

Devil's Mark

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“To learn what we fear is to learn who we are. Horror defies our boundaries and illuminates our souls.”

— Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

The Little Key

Video Transcript, Voice Unknown, 02/04/2013

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I didn't start taking Bobby seriously until he blew his own brains out. Can you imagine that? It's just that he talked so much and all the time. A million get poor quick schemes. A million pieces of inside info. But then sometimes he'd surprise you. He'd say "*I know a guy who can get us some machine guns*" and I'd say "*no you don't but we don't need machine guns anyway.*" Two weeks later he brings me into his bedroom and he's got an AK under his mattress. I say "*you're going to be masturbating on the bed like an invalid and accidentally set that thing off.*" He just laughed. Oh! And the guy he got the AK from, he invited him to go to the movies with us. We go see fucking *Avatar*. I swear to God. I find out later, that guy, the wannabe arms dealer or whatever, killed himself too. So both the guys I went to see the movie with ended up offing themselves. I'm not saying it was *Avatar*'s fault or anything like that, just kind of freakin' bizarre you know? Sorry, let's get back on track, I'm getting like him, can't shut the fuck up.

Anyway, the brass tacks is this- Bobby hated the Catholic church. We went to Catholic school so maybe that had something to do with it. You see he hated school, even more than most kids do. We'd be in church and there was this sign that said "IHS" above the priest. I don't know what IHS actually means, probably Latin or something, but Bobby used to point at it and say it stood for "I hate school." I guess it doesn't sound that funny now, but when you were kids... okay, moving on. By the time we were adults he'd always be whining about the Catholic leadership. Talking about how all their churches have gold in them and all these expensive statues and paintings and, at the same time, most of their followers are poor- starving actually. He says it enough that one day we're sitting there watching cartoons or something and his eyes get real wide, and he says he's got it. The perfect plan. Instead of robbing a bank, you rob the church. There's no security, no cameras, the doors are almost always open. We'd break into [REDACTED] Cathedral and steal a bunch of holy shit, oh sorry, stuff, and he could "get a guy" to

move it. I told him no. I've done a lot of bad stuff in my life but when you mess with God you're asking for trouble. He says "Fuck that. If God is real, how come there's babies dying, and famine, and disease. And don't get me started on politics, the bad guys always win." Alright, he made a few points, but I don't know, man, I was still too afraid of Jesus etc. I never liked those pictures of him on the cross. Didn't they throw stones off some lady too? I don't know. The church scared the shit out of me.

Then Bobby dies. He was always a little wacky, but I never thought he'd do it. Despite the fact he was a low life piece of crap he was my best friend in the whole world and I loved him dearly. Other things started going wrong in my life, mostly my own fault, okay, entirely my own fault, and I was pretty near rock bottom. I needed money badly and I started thinking about [REDACTED] and I started thinking Bobby was right. Someone should empty it out. I used to walk by it and fantasize about how much money I could make lifting a statue or something. The issue was, I didn't know how I'd move the stuff. I didn't have the same network of aspiring criminals in my phonebook that Bobby did. An idea pops in my head. I'll call Bobby's younger brother, he's a scumbag too, God bless him, and he might know someone. He says he does. I don't even have time to fucking verify if this is true. I just decided I'm going to rob the place.

So, I stole some shit. Hence why I'm wearing the mask and I've got the voice changer right now. I'm embarrassed to put on this get-up but I'm not going down for this, especially when I'm doing you all a favor. Oh, man, I'm getting spooked out just thinking about this next part.

I'm in [REDACTED] and I'm hiding up on the balcony just praying the priest doesn't come up there to dust or something. I hadn't ate nothing or drank nothing for hours to make sure I didn't have to use the restroom when I was up there. Things were going pretty much according to plan and I already had a few pieces of gold in my bag. Candle holders and some dish thing, like a sacred ash tray. I don't need anyone special to move those, just go to any pawn shop.

What I really wanted was a painting or a statue and there was a statue of the Virgin Mary I had my eyes on. It was the size of a midg-- a little person, and probably heavy as shit but I figured I could lift it. The strange thing is they kept it in a cabinet, but the little key for the cabinet was left right in the lock. Anyone could have stolen it.

Now, if you're wondering what type of religious person would pay money for stolen goods- the answer is a lot of them. I don't really want to get into the nitty-gritty 'cause I'm not exactly a Rhodes Scholar, but if you think about it, there's thousands of fucking years of Chrisitans stealing shit from one another. Catholic thieves- a double-moron as they call it.

