

BENEATH THE AUTUMN MOON

By : Premonitions of doom

A short novel/novella (still incomplete) about a hiking trip which turns deadly. I have posted the first three chapters of the five which I have completed.



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Chapter 1

They had been moving for what seemed like days, but couldn't have been more than a number of hours. Everything seemed to take so long. Murphy was constantly complaining. His back hurt, his shoulders were sore, he was hungry and there wasn't enough food, his feet were cold and soggy. A seemingly endless array of petty trivialities spewed forth from his mouth. Graham wished he would just shut up for a while. He was getting sick of Murphy, and he was fairly sure that the others were too.

There were six of them, Graham, Murphy, Harold and his wife, Susan, and Stephen and his girlfriend, Janice. They had been planning this trip for several months, but now that they were here, they all wished that they were back home. It had been a mistake. That was all too obvious now.

"I need to stop for a minute," Murphy said, "I'm tired, and I need to rest. You guys have been walking way too fast. You're going to burn yourselves out if you don't slow down a bit."

"We can stop when we get to the base of the mountain," Stephen said, looking at his watch, and then up at the darkening sky. Dusk was descending already. The moon was a pale, thin slit far above, in the western sky. Thick, fluffy masses of dark clouds hovered above them, barely visible in the purplish sky.

"How much longer is it going to take?" Murphy moaned.

"We should be there in less than an hour," said Harold, shoving his hands into his pockets to keep them warm. It was late October, but already the cold sting of winter's impending arrival was in the air. Thin patches of snow blanketed the muddy, soggy ground, and the bright, deep reds and oranges of the fall leaves were already withering and dying an abruptly premature death.

Graham looked over at Murphy. The man was like an anchor, holding them all down. Slowing everything down. He was short and heavy-set with dark curly hair that grew in frizzy tufts and protruded awkwardly from his bulbous head like a dark, round bundle of old cotton-candy. Completely out of shape, and totally unprepared for hiking or mountain climbing, or for any other type of physical outdoor activity, for that matter, Murphy was making the trip into an exercise in monotony. Graham needed a drink badly. He felt a tingling sensation in his stomach, and he found that he was constantly tightening his fingers into fists. The withdrawal symptoms were still present. He had been sober for sixth months now. Alcoholism had been consuming him, but finally, after years of drinking he had made the decision to go to an AA meeting and sober up. More for the sake of his pretty, new wife than for anyone else. She had threatened to leave him if he didn't stop drinking. She said that he often became belligerent and abusive when he was drunk, but he didn't see it that way at all. The way he saw it was that she had deserved everything she had gotten. Sure, there had been a few ugly incidents where he had gotten a little rough with Sylvia, but that was all water-under-the-bridge now. He was sober, and life seemed to be back to normal. Or, at least as normal as it could possibly be, considering the circumstances. And now, here he was, out on this hiking trip with these three others. He couldn't say that he honestly liked any of them, although he had known Harold since high school, and he supposed that he considered him an acquaintance. Still, the man could be an annoying son-of-a-bitch at times too.

There weren't many people who didn't irritate Graham. He was not fond of the company of others. Never had been. He had always been quite solitary, a loner who found fulfillment more in his own swirling thoughts, than in the proverbial male camaraderie that appealed to other men. Other people were so foolish. He saw them as distractions. And there was no question that some of them were like deer in the middle of a dirt road who refused to move so that he could proceed onward in life. There was only one way to deal with these deer. You had to run them over. If you didn't they would hold you back for your whole life. That was the way Graham saw it. Some- times violence was necessary. Or, on second thought, not just necessary, but

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mandatory.

They all came to a stop so that Murphy could rest. Graham eyed the fat man, irritably, watching as he sat down next to the trunk of an old mossy oak tree, reached into his pocket, pulled out a Mars bar, quickly tore off the wrapper, and held it up in front of his face and stared at it gleefully, his tiny, sunken eyes observing it with awe, like some kind of treasure which he had just found. Then, his chubby little fingers raised the chocolate bar up to his mouth and he took a huge bite of it, devouring half in one gulp.

