

## Blocked

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1

Branch wore a neon shirt and camo pants, a walking meme, a candid photo someone takes and sends to their friends. Did he want to be seen or not? Thousands of men were spawning like this, as contradictions with dark thick beards and pale paper skin, with strong opinions on inconsequential subjects. Whether they were the bullies of their high schools or the ones that were bullied no longer seemed to matter- they had now assumed the role as both the alpha and the victim. His name, “Branch”, an outlier to an outsider, was as commonplace in his world as “Peter” in theirs. Branch and Peter would never have crossed paths if it wasn’t for the women they loved.

Peter met Tina as she was mid-protest at Northeastern, a rebel who ran away from home to attend school in Boston of all places. Now graduates, Peter and Tina were making their annual pilgrimage to her birthplace, a vacant lot of a mill town that found itself hooked up to life-support on some unseen back-up generator. It was an open secret that Peter’s visit this year was purposeful- he was due to ask Tina’s mother for permission to propose. Her father wasn’t around. He hit for a small amount on the lottery, bought a sports car, and then hit a large amount of a tree. If it was suicide, it was said to be a glorious one (unless of course you were Tina’s family or the road crew that had to clean up after him). So, at Tina’s request, Peter would ask her mother. Peter himself insisted that he also ask her brother-in-law. Peter didn’t like Branch but he was astutely aware that Branch considered himself the man of the house.

Despite his many faults, Branch had made himself useful by doing things like paying for the father’s funeral and keeping the lights on when no one else could afford to. Okay. These were noble acts, but they were irrelevant to Peter’s motive. The real reason he was going out of his way to ask Branch was because he knew Branch would complain if he didn’t. Like all men that expected more than they were owed, Branch held on to an imaginary code of brotherhood with stubborn naivety. Peter saw this way of life as a facade, a book of rules that was not only stupid but that never existed in the first place. Peter was scheduled to meet this master of mock machismo in his arena, in the forest, hunting unsuspecting animals.

The could-be brother-in-laws had previously engaged in an argument about the morality of the hunt. Branch insisted that hunting for food was far more palpable than buying processed meat at the grocery store or, God forbid, a fast food place. After a moment of angry reflection, Peter begrudgingly admitted that this was true and accepted a future invitation to join him. He figured that when the time came, he could find some excuse not to go. But now Peter needed to speak with Branch privately and so the day after they landed at Tina’s mother’s house, the two men went hunting.

Branch ditched his neon shirt in the parking lot and put on a camo jacket to match his pants. He handed Peter some of his old gear and when Peter put it on he looked like a kid playing dress-up in their father’s work clothes.

“Here,” said Branch, handing Peter a vibrant orange vest. “There’s only one other truck here but that means someone’s out shooting. We don’t want to get killed out there do we? Put it on,” said Branch, now holding back a laugh. “Now, tell me, are you ready for this?”

“I don’t think so,” said Peter.

2

Branch pulled an instrument from his pocket and then moved it behind his back to initiate a game of keep away. Once he saw that Peter wasn't interested in playing, he brought it out into plain sight. The device was akin to a Gameboy Color built to help you slaughter things. Technology had advanced to the point that a sort of land sonar was fully functional. The scanner could read the heat imprints of the deer from up to a mile out.

"What's the matter? They don't talk about these on the internet I guess," said Branch.

"Wouldn't this mean the military could use a device like this to hunt down people?"

"Who the heck do you think made it? Don't go blabbing about it now. They're not on the market yet," said Branch.

"Fuck, man. That's like the thing from *Predator*. Isn't it a little unfair for the animals?"

"Life's unfair, compadre."