I'm getting nervous, I think. That's why I keep beating around the bush. Fuck it. Just say it. When I was about to make my move, a guy walked into the church. I ducked down and checked my phone. It was 1:50 in the morning. Now, I don't want to lift my head too far 'cause the guy will clock me out of his fucking peripherals, but I can see he's a big bastard and he's got this long black coat on. He sat down to pray so I dropped back down. I figured even if he was in a rough spot, how long could he pray for? "Hey, Holy Father, I cheated on my wife with the cleaning lady at my work" or whatever and then he'd move on. That'd be five minutes tops but

five minutes passed and he was still down there. Then I heard these short bursts of grating, loud, squeaking sounds. The fucking guy is pushing the pew in front of him across the ground. Finally the thing tips over onto the one in front of it. They didn't fall like dominos or nothing 'cause they're locked into the ground, but I was still freaking out. Then, I didn't hear nothing for, I don't know, fifteen or thirty seconds, it was hard to tell, but when I looked down he was still just sitting there. A minute later I checked again and he's standing up stiff as a board. He slowly took his jacket off, and as I'm going back down I see underneath. At first I thought he was wearing red nursing scrubs. Tough night at the hospital. I look back and it's not scrubs at all. He's completely covered in blood.

At this point I didn't care about the statue, I just wanted to get out of there. I've been in a few fights in my life but there's no fucking way I could have taken this guy, whether he was injured or not. I decided to creep out of there- then he started screaming. Now, I don't really know how to say this, other than that I can't remember shit usually. Like, I got a nephew I call Davey and his real name is Drew I think. But I remember every single thing the guy shouted. To be honest with you, that's all I can think about. This isn't me talking, remember. Okay. He said this-

"I know their names! I know Bael. I know Agares! I know Vassago! They call me and you let them! I know Saminga! I know Marbas! I know Valefor! Should I continue? I know them all, even Prufkas. And when I ask you for help you say nothing. Now, look at what I've done. This is just as much your fault as it is mine."

Okay, back to me. That's what he said and the room was fucking shaking when he said it. I pissed in my pants, yeah, so what. Don't Google those names, man, I'm telling you. Ehkkk. Sorry. They're bad news. <Inaudible> <Coughing Noises>. Doing the voice hurt my throat I think. The guy stopped for a second and then continued, he says-

"Thomas Johnson's blood is on your hands. Janet Johnson's blood is on your hands."

<Coughing Noises> Then the guy stopped for a second and started crying. He sounded almost like a human being again when he said this, he goes-

"Jodie Johnson's blood is on your hands."

Excuse me. <Inaudible Noises> I need to get some water.

I don't think you'll need to Google those names. I checked the paper for the next few weeks and saw that you had that Johnson family as "missing". Trust me they ain't missing. I don't know where they are, but they're- Jeess, I hate to say it but you know as well as I do what happened to them.

My fucking throat is killing me.

I wasn't going to even say nothing, and not even 'cause I was stealing shit. In all honesty, I'm afraid of that psycho in the church. The reason I'm making this video is because I see you've got the girl's teacher as a suspect. That guy might be a fuckin' weirdo creep but he's not responsible for this. That guy is a little wimp. You should see the size of the real guy, the maniac. I guess you could say I've had a crisis of conscience or something, but you need to listen to me.

When I looked down at him one last time he was still screaming and then he stopped on a

dime. He turned and looked up at me and into my eyes.

“*Thief!*” he said.

When I tell you I hauled ass from behind that wall... Then I heard him below storming towards the steps. I grabbed the statue of Mary and, forgive me God, but I threw the thing through the bottom of the stained glass window in front of me. I crawl out onto the roof and shimmy down the building like a koala bear. I ruined my good jeans, I sliced my arm up, everything. I looked back up and the guy is in the window looking down at me. I was sure my heart was going to give out. That was the scariest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. He was so fucking angry, one of the vessels in his eye burst and he still kept it open. You ever see that in your life? I found my feet and then, as I started running, I saw the statue of Mary on the grass. Not a single chip out of it, hand to God, so I grabbed that too. Not even to sell it, but out of protection. Okay, so I sold it, but at that moment it was for protection.

Listen! What I’m trying to say to you is I’ve got a perfect description of the guy. Hair color, eye color, approximate height everything. I...

What was I saying? The guy..

What guy?

The guy at the church, stupid.

<Inaudible Noises> <One Minute Interval>

I don’t feel so good. <One Minute Interval>

I know <One Minute Interval>

I know their names. I know Bael. I know Agares. I know Vassago. I know Saminga, Marbas, and Valefor. I know them all, even Prufkas. You will meet them soon.

End of tape.

Refresh

The pitch was a "technology free getaway". A twisted, neo-luddite fever-dream. A week away from the electronic restraints of the modern world. The resort and the surrounding area were breathtaking and, yes, the trip was entirely paid for by her work, but Alison still didn’t want to go. She didn’t like that her boss was dictating how she would spend her holiday. It was like someone chewing your steak for you. She sat on the plane bickering with him internally. At some point in the argument she fell asleep.