"I'm going to get myself on a diet one of these days," said Murphy, as he chewed with his mouth open, smacking his lips together and making a loud slurping sound, like some kind of wild animal, perhaps a hog, lapping up slop from a trough.

That's exactly what you are, thought Graham, *a fat, useless hog.*

Susan took a thermos of coffee out of her back-pack, as well as some plastic cups, and offered some to everyone. Graham eyed her as she poured some into his cup. What a pretty little thing she was. Thin. Well-rounded. An athletic body, with wonderful curves, long light-brown hair with streaks of blonde throughout, and hazel eyes. How Harold had ever managed to get her was a mystery. Probably it had been his personality that had done it. Harold, although very average in the looks department (with eyes set a bit too closely together and a nose that was slightly crooked) had a way with words. He was a "people person." The kind of guy that made most folks feel comfortable, and at ease as soon as they met him. He was witty, sharp, and good-natured. Plus, there was the fact that he had a really good job as an attorney with a well-respected firm. Still, Graham believed that Susan was out of Harold's league, and at times he fantasized about showing her what it was like to be with a *real* man.

"So Harold tells me that you've been into hiking for years," Susan said.

Graham nodded, taking a sip of his coffee and closely examining the spectacle of her pretty face. This was the first time he had seen her without makeup on, and she was just as pretty, if not more so, without it. Her skin looked so soft and smooth, without a single blemish or flaw. He imagined what the rest of her body must have been like beneath all of those layers of clothing, and the jacket she was wearing.

"My dad used to take me up into the mountains when I was a kid," said Graham, "We'd go every summer, and he taught me about the importance of having a relationship with nature. He also taught me about the importance of survival skills. A man without survival skills is...well...less than a man. That's what Pops said to me."

"So were you and your father really close?" asked Susan.

Graham shook his head, and took another swig of coffee, wishing he had something else, something stronger, in the cup. *Some Jack Daniel's would go down really well right now.* "He was a hard-nosed son of a bitch. Used to beat the piss out of me and my brothers on a regular basis. Sometimes we deserved it, and other times he would just do it for his own personal amusement."

Harold came over and put his arm around Susan. "So Graham, you think we're doing okay so far? Since it's our first time out here on one of these hikes with you, how would you grade us?"

"You're doing okay. As for him, though...that's another story," Graham said, gesturing at Murphy, who was now working his way through a second Mars bar.

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Murphy was a friend of Harold's. A lawyer who been with the firm for more than fifteen years, and had mentored Harold from the time he had started on, fresh out of law school. The two of them got along very well, but he was not surprised that Graham found Murphy's presence irritating. Graham liked so few people, and he had very little patience. The main reason why Harold had called Graham, and asked him to come along on the trip and act as a sort of guide was the fact that he knew these woods like the back of his hand. Sure, he wasn't the most pleasant person to be around, and when he drank he often became quite hostile and violent, but he seemed a lot more at peace and almost subdued, now that he had given up the bottle.

Stephen and Janice joined them. Graham was unimpressed with both of them. She looked like a Cabbage Patch Kids' doll, with her chubby, bloated face and bleached blonde hair. Her boyfriend was tall and wiry, with an athletic build, but he talked as if he knew everything about everything, a real pompous dirt-bag. The pair apparently lived next door to Harold and Susan, and they would get together for little wine-tasting parties and go to museums together, the four of them. What a bunch of silly bullshit. Just a bunch of prissy rich folk who thought they were better than everyone.

"I think Murphy's finding this a bit rough," Stephen said.

Harold nodded and looked at his watch. "We should try and get going again soon, if we're going to reach the mountain and set up camp before it gets completely dark."

After a few more minutes, they moved on, with Graham leading and the rest of them following, Murphy plodding along slowly, behind.

When they reached the base of the mountain they began to set up camp. Stephen and Janice unfolded their tent, as did Harold and Susan. Murphy sat down in front of the fire which Graham had started in a small circle of stones, and held his chubby sausage fingers out before it.

