

Category: Short Story

Summary: A short story about the way men move through the world.

On Sunday morning, there was a knock on his door. The man had been sitting in his easy chair, skimming the back of the paper. The funnies had been disappointing and the world was in shambles. It was nothing new. Upon hearing the noise he freed his hands, setting down his coffee with one last hurried sip. He was mildly excited. Some days the local church service would send out hefty food packages to the older residents in town, and he always chatted up the volunteers. There was nothing better than small talk on a Sunday, no, nothing better.

He shuffled down the stairs, taking note of the old moccasins on his feet. The seams were starting to tear around the edges. Deb was always saying he needed a new pair, but he didn't want to bother breaking them in. Comfort was comfort, after all. He reached for the doorknob and pulled, clamping his hand around the cold brass. Squinting against the mid-morning sunlight, he was met with a teenage girl on the other side.

It was Fred's daughter. She looked small in the doorframe and her eyes were pasted to the gutter near the garage. Her face was dirty, that much he could tell from looking at her. Her clothes looked worse - stained from hem to collar. The only thing getting that mess out was some bleach and a cold wash. But that wasn't what she was here for. It was obvious she needed help.

"You ok?" His voice came out gruffer than he meant. He cleared his throat, muffling her reply.

"Yes!"

It was a strange answer.

"I mean. No, not really."

She had corrected herself too quickly to be up to anything good.

His eyebrows turned down. She was hiding something. He knew from his own kid that this was a mess that would need some heavy scrubbing, but there was nothing he couldn't fix. He decided to press, if only for Fred's sake. He wouldn't want his daughter out alone like this.

"So what can I help you with then, Tressie."

It came out more like a statement than a question. Deb was always telling him he needed to be more patient. It was hard, it was just getting cold outside and he wanted to shut the door. She was blocking the way. Not to mention the dirt on her face and clothes was making him squirm. He wished she would stop staring at the gutter and look him in the eye.

"It's.." She took a while to answer.

"Rob? What's going on down there?"

Better if Deb didn't see this commotion. He'd never hear the end of her meddling.

"Listen, Tress, I really do wanna help, but if there's nothing wrong,"

"There is, it's just," Her eyes dropped down to her shoes.

He could feel his eyes glazing over. Fred must be out on work if Tressie was here all alone. She was a teenager, he supposed. He remembered his days biking through town with friends until the street lights turned on. Fred wasn't the type to helicopter, anyways. Although, looking at her, maybe he'd have to talk with him about his daughter's well being. Too much independence leads to trouble, he thought.

Tressie lifted her head and looked him in the eyes. Jesus, she looked like she was about to start crying right there on his doorstep. Maybe he'd better get Deb, she was always better at these kinds of things. She always said some things took a woman's sensitivity. He didn't understand a lick of that, but if it helped here-

"Mr. Dawson, I think I made a mistake. And now I- Now he's-"

The waterworks were coming, he could feel it. If this was some sort of teenage-breakup-affair, he certainly wasn't the man for the job. He scooted back uncomfortably, his hand on the doorknob loosening. Yes, Deb could handle this much better. He preferred hands-on problems, anyhow.

He molded his face into what he imagined was a very welcoming smile.

"Why don't you come in, Tressie, Deb is home and I'm sure she'd be more than happy to-"

"NO!" Tressie's hand slammed into the side of the doorframe, rattling the keys on the nail inside the house. His eyes widened, his smile promptly gone. His brows sent themselves rigidly downward with fatherly authority. Her eyes dug into him like a cold shovel. He didn't like the way she looked at him, like she'd seen war before. Christ, teenagers and their breakups. They'd be the death of him some day. He thanked the Lord his children were off to college.

"Do I need to call your father, Tressie?" The words came out clipped, but he didn't try to fix them. It was one thing to knock, but to intrude? To yell at a man in his own home? No, no, this was not the kind of response he expected from a responsible young woman, and Fred's daughter nonetheless! She had always been a sweet, introspective kid. Obviously those days were gone. He didn't really care to know when that had happened.

Her eyes pinned him with something old, something weary. Her lips were pressed into a thin, firm line. Her matted hair rustled around her flatly. She spoke, slowly and quietly - her words were a hiss of a thing.

“He is gone. Something took him. And it is my fault.”

He felt his face drop. She couldn't have meant Fred. She meant some boyfriend, some fling in some teenage delusion-

“Mr. Dawson, you have to help me. You knew my dad, he-”

He could feel himself losing his temper. Fred was a good man, a good cop, and whatever shenanigan or prank this young lady was talking about was nothing more than a fluke. Something took him? What, some inane creature from the Black Lagoon? He'd had enough of this. It was time for her to go. His coffee was surely lukewarm by now.