Unable to connect.

Just before landing her neck snapped downwards and the whiplash woke her up. A puddle of drool had formed all the way down on her knee. She grabbed a rumpled cocktail napkin from the mesh net in front of her and mopped it up. Before collecting her bag from the overhead bin, she scrolled to find the airport WiFi. No dice. When she got to the baggage return,

there was no service there either. She grabbed her suitcase and hurried outside.

The taxi stand felt like the rotating dish at the center of a microwave. It was over one-hundred degrees out and she was sure she would melt if she didn't get in a cab soon. With this in mind, she cut in front of some lanky bastard in front of her. There was no verbal protest from her victim but she could see his long, defeated body shrug in the distance as the car pulled away. Alison laughed at how rude she had just been and then accidentally rested her hand on the metal of the seat belt next to her. It was hot enough to brand her. She yelped.

"That wake you up," said the driver, smiling. The cab rumbled towards her hotel through dilapidated buildings and makeshift huts that crouched inside of magnificent wildlife. Everything lay at the feet of the mountains in the distance, two gorgeous green gods that sat casting judgment.

"This may have been my screen saver at one point," she said.

"You need ATM?"

"No, I was just saying... Hey, do you take card?"

"No. We go ATM," said the driver pulling next to a gas station that didn't have any pumps. "You go there no one bother you." There was a picture of the driver and Scooby-Doo taped to the sun visor above his steering wheel. "That's Scooby-Doo," he said, poking it lightly. "I also Scooby-Doo."

Despite the innocent photo, the fact that he made a point to say that the station was safe made her more nervous. Who would even know if someone came and stuffed her into the back of a van? She took her cell phone out and pretended to make a call. After she grabbed the money from the slot, she rushed back to the cab.

"You get service here?"

"Oh, I guess so," she said. "Do you?"

"Yeah, I do. But I live here. I'm just surprise you get it," he said. "You need WiFi, you go to cafe this way okay? Good WiFi I show you."

"That's good. The place I'm going to doesn't allow any phones or computers," she said.

"I know. You go crazy place. Rich people pretend to be poor."

They passed the cafe and kept going through winding roads lined with slumping trees until the hulking structure appeared in the distance above them. She found it difficult to stay angry in the understory of this analog cathedral of a hotel. It was everything the website had described and more, jetting out and sloping implausibly over a diamond ocean. The taxi rumbled to a stop as an employee from the hotel proceeded to her car door. At that moment, an identical cab pulled up next to them and a familiar sickness spread in her stomach. She had only one guess as to who the passenger was.

A pale, elongated leg uncoiled from the backseat. The man from the taxi stand.

"Hello. Sorry about earlier," she said, exiting the cab.

"You know, I think I just became lifelong friends with the driver," he said, laughing heartily. "So, actually, I should thank you."

"Follow me please," said the worker. They trailed the luggage through automatic doors

into the lobby. It was good to see that the "technology free" gimmick didn't mean there wasn't any electricity all together. A banner behind a grand wooden counter read "Reconnect and Refresh". She considered smuggling her phone in by way of an unholy place, but decided not to at the last moment. If only she had thought of bringing a dummy cell phone to check in. *"No laptops, phones, pads, or pods!"* warned a laminated decree on the counter. The clerk, a professional stick-up artist, shook her down for any "smart" paraphernalia. She handed the thug her devices and that was that.

The employee that brought their suitcases in instructed her to follow him up the stairs to her room, each of his fingers was gripped tightly around the handles as his muscles rippled through his sleeves. More of a bag man than boy, she couldn't help but stare as he moved in front of her down the third floor hallway. The trail was longer than expected and only stopped when there was no carpet left to walk. Her room, the last one in the building, sat perpendicular to the other doors and faced back out at them. He opened the door and brought her bags inside as she idled in the door frame.

"This is your room, mam. Welcome to your getaway," he said. "Mam? This is your room."

She felt the blood return to her body, if only out of embarrassment, and entered the threshold.

"Thank you," she said, walking past him, managing not to fall.

"There is no phone, so in case of emergency please find the cord next to the sink in your wash room. My name is Jason, and if you need anything I'll be around." He closed the door behind him as she realized she had not offered a tip. She scurried to the peep hole and peered out. There he stood, still, sideways. Her hand reached for the knob but then she paused. During her moment of hesitation, she watched him as he threw a punch at the wall, stopping right before his knuckle met plaster. With a huff, he abruptly turned his huge frame and continued out of sight.