Graham opened up his backpack, removed a long, thin metal grill-cover, and stood it up over the fire. He then proceeded to place the meat of the three wild rabbits which he had shot and skinned earlier that day, on the grill. Murphy watched the meat sizzle, the flames making crackling noises as they warmed the fatty pinkish pieces. "I've never had rabbit meat before," said Murphy, watching Graham intently now, as he turned the meat over with a large hunting knife (still stained with the blood of the dead rabbits). Graham did not respond. He simply kept his eyes on the meat, and the flames, as if his attention was lost entirely, and he was focused on something that none of the others could see. It was an empty, spaced-out stare that made Murphy very uneasy. He had heard about Graham's past, about his drinking, and the mean streak that often erupted within him when he drank. But Harold had told him that the man was completely sober now, and had turned over a new leaf. Alcoholics Anonymous, anger management classes, the whole bit. He had married a pretty young girl, and had resumed his job as an auto mechanic (which he had taken a leave of absence from in order to sort out his problems).

Murphy stood up and brushed the dirt and leaves from his pants, then headed over to his backpack, unfolded his tent, and began to fumble around with it. Harold and Susan helped him with it, and when it was finally up, Murphy clapped his hands together, and said, "What would I do without you two? You know, I've already come to realize that this was a mistake, for me to come on this trip, I mean. I'm just holding you all back. I'm slow, out-of-shape, and not exactly an outdoorsman."

"It's okay, Murph. We're glad to have you along," said Harold, "and you can only benefit by the experience. We all can. Susan and I have never done anything like this before either. That's what makes it fun, and challenging."

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Murphy nodded, and patted Harold on the back. He definitely had a way of making people feel accepted and comfortable. Harold was a confident guy, but not confident in a way that even approached arrogance. He was simply comfortable with who he was. He had found peace and contentment in his life, not to mention a woman who was not only beautiful, but extremely intelligent. Murphy had never been married. When he was younger, before he had put on so much weight, he had dated numerous women, but nothing had ever worked out for the long-term. And that was alright, because he had become quite content with his living situation. Like Harold, he made good money, owned a nice condo, drove an expensive sports-car, and was able to eat at all of the best restaurants. He was a damned good lawyer too, all of his peers agreed upon that. He was generally good natured, and got along with most people, yet out here in the wilderness he felt lost. This was not his territory, he felt like an intruder here.

Soon they were all gathered around the fire, eating the dinner of cooked rabbit which Graham had prepared for them. "This tastes surprisingly good, Graham," said Stephen, chewing a piece of the darkened, tender meat. "Where did you learn to cook like this? I never would have guessed we'd be sitting out here eating a gourmet meal like this."

Graham stared off into the fire, his eyes looking lost, travelling somewhere else. "My dad showed me how to kill and skin rabbits when I was a boy. He took me out hunting in this same area, when I was a kid. The meat's best when you don't over-cook it. I prefer it tender. Even a bit bloody. Tastes best that way."

"I'll say! I couldn't get anything as good at any of the restaurants that Janice and I go to, back home." Janice nodded her head in agreement, as she chewed a small piece of the meat.

"So tomorrow morning we're going to start our climb," said Harold, looking up at the massive, monolith of the mountain above them. The dim light from the flames flickered and danced against the old stone, making their faint shadows move and stretch, like some faint, dark apparitions.

"Yup," Graham said. "Let's get an early start in the morning. It's going to be a long day tomorrow. We'll all need our sleep."

They put out the fire and went to their tents. While everyone else found sleep quite easily, Murphy lay awake for hours. He was cold, uncomfortable, and when he heard the distant howling of some wild animal, perhaps a wolf, or a coyote, up in the mountains, he shivered and rolled over. The night was alive, and the wild, screeching October winds whistling their haunting melodies through the branches of the bare trees lent it vitality.

Chapter 2

When Harold awoke the next morning he heard noises outside of the tent, the crackling of a fire. He awoke Susan, and she smiled at him, as she so often did in the mornings back home. He thought that she looked just as beautiful in the morning, when she was just waking up, with her hair in disarray, and her eyes squinting, wearing her fluffy wool pajamas, as she did when she was all dressed up, with her hair neatly combed back in a ponytail. He saw the way other men looked at her, envious of the fact that she was with him, and counted himself lucky to have her. "Good morning, dear," he said, "I guess we should get ready to hit the trail. Graham said he wanted to get an early start."