Tersely, he spoke. “Tressie, I'm sure Fred is just fine. I'm really very sorry, but I can't help you.”

He didn't have time to see her reaction as he slammed the door shut and clicked the lock into place. He quickly stood to trudge up the stairs. He was very much looking forward to his coffee, his easy chair, and his mediocre paper.

The peace did not last long. Soon after he settled into his chair, three abrupt thuds rattled his door. He wished the ruckus had startled him, but she was Fred's daughter, after all. He had a feeling she would be persistent. He sighed and rose from his easy chair.

When he met the doorknob with another firm grip, he was surprised to discover nothing on the other side. Nothing, save for a postcard.

He bent down to pick it up, fingernails scratching the pavement. He promptly shut the door.

Unfortunately for him, the commotion had finally summoned Deb. He sighed as she came stumbling down the stairs after him.

“Was someone here, Ron?” Her flabby arms swayed as she grasped the railing. Old age had loosened her skin, bringing a veiny sheen to her arms and neck.

He cleared the phlegm from his throat. “Nothin'. Just Fred's kid.”

“Little Tressie? She alright? Poor dear, after her mother you'd think that old Fred would pay her more mind.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he pocketed the postcard.

She sighed, hot breath creeping down his neck.

“Alright. I’m off to the market.” She reached for the keys.

“Wait, Deb-”

She looked at him with sunken eyes and one thin, raised eyebrow.

“Let me. I have a few errands to run.”

Her breath hitched as she began coughing. Her loose neck wiggled with each shake. It wasn’t unlike spit dripping off a toothbrush. He tried to meet her eyes, but looked away.

“Suit yourself,” she coughed out as she turned. Deb had always had a good heart, but that was never enough for a man to stay in love. He grimaced - at his wife of 40 years or at himself, he wasn’t sure.

Standing by the doorway, he absentmindedly fiddled with the postcard in his pocket. He shuffled into his jacket and shoes, throwing on a hat for the cold. He didn’t know how long it would take to get where he needed to go.

Once he was out, he locked the door behind him, crouching against the wind. His nose burned from the bite of it already. He walked down the drive and into his old Ford sedan. It took a few hard wrenches of the key to get the engine running - retirement never paid enough to fix the things that needed fixing. He took another look at the handwriting scrawled across the front of the postcard in thick permanent marker.

**MEET AT
HOLLOWAY DOCKING CO.
ASAP**

BRING A SNACK

He rolled his eyes at the last bit. He may have known Tressie since she was a little girl, but that didn’t mean he owed her the lace off his boots. He didn’t like the idea of being bossed around by a teenage girl, anyhow. Still, he fished around for the almonds in his glovebox and pocketed them, frowning.

He wanted to kick himself as he shifted into gear and rolled forward. Lying to his wife, abandoning his most comfortable chair on a perfectly serene Sunday morning, forgoing his

near-ritualistic Sunday chats for a girl and her delusions - he felt that if he were to look in a mirror, he would not recognize the man he was this morning. Sniffing, he spread his old map out on the passenger seat and marked the location with an old pen. Holloway Docking had been around since he was a kid, but it was only a storage facility. He supposed some delinquents may have made it their home - it was surrounded by woods, an easy getaway for teens. No matter how hard he tried, however, he couldn't imagine Tressie running with a group like that. Although, after today, he supposed he couldn't be sure of anything. He took off down the street, focusing only on the pavement grinding away beneath his tires.

Holloway Docking had been an old staple in his days. Full of hooligans and teenage riffraff - himself included, he supposed. He had spent a good amount of time around the old woods when he was younger, though it didn't make him any fonder of the trip. Unfortunately, he had arrived rather quickly. He remembered the dense forest well - it hadn't changed from his childhood days. As his car rumbled to a stop, he couldn't help but remember the way the undergrowth clipped underneath his bike tires. He tried to fight the sudden flood of fond remembrances, but the colorful visions of wide handlebars had taken a hold of him. He grappled with a smile, shoving it far, far down.

He let his engine groan to a stop as he slammed the old door behind him. He was right at the entrance to the docking company, though there was no sign. He approached the site with a fair bit of suspicion, gripping his keys in his pocket.

He approached the clearing of Holloway Docking sooner than he would have liked.

Tressie stood next to an empty garage, looking for all the world like she'd seen a ghost.

"You came."

He only nodded gruffly. He felt as if his brain was stuck in a kind of stupor from the forest. The girl paused for a moment, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Okay. Follow me."

And, despite everything, he did.