Confused, she scanned the remainder of her suite and caught the sunlight trying to fight its way through the drapes. She tugged excitedly at the pull-string to unwrap a balcony drenched in color.

2

Alison escaped a treacherous nap and knew that she better find a bar before a headache set in. Her target was down on the first floor past the front desk and at the rear of the resort.. The patio beckoned phoneless guests with fairy lights streaming across the railings. They reflected faintly on the wine bottles mounted behind the bartender. As the matron moved under them, the evening was gradually ringing blue out of the sky, leaving a pink orange canvas in its place. The only people present were grouped together around a table directly in the center of the deck. Alison held them steady in her peripherals as she found a spot on a stool far away from them. Before she could order...

"Join us, wouldn't you?"

The words rang out from a bulbous face in the middle of the small gathering. His flesh was tomato, but not the ruddy tomato red reared from fertile soil and a gardener's care. It was the red of a mistake that struggled itself through into being in the shade, forgotten. She reluctantly walked over to them and as she drew nearer she could see the blood in his cheeks swirling in blotches of white, glowing like a lava lamp. To the left of the rotting vegetable was a gorgeous woman in her early 30s. The neckline of her dress plunged and dared. To his right sat two men, one of which was her lanky, star-crossed acquaintance from the plane. To his left, completing the semi-circle, a considerably more fashionable man around the same age. As they introduced themselves she blurted-

"Well, I already know him. I stole his cab earlier."

"So that's you!" said the well-dressed man named Lucas.

"I was going to let you remain anonymous," said Ben, the victim of her earlier abuse.

They all seemed nice enough, except maybe for the older lava lamp man, Ralph. His wife Ashley was pleasant enough (or drunk) but there was something unsettling about him. It was as if two lit dynamite sticks sat in the folds of his neck. Ralph got up to pull out a chair for her and complimented himself for being a gentleman. Alison sat down next to Ashley and realized she was stuck with these people until it was socially acceptable to leave. Luckily the time moved quickly and empty glasses materialized in front of them each time the hand on the clock moved.

During a lull in the conversation in which Ralph and Lucas spoke in excruciating nuance about the landscaping around their houses, it became evident that the night was approaching its conclusion. Ben mimed blowing his brains out as Ralph entered a diatribe about one of his favorite plants. It really sounded like he wanted to fuck the thing. The girls laughed and it caught the attention of the other two men. Ralph turned in an effort to confront Ben but was interrupted by the bartender coming over to retrieve some of the glasses. She carried a manufactured smile along with her.

"You have such lovely eyes," said Ralph as his head slithered towards her.

"Oh, I know. Aren't they perfect," said the bartender, who had met a thousand Ralphs. She walked away, and the men watched each leg as they moved.

"That might be the lady for you, Lucas," said Ralph.

"Engaged, actually. So I'll regretfully have to decline," said Lucas.

"Ah, a man of high morals, well that's a shame," said Ralph.

"Well what about you Ben?" said Ashley.

"Oh, no thank you I'd probably faint if I tried to talk to her," said Ben, the unofficial balancing beam of the group, a teddy bear with most of the stuffing removed.

"I could put in a word for you, Ben," said Ralph.

"Oh, yeah. Ralph has had three wives. He must be an expert at talking to women by now," said Ashley as the conversation teetered.

"Yeah I don't even know this one's name," said Ralph, pointing at Ashley.

"Hey, hunny, do you think you could put in a word for me with the bellboy?" said Ashley.

"What I'm not enough for you?" said Ralph in a decidedly different tone.

"Well, you're going to be useless tonight," said Ashley.

"That's enough!" said Ralph, his fist slamming the table.

The briefest of silent moments was then broken by his glass rolling off the edge and smashing against the ground. Lucas and Ben stood up, hands stretched out trying to calm Ralph like dog catchers trying to reel in a hound. Ben stepped closer and received a shove in the chest which caused him to trip over an errant chair.

"I'm fine!" Ralph shouted as he stormed away. Lucas followed him into the resort.

"I think I'll call it a night," said Ben, almost laughing.

Ashley invited him to stay with them but he said it'd probably be better if he went to bed. The bartender casually walked towards the shards of glass with a broom, brushing past Alison and Ashley without sound. Lifeless, they watched the bartender clean until Ashley suggested that they themselves exit. It didn't seem to make much sense to go where Ralph was, so the two of them wandered through the hallways and stairs to the other side of the hotel.

When they reached Alison's room she turned and whispered to Ashley to be quiet. Ashley asked why they needed to be quiet. The two of them burst into laughter and raided the mini-fridge. After comments from both about how much they missed their phones, Ashley told her that she thought she had seen one in the bathroom. She stood up and then returned with a bar of soap pretending to make phone calls with it. They knew it shouldn't be that funny but it didn't matter. They held their stomachs as they bent over, hilarious. Each took turns arguing with a make-believe person on the other end of the soap before resorting to mimicking taking pictures of themselves with it.