"What time is it?" she asked, squinting one eye, and turning her head inquisitively to look at him.

He looked at his watch, "Seven-fifteen."

"I could sleep for at least another hour," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder so that her hair spilled over him. "So could I, but I think we should try and do what Graham wants to do for the next few days. After all, he was good enough to agree to come out here and act as a guide for us."

Susan rolled her eyes, and he put his arm around her, holding her tight, feeling her cool, soft skin against his own. He felt himself stiffening as he kissed her neck softly. Then, as if it had been timed perfectly to ruin his arousal, he heard Graham's voice outside of the tent, "Okay folks, let's get a move-on! Time waits for no man. Or woman either."

"Be right out," said Harold, rolling his eyes and smiling at Susan.

They squinted at the bright sunshine when they came out of the tent. It was a beautiful morning, quite cold, but beautiful, nonetheless. Graham was sitting cross-legged in front of the fire, his hunting knife in one hand, and his rifle in the other, staring up at the mountain, its vast white expanse spread out before them and looking down upon them, like some giant, probing celestial eye.

"What a sight," Stephen said. He and Janice had just joined the others by the fire, and they stood looking up in wonder at the morning sun casting its radiance down against the snow-capped peaks high above.

"How far up do you think we'll get today, Graham?" said Stephen.

Graham kept on staring at the mountain, as if sizing up a well-known foe. "It's hard to say. I guess it'll depend on how many times we'll have to stop so that Murphy can rest. If it's as many as yesterday, then I can't see us making a great deal of progress. In fact, I'm not too sure how he's going to be able to handle the climbing part. Walking on flat ground seemed to be difficult enough for him."

They all looked over at Murphy's tent. Apparently he was still sleeping. Loud snoring noises were coming from within.

"I'll wake him and tell him that we need to get going," Harold said, walking toward the tent."

After a few minutes Murphy appeared from the tent. They were all seated around the fire having breakfast. He sat down next to Harold, rubbing at his eyes, still seemingly trying to emerge fully from the land of broken sleep, in whose unkind arms he had spent a night tossing and turning. "Did anyone else hear the howling last night?"

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"Yeah, I heard something. It sounded like it was coming from above, up in the mountains. A wolf, or a coyote, or some wild dog," said Janice.

"There are lots of wild creatures wandering about up in the mountains," Graham said. "They usually tend to keep their distance from humans, though. We don't really interest them."

"That's good to know," Murphy said.

After they finished eating they packed up the tents, loaded the supplies into their backpacks, and began walking toward the mountain. There was a long, rocky trail that led up through the lower region. "We'll stay on this trail until we get to that first ledge, way up there," Graham said, pointing to a rocky overhang roughly fifty feet above them. When we get there, that's where the real fun will beginâ!"

"I can hardly wait," Murphy said, shoving his hands into his coat pockets for warmth.

Graham had told them, before embarking upon the trip, that they would not need any actual mountain climbing equipment, like ropes or special shoes, since there was a trail that they could walk upon, which led all the way up to the top of the mountain, and across to the other side. He and his father had gone up over this very mountain on numerous occasions when he was a boy. Still, the trail went entirely uphill, and they would have to make a detour through a large cave in the centre of the mountain, since the trail went right through the middle and then ascended farther upward on the other side.

They had been moving for no less than an hour when they arrived at the lower ledge. Looking down, Harold thought that the landscape below seemed almost like an illusion, like nothing more than a vivid painting across a massive canvas. Trees, for miles and miles, and the river which they would eventually have to cross when reaching the other side of the mountain, running through the depths of the woods on each side, crumbling rocks and gravel, all seeming to be held in place by invisible strands of indestructible thread. This was truly what people meant, when they spoke of the 'rugged beauty' of nature. He breathed in the cool morning air, and put his arm around Susan. They looked down on the world, and he thought that this would likely be a moment that they would both remember when they were old and gray. It was times like this that you wanted to hold onto, that you wanted to freeze in your memory for the rest of your life.