They marched into the forest waiting for the scanner to beep. Neither of them could think of anything to talk about, and Peter felt it was too early to pop the question about popping the question. He'd wait until Branch was in a good mood and he'd be in a good mood when he killed something. Peter stopped thinking about the deer's well being as soon as the bugs started swarming. The insect spray they had lathered themselves in wasn't working. The damn things kept trying to chew through their goofy bucket hats and the thick material on their sleeves. Peter kept swatting them away and dreaming of the best case scenario- They get in quick, blow a deer's head off, and get out as soon as possible.

"How easy is it to start a fire?"

"Won't need to start a fire today, but if we did, I've got an automatic fire starter. It lights sticks up like you wouldn't believe. Think Hiro-freaking-shima. Probably something else you don't get up north," said Branch.

"And tents?"

"What are you doing a school report?" said Branch, spitting the Skoal from his lip. "We don't need tents neither, but if we did they got that figured out now too. You throw the thing on the ground and it pops open like it's from outer space. Hold on now," continued Branch holding one finger up. "We're in business."

The device beeped red and the outline of a deer blinked on the screen. One and a half clicks away. 10 o'clock. Peter's heart raced but then that took a back seat to his stomach swirling.

"I'm sorry, man. I've got to go to the bathroom. Do you have anything for shitting?"

"Oh, come on. Go grab some leaves or something. Hurry up, soldier, or we'll lose track of it."

Peter crouched behind a tree and prayed to a God that he didn't believe in to protect his bare ass from the bugs. All in all it was one of the most humiliating experiences of his life. The leaves made it feel like cleaning yourself with dirty tinfoil. He did as best he could and then crouched back to Branch. Bowels voided, they went after the deer.

3

Eye-level broadside shot. A hunter's dream. Hug the crease of the shoulder. Hold right at the equator between the top and bottom of the deer. Branch didn't hesitate to shoot, but Peter sneezed. The deer darted off unharmed into the woods and the bullet destroyed a helpless rock. They had marched that whole way for nothing.

"I'm not even going to talk right now, or I'll say something I regret. I'm losing my religion here, Peter!"

"I'm sorry, Branch. I really am. I think it's the bug spray irritating my nostrils."

"How about I irritate your... Nevermind. Let's get moving," said Branch.

The deer stopped running a click away and Branch feared that it'd be too startled for them to get another good shot. Still, they persisted.

"Do you ever worry you'll get lost in the woods?"

"Lost? Peter, all we gotta do is follow this GPS. Come on now, we gotta move fast."

After a long haul, the device showed them that the deer was just on the other side of the hill. Even Peter knew that the doe would be toast if they had that high of a vantage point. They climbed the hill, each man trying their hardest not to reveal that they were out of breath. Bing. Bang. Boom. The deer would be dead soon and they could get the hell out of the increasingly uncomfortable forest. The trees were hugging them tighter and tighter.

BEEERROOOOP

The device's screen went completely red just as they were hitting the top of the hill.

"What happened?"

"How am I supposed to know? I'll just restart it and it should work fine," said Branch. "Just be quiet for a second."

When he restarted the machine, nothing changed. Peter suggested that Branch check the GPS on his phone and Branch begrudgingly agreed to. No service.

"You must be bad luck or something, man," said Branch. "This ain't never happened before."

Peter was trying his phone when he felt something hefty push into the back of his head.

"Don't either of you move a molecule or I'll blow your heads off," said a voice from behind Peter.

Branch turned quickly and was met in the nose by the barrel of the gun. He went heels over head down the hill hitting more than a few rocks, trees, and clods of dirt along the way. His rifle lay only ten feet from where he first fell. Peter could only assume that the deer took off, and this time for good.

"Are you deaf boy? Drop your bag slowly and empty out your pockets now."

Peter did what he was told without any protest.

"Son, all you've got is a cell phone, a wallet, and an engagement ring? You going to propose to that man down there?"

"No, sir. That's my brother-in-law. Or would be, if my girlfriend says yes."

"Well, I ain't here for that, you can keep that and your wallet. Going to be needing this phone though. So, he's the one with all the equipment, huh? I suppose all that bullshit is in that bag that's down there with him. Hmmm. Okay, we're going to walk down this hill together. Don't look back. And don't fall, or I'll have to kill ya."