"Does he do that a lot?" said Alison.

"What?"

"Ralph. Does he act like that a lot?"

"Oh, yeah. He's a piece of shit," said Ashley laying back on top of the bed

"Is it ever worse than that?"

Ashley flopped back her dress to reveal bruises on her thigh.

"Does he hit you?"

Ashley laid comatose.

"Ashley?"

At first, Alison thought she was pretending to be asleep but then came the snores. Alison rested her head for just a moment and then they were both out.

3

When she woke, Ashley was gone but the inevitable headache was still there. She looked around her scattered room and realized she didn't have anything to do. No TV, computer, phone, radio, record player, or even telegraph. The thought of just lying there made her fidget. She kicked the sheets as if they were the ones to blame and then rose and cleaned herself up. It was best to head down to the lobby to find some form of distraction.

Jason, the muscular helper from the day before, was standing near the front desk and told her that her friends were already back on the patio. Embarrassment struck as it was obvious she had been linked to the riff-raff from the night before. She thanked him and continued to the back. There, with a Bloody Mary a piece, was Ralph, Lucas, and Ashley.

"There she is," said Ashley, no worse for wear.

"Just a little something to take the edge off," said Lucas, with not a single hair out of place on his head.

Ralph said nothing.

"No Ben?"

"Probably still sleeping. Don't think he can handle his alcohol," said Ralph taking a sip of his drink. It wasn't clear if the irony was intentional and everyone giggled disconcertedly. She didn't look forward to spending the day with any of them, especially Ralph, the crimson slob wife-beater maniac, but inhibitions were hard to maintain once her own Bloody Mary arrived. Ashley interrupted asking the waitress to turn on some music but her request was denied.

Alison prayed Ben might walk through the doors and restore some semblance of normalcy. Before long they were back in the momentum of the night before. Ashley asked her to go to the ladies' room with her. On the way back to the table she suggested to Ashley that they go find Ben.

"Shit you like Ben? Girl, I figured you for Lucas," said Ashley.

She didn't like Ben, at least not in that way. She just wanted him there. In lieu of explaining that, she went on letting Ashley assume it was sexual attraction. They asked for Ben's room number at the front desk. The staff refused to give it to them so Ashley told them she had left her peanut allergy medication in his room and needed it immediately. The whole thing was such a ridiculous lie it was hard not to break cover. They wouldn't give them his room number but did offer to send someone up to the room to check on him. The clerk tasked Jason with the recognizance mission, just as they tasked him with every other chore. He returned to report Ben's door was open and that his bags were in there but that he wasn't.

"He must have gone to the beach or into town," said Jason.

It made sense that he didn't want to be stuck at that back table all weekend. Alison was ripe with envy and, Ben-less, the duo returned to the revelry. The sun-soaked table sat waiting to go nowhere. Music rose from somewhere below, perhaps one of the local's cabins. Instead of melody there was a static, thumping beat and it was tiring, awfully tiring.

"I want to eat," said Alison before standing up and journeying to her room.

The alcohol and the dizzying hallway handicapped her attempt at putting the key into its hole. After a struggle she managed to get inside and plop on her bed. Some time later she heard a hand turning the knob in the hallway. Whoever it was couldn't get the door open.

"What time is it?" said Alison.

The hand at the door began knocking. She looked over at the curtains and could tell there was no light on the other side of them. Alison went silent hoping her visitor would go away. The hand alternated between knocks and twists.

“Let me in please,” said a slurred voice.

Alison recognized it despite its impediment. She crept over to the peephole. It was Lucas, his hair now disheveled. He had vomit on the lapel of his shirt. She slowly retreated from the door and decided to wait him out, but he didn't stop. If she told him to leave it might only confirm that she was awake and inside. She instinctively reached for her phone over and over again, constantly reminded it wasn't there. There was the emergency cord in the bathroom but she wanted to avoid causing a scene.

Time was an increasingly complex issue. There was a clock on the wall but she had just noticed it. When did this start? When would it end? How was it possible that he hadn't given up yet? Finally, the noise changed. There were two voices coming from behind the door arguing. She inched again towards the hole and looked out. Lucas stood facing a frame larger than his as they both violently motioned towards each other. Jason was telling Lucas to go to his room. To stop making so much noise. To leave her alone.

Lucas left after a prolonged debate. Jason stayed for a moment, only quickly glancing at Alison's door before following Lucas into the void. The immediate threat was over but her fear still lingered- the fear of not knowing if Lucas would come back, of not knowing what to do for the rest of the night, of not having contact with anyone other than a group of drunk psychopaths. It was too late to go anywhere. It was too scary to sleep. She sat rocking back and forth next to the cord in the bathroom until the panic passed. The next time she opened her eyes she was staring at the bottom of her toilet.