"Excellent view," said Murphy, being careful to stay as far back from the edge as possible. He had always had a fear of heights, and despite the superb scenery, he couldn't help thinking about how horrible it would be to fall to one's death from up here. How many times would a person smash against the rocks, their bones shattering like glass, before they finally landed on the stony ground, far below? As if reading his mind, or perhaps sensing his nervousness, Graham said to him, "Look on the bright side, Murphy, if you were to fall from here, you'd likely be dead before you hit the ground, anyway."

"That's really nice, Graham," Susan said, looking at him with distaste.

Graham looked at her, and for a moment she saw something menacing in his stare. Then he looked away, and his eyes were downcast.

The time moved along slowly, or so it seemed to Murphy, as they made their way higher up, following the trail across the coarse, rock-covered ground, very thin patches of hardened snow crunching beneath their feet as they progressed onward. After three hours Murphy requested that they stop so that he could rest. He looked very fatigued, and Harold was starting to get concerned. There was very little doubt that the man had been ill-prepared for the trip, and that it had been a mistake inviting him, but he couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He was still trying to give it his all, despite his physical limitations, and there was something noble and admirable about that. Graham, though, was quite unimpressed by any of this. He simply saw Murphy as a

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hindrance. While the others were sitting down on the rocks, talking amongst themselves, Harold took Graham aside and said to him "Listen, Graham. I'm beginning to think that we shouldn't have brought Murphy along on the trip."

"No shit."

"So maybe we should just call it quits. You know, turn back and head home. I'm not sure how much more he's going to be able to handle."

"Once I get out on a hike, I don't turn back until I'm finished."

"Well, how much farther do you want to go?"

"We'll do as we planned: come across the other side of the mountain, cross the river, then go back through the forest until we reach the waterfalls about twenty miles from here. Then we can turn around and go back."

"How many days do you think that'll take?"

"No more than three," said Graham, looking at his watch, in a gesture of impatience. "Although, if we keep on stopping so frequently, it'll take longer. We're moving at a snail's pace because of him."

"Maybe Susan and I should turn around and go back with Murphy. That way you can keep going, and Stephen and Janice might want to keep going on with you as well. I just think it might be for the best if we got him back home. He's definitely not an outdoorsman."

"How are you going to find your way back? You'd get lost in the woods for sure."

Harold thought about it, and came to the conclusion that this was probably true. Despite the fact that he had a map, it would be difficult to get very far without Graham, since he knew this area like the back of his hand. To Harold, their trek through the woods had been arduous, and confusing, to say the least. He remembered certain areas, like the wet, swampy land on the outskirts of their entry point, but overall so much looked the same within the forest. Miles and miles of trees, muddy ground, and fallen leaves. They would most certainly get lost if they attempted to turn back without Graham's guidance. There was no doubt.

"So I can't convince you to come back with us? Don't you think it'd be for the best?"

Graham shook his head. "Like I said, when I go out hiking, I don't turn back until I reach my planned destination. Besides, it'll do him good to find out what it's like to really be a part of the wilderness, to appreciate it fully. He obviously lacks that appreciation now. The only way to gain it is through experience."

"I think he appreciates it. It's just that he's having trouble with the physical aspects of the hike."

Graham smiled then looked over at Murphy for a moment. "He needs to lose weight, get in better shape. Then he wouldn't be such a pain in the ass to us all."

"He's trying. He just isn't used to this sort of thing. Like I said, he isn't an outdoorsman, but he's a good friend of mine, and I invited him because I thought it *would* be a good experience, not just for him, but for all of us. You know that Susan and I don't do this type of thing either. That's why I was so glad when you agreed to come with us: because, this is your territory. You're familiar with it, you're comfortable here."

Graham nodded. "If you really want to turn back, Harold, that's fine with me. I intend to keep going, though."

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"What do you think the odds are that we'll get lost if we try to go back through the woods without you?"

"Oh, I'd say about fifty/fifty. You might do alright. You have a map, so just keep looking at it as you go along. It isn't too difficult."

Harold sat down next to Murphy. "How are you doing, Murph?"

Murphy took a swig of water out of his plastic bottle, and rubbed his hand across his forehead in a gesture of fatigue. "A bit tired. I didn't sleep too well."