Peter began walking silently down the hill. His legs were heavy with fear and exhaustion and it was hard not to wobble them with each step. On a good day, with no gun pointed at him, he would have found the terrain treacherous. All he could do is keep putting one foot in front of the other and tap into his love for Tina as strength. Impossibly, he reached the nadir and stood in front of Branch's body. Without checking to see if Branch was breathing, Peter removed the bag from his back and began to unload it with his back to their attacker. Branch shot awake with a knife in his hand and told Peter to run.

"You're stupid as shit, boy. How you going to stab me from all the way over there?" said the man.

"You'll see!"

"*I'll see,*" said the man in a mocking voice before continuing. "You're going to put the knife down and I ain't going to hurt you any more than you've already been hurt. I only need a few things from

you then I'll be on my way."

"Don't give him anything!" said Branch.

"I hate to say it but the Yank has got a lot more sense than you. He's going to hand me what I need. The tracking device, your phone, and whatever other ungodly contraption you got in there. What else, Yank?"

"There's an automatic fire starter," said Peter. "No tents. Already asked him earlier."

"Shut up!" said Branch.

"Okay, well I'll be taking the fire thingy. You can use sticks and stones just like everyone else."

"You bastard! You're killing us!" said Branch.

"I ain't killing ya. I'm just evening things out a little bit," said the old man. "You can turn around now, Yank." The old man gave him a once over then looked up and away, seeming to see the future, and nodding his head to confirm it to himself. "I'll leave the gun up on the hill there. You'll find your phones back near the entrance from whence you came. Be keeping them other devices though."

Peter stared at the old man without responding. The man's strands of hair were thick like the ropes in gym class and his gray, forest-dweller beard was beaten to shit, but something about the face underneath was surprisingly healthy. Years of living rough hadn't taken a toll the way they were supposed to. Peter thought that even if they had both rushed the man from the beginning, he still would have fended them off easily. He walked over and dropped the phones, tracker, and firestarter at the man's filthy boots.

"Okay, turn back around now. Walk back over to your friend and kneel by his side. Cover his eyes and go ahead and close yours. Count to one-hundred," said the old man.

"Fuck that! Don't do what he says," said Branch with considerably less gusto than he had before.

"It's already over," said Peter.

The old man vanished and took the heat of the woods with him. A cool breeze came in as Peter was approaching ninety on his count. He knew he'd never see the stranger again.

4

Branch's leg was broken, that much was clear. He likely had a concussion or in any case, a broken nose and two black eyes. As Peter was trying to lift him to his feet, Branch was spewing some John Wayne type plan to hunt the old man down and get their revenge. He must not have meant it very seriously, because as soon as he took his first step he shut his mouth and kept it shut except when he needed to groan. The odd couple struggled up the hill and had reached the spot where the rifle still lay. Peter suggested they leave it but Branch managed to grunt "expensive" through bloody teeth. Peter reached down to grab the gun and Branch slipped out of his grip and onto his ass. He didn't roll back down the hill but his leg snapped further and he let the forest know. Birds took off from all directions at the scream and perhaps the doe, now safe, smiled.

They slowly moved on what Peter believed was the path back. Once in a while Branch would raise his arm to point what direction to go. Branch had drunk all of their remaining water by the time they were at the location of his missed shot. Peter didn't think he could hold him up much longer so they both agreed to take a break without verbalizing it. Peter sat next to a tree while Branch held himself up with it. He felt that if he sat down he wouldn't be able to get back up.

"Can I ask you a question not related to any of this?"

"Not... now.... please," said Branch through heavy breaths.

After ten minutes of painful rest, Branch pointed to his right. Peter was sure they should go left but couldn't get the words out when he tried to say them. The thought kept building up on top of itself in

his head and when they were a substantial distance away, they exploded out.