4

Despite the events of the last two days, Alison was determined to make something of the vacation. There was a boat tour advertised in a hotel pamphlet that looked like it could fulfill her desire for change. According to the schedule, a guide would be leaving with a group from the lobby in twenty minutes. After hurrying to get herself together, she made it to the shuttle just in time. She walked up the rusted steps into the vehicle. The only people seated inside were Ralph and Ashley.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” said Ralph and his abysmal mouth.

“No sign of anyone else?” said Alison.

“Nope! I think we're scaring them off,” said Ashley.

The van's engine boomed and the vehicle bounced back and forth down a rough road into the wilderness. They zoomed through the primal tunnel of trees then shot out the other side onto a vanishing beach trail. Ten minutes later, they reached their destination.

The water remained clear and motionless as what was to be their boat swayed gently on top of it. Their guide opened the van's doors and instructed them to get out. They all walked on a sandy dock to the entrance of the dingy. The guide shouted inside and rang a bell that was dangling from its roof.

No one answered. Their guide suggested that the captain may be out and that they should come back later. Ralph suggested the guide take them out on the boat but he rightly refused. With

this, Ralph redirected his anger at Ashley, blaming her for making him come on the excursion in the first place. The driver, knowing his audience, suggested that he could bring them into town to find a bar.

“So, there’s really been no word from Ben? Or Lucas?” said Alison.

“No word from either. I thought we already established that,” said Ralph, now having two conversations at once. He agreed to let the driver take them to town.

“I’m going to just walk the beach for a while, you guys go ahead,” said Alison.

“Are you fucking nuts? You don’t want to be walking alone in this country,” said Ralph.

“There are more dangerous things than foreigners,” said Alison.

“Suit yourself,” said Ralph. He and Ashley climbed back into the shuttle. The driver didn’t care enough to offer his input. They sputtered off and soon the only thing left was the fumes. Alison spent the day swimming with storybook creatures under the alien sun, not another soul for miles. Not another soul for the rest of the day. The air above the water was a lover’s warm breath and when she closed her eyes she could feel it comforting her, letting her know it was by her side as she rested. When she had her fill, she ventured back to the hotel on foot through the rocky roads and the shaft of trees.

The resort was a sight for sore toes but the lobby was empty aside from the woman at the front desk. Alison asked her if she had seen the couple that she was with earlier. She hadn’t. After a trip to her room and a shower, Alison came back and went out to the patio. One drink turned into three as that was the way things went out there, but this time she was at the table alone. She repeatedly turned to the patio doors and no one was coming through them. Courage soon arrived and she walked into the lobby to ask for Jason.

“Jason isn’t working today,” said the woman behind the desk.

“Poor guy finally got a day off huh?”

The clerk didn’t respond.

“Can you send someone up to my friend Ben’s room to check on him?”

“Ben is gone.”

“Ralph and Ashley?”

“No Ralph and Ashley either.”

“Lucas?”

“Mam, they’re not here.”

She asked the clerk if she could have her phone back but the woman refused. Alison spent the rest of the night spinning out of control, unassisted. In the morning she repeated her questions and received the same responses. She journeyed into town and found no one. She checked the patio when she returned and it was empty aside from the bartender and her glimmering bottles. She spun again. She demanded her phone but it wasn’t given to her.

The next day she decided, with two nights remaining on her stay, that she would check out early and pay for her own flight home. The clerk begrudgingly obliged to return her belongings and called Alison a taxi. Because she still had no service and couldn’t check the flight schedules, Alison asked the driver to drop her off at the internet cafe her first driver had

recommended a few days before.

The cafe was in a group of stores that looked like they had fallen together like *Tetris* blocks. There was a jewelry store, a butcher shop, and a few other businesses that she couldn't make out. The bottom middle store had a big sign outfront that had "WiFi" sandwiched between drawings of fireworks and a giraffe for whatever reason. The only lights radiating from inside were those of the computer screens, decade old desktops nearly all taken except for one with a recently extinguished cigarette on the seat. It was so hot out she thought the butt might reignite. Avoiding the dirty seat, she stood with her luggage halfway in the doorway and recklessly connected to the WiFi, begging the green mountain gods in the distance to protect her data. She booked her flight in a panic. It left in one hour. No cabs were driving by and so she tried to hail local cars down to no avail. She asked the person at the desk in the internet cafe to call her a cab, but the person kept saying "no english" and shaking their head. None of the clientele offered to help. None of them even turned to look.

