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Palshaw

English IV

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Escape

“Truth is, I got no place to go. Even if they don’t catch me.”

 The shadows of fir trees lengthened in the growing night, and two men sat round a crackling fire.

 The man with the wool cap glanced up from the embers. “Is that why you’re runnin’?”

 “I wish.” The man with the beard took out a pocket knife and started to whittle. “Be nice to start over, find a new beginning.”

“And do you think you’ll find it?”

 “Nah.” He tossed the piece of wood into the fire. “I don’t believe in fairy tales.”

 For a time both men were silent. Then, reaching into his heavy pack, the man with the cap pulled out a metal pot and camp stove and began to boil water.

 “That from the stream?” the bearded man asked.

 The other nodded. “I figure up here the water’s pretty clean. Comes right off the glaciers.” He paused. “Although it’s not always like that. You know, back in Weed I wouldn’t trust creek water for the life of me ‘cause of the cattle. Godawful iodine tasted terrible.”

The bearded man smiled. “There aren’t any border patrol in these woods, are there?”

“Well, there’s always rangers. But I haven’t encountered many, and I doubt they marked the Canadian border with anything more than a sign. If we travel twelve miles a day, we’ll be there day after tomorrow.”

An owl hooted in the trees beyond the clearing.

The bearded man lit a cigarette. “Why are you helping me?”

“I’m curious,” the man in the cap replied. “And besides, bears won’t attack a party of two if we’re loud enough.”

The owl hooted again.

“You got a girl, backpacker man?”

“Of course I got a girl. This trip’s just me, that’s all.”

“Sure.” Puffs of cigarette smoke joined smoke from the fire. “What kind of bears?”

“Oh, just black bears, the occasional grizzly. As I said, won’t bother us if we’re loud enough.”

“Why not just invite her?”

“Invite who?”

“The grizzly.”

“Huh?”

“The girl, dumbass.”

“Oh.”

“Much better company than me, I’m sure. Hey, I bet that’s great in the tent! Just you and her, the owls hootin’, and the grizzlies all stayin’ away ‘cause you’re makin’ too much noise.”

The man with the cap got up to add a log to the fire. “Cut that out, huh?”

“And then the bear starts gettin’ nosy, sniffin’ around the tent, and you start shoutin’ trying to scare it off but all you really do is embarrass yourself, and your girl goes from whimperin’ ‘cause a bear’s two feet away to laughin’ ‘cause an idiot’s on top a her, and--”

“I said quit it! I don’t have to help you, you know.”

The man with the beard laughed quietly into his cigarette. The owl had stopped hooting.

“You don’t really have a girlfriend, do you.”

“Does it really matter?”

“I knew it.”

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled.

“Know what they used to call me?” the bearded man asked.

“What’s that?”

“Griz.”

“How fitting.”

The bearded man chuckled. “Maybe one day when I’m like you and can hike for fun I’ll explain it.”

“You do understand this isn’t just any hike,” his companion said. “It’s bigger than that. Christ, it’s the Pacific Crest Trail, it’s an accomplishment. Something from start to finish, all the way from Mexico to Canada. It’s poetic.”

“Poetic my ass. Sounds like a waste of time.”

Laughing, the bearded man sketched a building in the dirt. “Know how I got out?” He kicked the fire with a boot. In an eruption of sparks, the logs on top crashed onto his drawing and lay there burning.

“You burned it down?” the man with the cap said.

“Well, tried to. Suppose now they want me for arson.”

“What’d you do in the first place?”

The man with the beard quieted. The slight smile on his lips faded, and he stamped out the flames on the cooling logs with his foot.

“Oh come on,” the man with the cap said. “We’re both out here with nothing to lose.”

The bearded man glared at him. “Nothin’ to lose, huh?”

“I mean, look at it lightly. The border’s just ten miles away, I don’t think they’ll catch up with you now.”

“That really what you think? That I’ve got nothin’ to lose? ‘Cause maybe *you* can afford trottin’ around the woods whenever you want, swimmin’ in lakes and fillin’ up at streams as you please, but if I don’t make it across that border in two days’ time, they’re gonna take me back and I’ll spend the rest of my goddam life in prison. So feel free, take as long a vacation as your pretty little heart desires, and don’t forget about ol’ ‘Griz’ when you get scared.”

 The fire sent sparks up into the shadows.

“Am I a consolation for you, backpacker man? A safety measure? Is that really why you’re helpin’ me? Tell me the truth.”

A sound of thunder approached the valley; high above, the rhythmic thumping of helicopter blades broke the silence of the night. A black shadow blocked out the stars, and a breeze kicked up, ruffling the branches of the firs. A second shadow followed. Two of them. Not very low yet, but in time they would be.

The sound died away, and the two men were left standing opposite each other. The fire crackled softly. One, adjusting his cap in the chill air, stared at where a faded trail picked its way up after the clearing, and then turned back to his companion.

“Tomorrow we take the first fork to the left, circle back across the creek high enough to bridge the pass, and traverse the ridge by night. Cover of trees will protect us by day, and once we get beyond this valley, we cross a river. That should give us a clear shot up the couloir, and from there--”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Think I heard a wolf.”

A full moon rose in the valley.