

Flurries

Earlier this morning as I sat at my desk- back straight, jaw clenched, paper blank- I saw a most peculiar sight. The sharp wind was tapping at my windowpane and flurries of snow drifted in through the gap I had left purposefully ajar. My fingers were tapping the wooden desk at an equal pace as I gazed out at the storm. Through the glass, although draped in a kaleidoscope of frost, I could see the precocious branch of my favorite sycamore tree. It was usually stretched thin yet defiantly erect, but today the branch was bent in an arch like the rubber on a boomerang. Puzzled, I quit my tapping and let my hands cool on the coating ice as I lifted my window up higher. I pushed my head out into the frenzied world to take a better look.

There, about five feet below my window, yet thirty feet above the ground, a plump squirrel clenched the limp end of the branch and flicked his tail in struggle. The withered look of the branch told me he had been there for quite awhile and the large pupils in his eyes showed that he knew the only place he had the option of going was fast to the ground. The snow continued weaving in confused circles about my head as I attempted to reach out to this troubled, winter-fed companion. Yet, to no avail; my arm simply couldn't reach. The wind was picking up and the glass, so brittle, was screaming from the hit of the branches. I began to contemplate the idea of retracting my head, slamming the window all the way down, and returning to my deskwork as to forget the struggle happening just feet and flurries from my alcove. However, I was suddenly greeted by the yapping of another squirrel- a wee bit less plump- that had scampered up to a more stable branch above the boomerang. In what felt like only a couple seconds, this brave, furry friend sucked in a deep breath, pulled in his bulging gut, and scurried onto the boomerang. He paused at the arch and attempted to reach out a small claw to his helpless companion; he failed. I watched as the branch trembled beneath them. Just before they fell, I swear I saw them lock their terrified eyes. They fell through the flurries like soft boulders and disappeared from my sight. The branch snapped back into place. The snow continued to fall. I pulled my window shut and resumed my tapping.

There is a road in Northern Michigan that lets sunlight paint it in strokes through

tree branches and meadow-weeds cover it like they know it's really their land to have. I watched a deer here one afternoon. The thick snow was piled all the way up to the elegant bend in her twig legs. I was walking safely above the cold, my snowshoes keeping me up high on the banks. I paused when I saw her. She was centered beautifully with rows of pine trees on either side and was chewing on fallen icicles. She paused when she saw me. The sun coated her soft brown hair and made her eyes gleam. I had never seen a scene look so still; the snow fell, her lungs grew and retracted, but in her steady gaze all movement seemed to be halted. In that moment, I felt like I was the only person in this white, vast world. Somewhere, a rotted branch finally gave into the weight of snow and cracks and creeks shot through the air. Her ears perked and her head seemed to nod. I opened my mouth to say something- what, exactly, I can't recall- but decided against it. She held my gaze for one more short embrace. Then she flicked her tail and was gone.

My fingers were beginning to swell from my harsh taps. I remember how red they became when I moved this big, oak desk up to the alcove so many years ago. Until then, it had sat, waiting, in the dusty attic of my father's old office- or, rather, my father's old storage attic. It was a beautiful piece of furniture; it creaked and stood proudly, as if it had its own story to tell. When I was young, Old Pal and I used to weave in and out of its legs, pretending to be scuba-divers exploring hidden caves. Other times, we would lie opposite each other, like shoes in a box, and stare up at the thick under-beams. Many were broken and rotted with age and often dust would fall down and hit us in the eyes.

"Rudy," Old Pal used to whisper, "what happens if it all falls down?"

I would never reply. I would just brush my eyes and wiggle my toes and stroke the broken beams with my small hands. Then Old Pal would sigh and the wood would creak and our small minds would pretend to ponder the meaning of all that weight.

One dark winter night in high school, Old Pal let his tires spin out while we were driving down a gravel road near his dad's old farmhouse. His breath still had a faint hint of whisky and, regardless, the snow itself was intoxicating as it fell in patterns on the windshield. It had been a long time since we had truly locked our green eyes and, especially in the pale moonlight, I could feel the vacancy like I could feel the cool breeze

biting the back of my neck. The emptiness had begun when his dad left, when we both realized we weren't gonna find anything bigger than Mistmoss, Idaho; it grew as he lost faith and found whiskey and I forgot how to speak about anything important; it stayed as snow continued to fall and nights remained dark and wooden desks became farther and farther away. Somewhere, Old Pal had lost his smile and he filled the gap with a lonely straight line. As we whipped in circles and swayed into the cornfield, I instinctively threw my arm across his body. As the glass broke and a heavy oak limb smashed through the windshield, I gripped tight. *If it falls down*, I thought, *we pull each other out*.