"Scooby!" she blurted. "Do you know the Scooby-Doo guy?"

The person behind the counter thought for a moment and then nodded their head, conceding that they did indeed know Scooby. When he showed up a few minutes later, Alison was so excited that she hugged him.

"I know, I know," he said. "I'm nice guy."

Scooby dropped her off at the vacant airport. She would make her flight with plenty of time to spare after all. When she got through the security line with ease, she broke down crying. It felt so good to be on the way out. She checked the WiFi but her phone still wasn't connecting and then the dim lights above her then went completely out.

We're sorry to announce that we are experiencing a power outage. Flights may be delayed as a result. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience.

Rain started to come down outside, at first a spittle, and then a downpour. The water streaked down the glass so furiously she couldn't see out of it any longer. She tugged futilely on her phone screen in an attempt to refresh it.

We should have another update shortly, but if possible, we recommend that you try and find somewhere else to stay tonight. It's likely all flights will be canceled.

Alison yanked her phone screen down repeatedly. She kept hitting the refresh button, but nothing was happening. There was no one else at her gate, but she could swear she heard the seats next to her creaking. She turned her phone light to try and pinpoint where the noise was coming from but there was no one there. Footsteps started behind her, at first softly, discreetly and then pounding, stomping. She looked back to her screen and hit refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

The End

The Unmarked Grave of a Yellow Blazer

1

The scattered pattern on the ceiling revealed the silhouette of a fish. I fought my blurring eyes but eventually I blinked and it managed to get away from me. I lay there tracking different creatures to pass the time, hoping they'd stay, hoping I wouldn't wake her up. It wasn't her sleep that I was worried about but rather the repercussions of her not being asleep. Once she was awake she would talk until she lost her voice, saying things like "this is what I'm getting for my next tattoo." Then she would show me a picture of Sylvester from *Looney Tunes* or a flower she passed on the street. Once she showed me an ampersand and said she was getting that inked on her leg. I had seen every inch of her multiple times and yet I didn't even know where the first tattoo was.

Despite its diminutive size, her leg was heavy and pinned me against the wall. The fish on the ceiling was almost back on my line when I woke again. Any attempt at lifting her leg through telekinesis proved fruitless. I then transitioned to the more traditional method of subtly shifting my body in an attempt to clue in the motor functions of hers. Her sparing movements never resulted in the full roll required for my freedom. I resorted to a forceful push which brought her back into full consciousness.

"I'm cold. Where are your blankets? I thought a place like this would have heat."

I pretended to be asleep but she shook my shoulder powerfully, not affording me the same courtesy I had given her. Even with my eyes open, I refused to speak and hoped she would follow my lead. She didn't. She got out of bed to retrieve my blanket from the floor. I rolled to face the other direction, only turning back when I heard her rummaging through my belongings. She happened upon a box of clothes that I had packed up but not put away. One by one she took each item from the box and began slipping them over her legs and shoulders. In a challenge to herself she struggled to get the last few articles on. Like an Inuit woman, she waddled through the room with the layers covering her. Finally, she reached for the last piece in the container and pulled out a woman's blazer.

"Whose is this?"

"No one's. Put all that stuff back, you're driving me crazy."

"My apartment is warmer. I'm leaving," she said.

"Thank God."

When she stormed out I felt sleep tremble inside of me. It was still in reach for an instant, but then, like her, it was gone. I couldn't stop thinking about the yellow blazer and how it sat slumped on the floor like a discarded doll. It was only ever officially worn once, by an ex-girlfriend who I hadn't seen in a long time. On the one night she wore it, a homeless man called her SpongeBob and that was that. Afterwards, I would periodically wear it around the house to tease her. She would chase me and tug at me and eventually a button was the casualty of our playful scuffles. The cavernous hole where the button once was called out to me, shrieking. If I was not careful I would fall forever into that siren's pit.

With gloves on, holding the blazer away from my body like radioactive waste, I walked down to a dumpster behind a grocery store but couldn't bring myself to throw it in. Next to the garbage was a clothes donation bin, so I opened the latch and released the yellow coat inside of it.

2

The coffee made me sick. It was all I had put in my body that morning and because the person I was meeting was running late, I kept anxiously drinking more. At first I was just checking the time on my phone and staring out the window, but then I found something else to hold my attention. A woman in

her early twenties had entered the shop wearing tight maroon leggings and when she bent over the Lululemon logo on the band of her pants blinked incandescently like a transmitter. Her ass wasn't the gift of genetics, some survival of the thickest selective breeding, but rather one molded through hard, long hours at the gym. I couldn't not say hello. I would do what I always did- ask her if she lived in my building. I knew she didn't, but it would let her know that I lived in one of the most sought after and expensive high rises in the city. The conversation would continue from there.