"I spoke to Graham and asked him if it would be a good idea for us to turn around and head back. I know that you're finding this a bit rough."

"I'll be okay," said Murphy.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, let's keep going."

"Alright, if that's what you want to do. But let me know if you want to turn back, alright?"

"Alright."

So they moved on. Murphy did not ask to stop for the rest of the day, although when Harold looked back at him, he thought that he was simply forcing himself to plod along.

Chapter 3

The sun was beginning to wane and dusk was descending when they came to the opening of a large cave. Here, the trail stopped and seemed to turn directly into the darkened cave. "We'll have to go through here in order to follow the trail across to the other side," Graham said, reaching into his backpack and taking out a flashlight, then holding it out in front of him with one hand, his rifle held back over his shoulder like a marching soldier, with the other.

"But it's so dark in there," said Susan.

"It's the only way to get us through to the other side. We have to stay on the path," Graham replied.

"I don't want to go in there."

"Then you can stay here, or turn back. Do whatever you like." said Graham, walking forward into the cave.

Susan shook her head, and looked at Harold, who raised his hands in the air in a gesture of ascent. *Let's just do what he says, honey. He knows best*, was what that gesture said, and she was not impressed with it. She was beginning to really dislike Graham's persistently unwavering self-righteousness. He seemed to have very little concern for any of them. His only concern seemed to be moving forward, always moving forward, and as quickly as possible. Didn't he know that this was only recreational for them? Why did he have to take everything *so damned seriously*?

Still, she decided that it would be best to keep quiet for the time being, seeing as Harold seemed to trust Graham, and if Harold trusted his judgement, then she supposed they would be okay.

The interior of the cave was very dark, and very damp. An odor of rot emanated from within. The only light was cast by the tiny bulb of the flashlight, which Graham held out in front of him like some strange talisman as he moved quickly ahead.

Murphy felt himself losing his balance as he stepped in a puddle, and then toppled over sideways into the damp, muddy water. "God damn it!!" he shouted, spitting out the filthy water, some of which had gone into his nostrils and now dripped down the side of his face.

"You okay, Murph?" Harold said, helping him up.

Murphy breathed in deeply, then looked around him at the dark, damp, old stone walls of the cave, and all of a sudden had a severe longing to be back home, sitting in his comfortable Lazy Boy chair, with a big bag of nachos in his hand, watching the baseball game on his big-screen TV. That all seemed so far away now. Home seemed so distant. Instead, here he was soaking wet, cold, tired and miserable. Traipsing through a cave in the middle of the forest to get to God-only-knows where. Why had he agreed to come with them? He liked Harold, that was why. Harold was a good friend of his. But he should have realized his own limitations. This type of thing was not for a man like Murphy.

Graham was continuing to move forward, either unaware or simply disinterested in Murphy's fall. As he moved farther away, the light became dimmer and dimmer. The others had all stopped, and Harold called out "Can you hold on for a minute please, Graham. Murphy had a little accident." The light stopped moving away, and after a few moments of standing still, like a big distant shadowy statue staring back at them all, he started coming back toward them. When he arrived Murphy was sitting down on a rock, breathing deeply and shivering.

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"Took a little tumble, did you, Murphy?" Graham said with a smile, looking at the heavy-set man with unmistakable amusement. There was a glint of what seemed like almost gleeful mockery in Graham's eyes. He enjoyed the humiliation of others. Especially people he thought were getting in his way, or, in Murphy's case, slowing him down. This was quite obvious. But what really disgusted Harold was the smug, sarcastic attitude. Here was a friend of his who was genuinely having a rough time, and Graham, who was supposed to be their 'guide,' simply chose to mock the man in a subtle, albeit plainly overt, manner.

"We need to wait for a minute. We need to rest."

"It's going to be nice and dark by the time we come out of this cave. There are plenty of animals roaming about up here in the dark. We'd be better to move on ASAP and set up camp. Don't want anyone getting eaten by wolves, coyotes, or bears. That would be tragic."

"Please, Graham. Can we just stop here for a minute-or-two."