“I think we should have maybe gone left,” said Peter.

“Who... is... the one that’s...done this before?”

Maybe he was right. Peter knew jackshit afterall. And so it wasn’t for another twenty minutes that he was sure Branch had been wrong.

“Do you know...which way...we’re going?” said Branch.

“Are you serious, man? I told you a while back I thought we were going the wrong way,” said Peter.

“Hold on. Let me... get my bearings. I got hit... in the face...with a rifle,” said Branch. This time he did ask Peter to put him on the ground. It didn’t matter how much it would hurt getting back up. He couldn’t stand any longer.

“Okay, man. I don’t know how you’re going to like this, but I think I can at least get back to the spot we were just at. We’ve made a long, messy trail on the ground. What do you say I run back there and then try to make my way back to the parking lot? I’ll use your knife to cut off pieces of my vest. I’ll tie them to trees and follow them all the way back to you once we’ve got the right way to go.”

“Fine. Just let me keep the rifle in case the old man comes back,” said Branch.

“Before I go, can I just ask you one thing?”

“I can’t stop you,” said Branch, his eyelids bouncing and then closing gradually.

“Well, the thing is, I’m going to ask Tina’s mom for permission to propose, but I also wanted to ask you too.”

“Why me?”

“Ever since their dad passed, I figured you’re the man of the house,” said Peter.

Branch’s cheeks livened with pride and his face morphed into the shape you might take to pose for a painting. His mouth then suddenly fell back into a frown. He nodded like the old man had nodded earlier.

“I hate to say it, but you don’t have my permission,” said Branch.

“And why not?” said Peter, almost yelling.

“It’s not your fault, really. Just Tina needs a different type of man is all,” said Branch.

“What? Why are you saying this? Why wouldn’t you just lie to me... until...until we got out of here? Why did you have to say that?”

“I’m an honest man, Peter,” said Branch.

Peter considered stepping on Branch’s head and smashing it into the tree it was resting on but Branch was already so hurt. Peter shook his head violently and took off into the woods without saying anything else. He found his way back to the location of their first shot and looked back at his trail of neon ties on the trees and bushes along the way. If he could just make it to the parking lot, this would all be over soon.

Just when he was out of neon to cut and just when he was unsure of where the fuck he was, something wonderful happened. He stepped in shit. Luckily, it was his shit which meant they were close enough to where they entered. Peter could go get Branch and get him out of the woods just before nightfall. But, should he? After everything they had been through, Branch still had the audacity to tell Peter he wasn’t good enough. What kind of person does that? If... If Peter went back and moved the neon markers the other direction... No. He shouldn’t. Branch wouldn’t make it through the night, exposed in the cold without food and water and blankets. *Branch wouldn’t make it through the night, exposed in the cold without food and water and blankets.*

Peter went back and found Branch asleep. There was no protest as he started moving the neon markers the other direction. When he got back to his makeshift toilet, Peter realized he was only still guessing the correct way out. He thought it was straight forward but couldn't know for sure. If he reached the parking lot now, he might see someone and be forced to explain the story right away. They'd send a search party in and someone could still accidentally find Branch. He'd only go halfway then just to make sure he knew the right direction. Peter stood out from behind the tree and didn't hear the shot until after it hit him.

As Peter lay choking up his blood, two hunters approached his body.

"Oh, shit, Billy, you really got him bad!"

"It's not my fault! Why wasn't he wearing a fucking vest? Huh, son? Why in the world weren't you wearing a fucking.... Fuck! What are we going to do?"

"We gotta call it man. He's dying! No one's going to blame you! It's the guy's own fault!"

"Oh God, alright then! I'll apply pressure to the wound. You make the call."

Peter tried to think of Tina. The day they first met. The first time they kissed. Their first time under the covers together, playing only the way adults acting like children can play. But instead all he could think was -

*I hope they never find Branch.*

The End.