senior's crony, in a black t-shirt and frayed jeans, stepped forward and shoved Bob in the chest, knocking him off his feet and to the ground, where he looked over his shoulder at Tommy who watched helplessly.

The senior stepped to Bob and kicked him in the ribs and then, with one muscled hand, lifted Bob back to his feet again.

"What's this?" The senior wrapped his hand around a thin gold crucifix which hung impotently from Bob's neck. It was a gift for his confirmation. The senior studied it for a moment, grimaced at his accomplice, then ripped the chain from Bob's neck, held it for a second in front of Bob's face, and then flung it into the forest where no one would find it.

The senior's sidekick punched Bob in the gut, dropping Bob to his knees, and then the two turned to scurry and flee, laughing as they disappeared back into the trees.

Tommy scrambled through the dirt and weeds to lift his old friend, bruised and limp, back to his feet. "I am sorry, Bob, I didn't know what to do."

Bob dusted his pants and wiped blood from his lips. "There was nothing to do."

"Let's just get home." Tommy put his arm around Bob to steady him.

"We shouldn't have taken the shortcut." Bob mumbled quietly and repeatedly to himself, almost as if to cope, to make sense of the embarrassment, to push way down the acrid taste of

shame which watered in his mouth. He never again wanted to feel such unmasked weakness, to be so exposed and vulnerable, to feel like a fucking idiot, so right then and there he closed himself off to the world, built a strong emotional wall and vowed never again to let anyone enter, to trespass, to sneak past the guard and injure.

Bob dabbed at the fat muddy tears which cut through the dust on his face, and then he looked down the path and towards his home through a dim dirty haze.

And then came the first of the rain.

The boys limped silently and without eye contact into woods on a narrow twisting path overgrown with thistle and spurge. It was a long arduous task—to make their way home after something like that, one of those moments that splits what was and what is to come, makes separate, creates the sense that something will forever be changed, different.