I checked my phone and email one more time. The person who had set up the meeting, the person who had gone out of their way to headhunt me and try to poach me from my company, had either forgotten to come or was full of shit in the first place. *Oh, well. God bless the broken road that led me to this girl's ass* or so I thought. When I was about to make my move, I detected a vibration on the sidewalk outside as something darted past the window of the shop. Undoubtedly it was a yellow blazer. The chances it was *the* blazer were small, but how could I be sure? I shot out of the coffee shop and pursued.

Her long legs moved quickly and I had to break a sweat to keep up. I was cognizant that there was more than one yellow blazer in the universe but this one looked familiar. I could not tell if it was missing one button but was compelled to find out. Yes, even if it had once been absent one button, the new owner could have mended a replacement, but I thought if I got close enough I would instinctively know if this was the authentic article.

Though the woman was unaware she was being followed, she moved as if she knew. Perhaps this is the way all beautiful women glide, and in any case, the brisk pace added to the excitement. Before I knew it we had both turned into a used book store. Paperback novels were strewn everywhere with a variable crowd of freaks and crumpled derelicts flipping through them, women with canes and nubbs for knees, men blowing waste into handkerchiefs that had been in their pockets since Aldrin landed on the moon. It was difficult to remain inconspicuous because, aside from possibly the woman in the yellow blazer, I was the best looking person inside. I couldn't be sure exactly how attractive she was until I saw her face of course, but I knew I was in for a treat. She stayed at the front of the store looking at the books under the glass front counter. I imagined they put them under there so that their clientele couldn't muddy and desecrate them with their unwashed fingers. As she bent over to examine one, the blazer spread backwards as if to gloat that all of its buttons were securely in place. Sewing a button back on would be the reasonable thing to do. It didn't mean anything. What did strike me as strange at that moment however, was that a seemingly well-to-do woman had received a women's blazer from some sort of donation group. Maybe she was masquerading in a different socio-economic bracket. The octogenarian behind the register asked her if she was interested in buying anything, and in a state of embarrassment my yellow clad friend promptly exited the store. I dropped whatever book I was pretending to study back into a pile, unsure if I had even been holding it right-side up.

She took off down the street and I shadowed her for blocks on end before we came to another stop. Entering an apartment building, she let the door swing close behind her. I put enough space between us and caught the door in stride with such precision that not even the most paranoid schizophrenic would have been alarmed. She pushed a button for the elevator and, to buy more time, I bent over to imitate tying my shoe. *The elevator is broken.* I don't know how I recognized that but I was so overpoweringly sure. I told her that I "thought" it might be out-of-order.

"Still?" she said without turning.

"Stairs it is, I guess. I suppose the exercise is good for us," I said. People like when you say stupid things like that. That's how I got my corner office.

Step by step she climbed up the stairs as I respectfully tailed her, never glancing up at her legs. Her head turned at one point and she peripherally acknowledged that I was indeed doing my best to be a gentleman, but because of my averted gaze, her face continued to be a blind spot. I prayed that she would stop at any floor before the top one. Thankfully she left me at the penultimate level and I continued higher so as to not disturb her sense of normal. At this point, I had improvised as much as possible. I considered retiring for the day. As I descended the staircase I only just scaled, I stopped and peered onto that second highest floor. Down at the end of the hall a door sat ajar. The pale light coming from the room birthed the contour of an arrow on the carpet. I crept down to see who was inside.

Directly inside the apartment, a bottle of milk lay on its side spilling onto the carpet. I lunged to pick it up and the door closed behind me. I wanted to scold someone for making such a mess but couldn't find the right words or anyone to blame. Then, in the corner of the room I saw her in the chair. She was older than when I last saw her and older still. Aging impossibly before me so that she looked more like her mother might look than how she should. The long legs I had followed were varicose and swollen. The veins were the unforgiving blue of the water you drown in. Her flesh was squash and it grew dense and sank.

"It can't be you," I said.

"Why not?"

"You know why," I said.

"And who else knows?"

"No one. I'm... I'm sorry. Okay?"

I woke up pinned against the wall, chasing fish on the ceiling. The leg pressing me down feels heavier than it should. I don't want to open my eyes and find out who it belongs to.

The End

Blocked

Mark James McDonough

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.

Further Reading

The Lottery - Shirley Jackson

Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? - Joyce Carol Oates

The Crowd - Ray Bradbury

An Occurrence On Owl Creek Bridge - Ambrose Bierce

The Night Face Up - Julio Cortazar

Born of Man and Woman - Richard Matheson

Harrison Bergeron - Kurt Vonnegut

Why, Honey? - Raymond Carver

A Good Man Is Hard to Find - Flannery O'Connor