She led him past the chipped garages, past the light undergrowth, and into the darkest patch of the woods. He couldn't bring himself to ask where they were going. The forest seemed to

squeeze him, demanding answers - demanding retribution. Tressie power-walked in front of him, continually leading the way deeper and deeper into the forest around Holloway Docking.

She spoke - quietly, but firmly. He really wasn't sure why he was here, or why he even inclined himself to listen. What his wife would have thought of this adventure, he didn't want to know. The almonds in his pocket felt heavy.

"I found an old file in my dad's office."

He felt his eyebrows raise as he walked. The girl most definitely should not have been in there. He would have said as much, but his mind had begun to muddle from the dark of the forest. She only continued.

"It was an old police report. It mentioned something up here, something big - I think they've been trying to figure it out for a while."

Was the world at a tilt, or was it just him?

"I got into a fight with my dad. He wasn't being fair and I was mad, so I ran to anywhere I thought might piss him off. But,"

She paused for a moment, slowing her walking. It was just barely light enough to see the trees crowding around him. The old memories of this forest pressed to the front of his mind, screaming with foggy warnings. Something had gone wrong here, something had happened, he was sure. If he could just remember-

"Now he's gone." She turned to face him in the dark wood, her eyes steel chisels.

"It took him. And I think you're one of the only people who know why."

Her eyes looked at him with a thin mixture of pity, anger, and a twinge of fear. Something about the set of her jaw demanded answers. He could say nothing. His mouth felt permanently clamped shut with sweat and tension. His mouth felt dry as he opened it, slowly.

"What are you talking about."

Again, more statement than question, though he couldn't find room in his brain to contemplate what Deb's thoughts might have been.

Her face seemed to say that it wasn't the answer she was hoping for.

"We don't have any farther to go. We're here."

She paused.

“Did you bring the snack?”

He hardly felt this was the time to stop and eat, but he complied. He felt wildly out of control here. Fishing the almonds from his pocket, he handed them to her with a wrinkled fist.

Taking them with a nod, she knelt down next to a particularly gnarled tree and began to stack them, one by one, into a small pile. He was wondering if he should just leave, but his mind seemed to pull him closer inwards.

He took a step closer, and it was like the boughs of a tree snapping all around him.

He had killed these very trees. Long ago. Why, it must have been almost 50 years now, when he himself was just a teenage delinquent, new to the world and desperate to make his mark on it.

He began to feel a very real sense of fear. Fred, his childhood friend, had been the one to throw him the axe and spill the chemicals, to tell him that they were doing this old place a service. Then again, it was only a childish prank borne of boredom, taking place so long ago he had simply forgotten. How had she known about this?

Tressie stood from her place on the ground. It was almost as if she could feel that something had changed.

“When I came here, they listened to me. They listened in ways my father never did.”

Her eyes stayed burning, looking only at the gnarled tree.

“We were angry. At the world, at our places in it, at being ripped through life. At men who damage and leave.”

He knew Tressie had gotten the short stick after her mother, but that was no excuse for this. What had gotten into her? Fuzzy as his brain was, he had to let her know that this behavior was unacceptable. Running away to trees, reprimanding an old man, leading him on this wild goose chase - he didn't know how much more his heart could take.

“Tressie, I'm really at a loss. I don't know what you expect anyone to say-”

“YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT I HAVE BEEN THROUGH.”

Her words mingled with the crashing, reverberating soundwave of a whole forest's pain as her head snapped to the man. The trees' and her words seemed one in the same.

“POISONED. MAIMED. WILTING THROUGH A LIFE WITH NO GUIDANCE.”

His mind felt as if it were about to splinter. The noise was too much, it was filling his body, he was drowning and nobody could save him.

The screeching feedback of the forest very slowly subsided until the girl's voice was the only sound.

"You and my father poisoned and ruined them. An entire forest. A thriving ecosystem! And I cannot for the life of me understand why."

Her eyes were full of tears as she spoke again.

"They told me that I deserve better, yes, but you know what else they told me? That your actions constitute a life debt. You. Kill. Everything. And the both of you barely even remember the things you murder."

Her face was a writhing mess of tears and dirt. It scared him. His brain stung. He couldn't stop the pressure in his temples. There wasn't enough air here, there wasn't-

She looked at him with an expression so pained he was sure she had lived for centuries.

"All I did was fix things."

A large gap seemed to cleave through his mind, leaving a bright open space. He choked back a scream, air turning sharp in his lungs, piercing through cartilage and bone. He dropped to his knees, surrounded by forest and dirt. He had not known, he had not known, he had not known anything. In his last moments, his last thoughts, he begged the forest to absolve him, but it knew not forgiveness. It swallowed him whole as a man does the world.