My desk has a deep scar that reminds me of Old Pal's eyelid after the accident. It's black but smooth with age and in the shape of a V, like when a child draws a bird in flight. Around eleventh grade, a couple months after the accident, I lost Old Pal beside a snow bank. We had cut class and were walking along the frozen river near our school. The ice on the river was too thin to walk on so we tiptoed cautiously on the edge, smearing our boots with salt and small clumps of mud that seeped out over chunks of ice. We'd been walking for a half hour and hadn't spoken a word. At some point, Old Pal changed his path. I'd already been losing him for months- maybe years- but as I watched him light a cigarette, remove his boots, and calmly walk out into the river, I realized that he was truly gone. He didn't even flinch as the ice cracked and the wind blew out his smoke. He walked until he was waist deep and then just stood, barely shivering, and watched the ice chunks he had created bob up and down in the excited water.

"Jeremy," I managed to stammer, "what are you doing?"

He didn't answer.

"Where are you going?"

He didn't even look at me. I watched as his cheeks grew red and his body began to shake. After what felt like hours, Old Pal finally began to trudge back to shore. He carefully pulled on his boots. We each lit a cigarette and started our walk back to school. We returned in time for 5th hour.

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The next morning, I found two deep, round impressions in the snow in my front

yard. I saw no blood or fur; I saw no tracks or burrows either. *How on earth did they escape?* I thought. The snow must have been four feet high. I looked up at the guilty branch; I could make out a small crack in its base but it still stretched straight and defiantly. I looked up at my window and saw the big desk resting, blanketed in yellow lamplight. The flurries poured and I wondered if they would ever end. I fetched my shovel from the garage and began clearing the walkway. My fingers throbbed, raw and red. I hadn't left that alcove for days. Looking at it now, with fresh air in my lungs, I couldn't understand why. Sweat felt good on my skin. It took three hours to expose all the pavement.

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After our river-walk, Old Pal and I only talked in sycamore trees. There was a line of them by my house and sometimes, when dusk was settling on the snow, he would appear at my door and we would walk in silence to our "forest". We'd remain quiet as we climbed up the branches- one at a time, careful not to slip- and found a nook to rest in. Then we'd close our eyes and listen to the wind blow until air and vibration found their way in and out of our lungs. Maybe speaking at normal altitudes had become too difficult; in the thin air we couldn't say much so, without the pressure, at least we could say something.

"Remember the..." he'd start

"car trips," I'd continue

"ball games"

"bruised knees"

"full homes"

"night drives"

"oak desks"

Sometimes, we'd climb the big oak tree in his backyard instead. During these times we didn't speak at all- the nook was much too high up- but would watch the snow whip through his cornfields. When we weren't in trees, our friendship was quiet; Old Pal didn't really speak to anyone for all of senior year. I learned to forget the oak desk days unless we were high in branches. I learned to not say much myself; sometimes just presence and silence is the remedy.

The winter after we graduated, I found Old Pal in a snow bank coated in yellow streetlights. The world was white and quiet and so was he but his green eyes were there and they were gleaming and that was all that mattered. I hadn't seen him since I had left for college in the fall and he had remained to work in the fields at his neighbor's ranch. I think the labor was good for him; it let him sweat out the pain. I joined him in the bank and we looked at the world around us. White, quiet, and still- so still. It was beautiful. Old Pal looked up at the hazy sky in wonder, like he used to look at the broken beams. His breath was steady and easy and I realized his scar was barely visible in the dim light. Together we shivered and remembered and accepted that sometimes snow just doesn't ever stop falling. I heard a tree creak in the distance. Jeremy looked me in the eyes.

"You know what's amazing, Rudy?" he whispered. "It never really fell, not any of it."

I nodded and smiled and watched as the flurries continued to dance.