"I'll wait for exactly two minutes. Then I'm moving on."

Susan shook her head and looked at Harold, who gave her a return look which said, *"Please honey, I've got this under control. Don't say anything that he'll perceive as being critical."*

Graham sat down, took out his plastic bottle of water and sipped from it. He saw his hand shaking, ever so slightly, as he held the bottle and clenched it tighter, so that no one would notice. The cravings for a drink were getting worse and worse. In the months since he'd stopped drinking he had never felt such a compelling urge to fall off the wagon. These people, Murphy especially, were beginning to really annoy him. The fat, useless ox should have stayed home. Well, now he was going to find that out the hard way.

"Graham, why are you always in such a hurry? None of us are used to hiking or being in this kind of rugged terrain, Murphy had obviously been having a difficult time, and you don't seem to be a bit concerned with that," Stephen said.

"That's because I'm not," Graham replied calmly, even though he was seething inside. *Who the hell was this pencil-pusher asshole, who'd never done a days' worth of real physical labour in his life, to tell him his business.*

"You're not concerned at all?"

"Not in the least. He shouldn't have come out here if he wasn't prepared for it. I left my wife at home for the same reason, because the forest is no place for women, or for *fragile men*," Graham said with a smirk, staring at Stephen directly, waiting for him to look away first, waiting for him to back down.

"Now hold on a minute! I take offense to that," said Susan.

Graham kept on staring at Stephen, smirking. *What are you going to do about it, big guy?*

After a long while Stephen looked away, took his bottle of water out and had a drink.

"You can take offense if you like. That's fine with me. It doesn't change the simple fact that a woman doesn't belong out here. That's why I left my wife at home. Maybe Harold and Stephen should have done the same. Then we'd be making a lot more progress."

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"You're a very ignorant man," Susan said, turning around and stomping off. She stopped and stood waiting twenty feet away in the darkened crevice between two large boulders. She had heard enough from Graham and was quite disgusted by him now.

"Yeah, so they tell me."

"You're right about me, Graham," Murphy said, "I shouldn't have come out here. I realize that now."

"You're *gaddamned right* you shouldn't have."

"Alright guys, let's just deal with the situation. The fact of the matter is that we're all out here now. So let's just try and do the best that we can," Harold said. "Graham said it'll only be a few more days until we reach the waterfalls. Then we're going to turn around and head back through the woods. So can we try and just make the best of things? Susan, are you okay with that, Honey?"

After a long time, she nodded, although still very upset. Janice went over to console her.

Harold had seldom seen his wife this way. She was usually able to put a positive spin on things no matter what. But Graham's words had really hit a nerve. And just what the hell was he thinking, talking that way? How dare he say that they would have been better off if the wives had been left at home. Pure rubbish, thought Harold. The man seemed to have a way about him that always drove people away from him. And perhaps that was the intention. Perhaps that was the way he really wanted it. Harold remembered a time in grammar school when Graham had been given accolades from a teacher for an essay he had written. The teacher had given him an A-plus for the paper (Graham had typically been a below average student, who had cared very little about doing well at school). When asked to read it in front of the class, he had ripped the paper up, almost out of embarrassment. The teacher had looked at him, dumbfounded. "Why did you do that, Graham?" she had asked him. In reply he had merely shrugged and cast his eyes downward to stare at his desk. A few days later, Harold had asked him why he had torn up the paper? Wasn't he happy that he had received such a good grade on the assignment? Didn't he want to receive any kind of recognition from his fellow students? "I don't care about what any of them think," had been his response. True to form, this had been the way he had lived life for a long time thereafter: as a loner, answering to no one but himself. Not wanting, or needing the companionship of others. Not caring about their petty affirmations, or the silly little cliques that they congregated in so that they could feel important, accepted. It was all foolishness to Graham, and he wanted no part of it. This was something that Harold admired in the man: his desire for individuality, his refusal to compromise. Yet any nobility found in this was far too often eclipsed by the man's self-centeredness and his narcissism, by his childish, perpetually standoffish personality. Harold realized how little Graham had changed since childhood. The boy had become a man, but really they were still exactly the same person in terms of the way they dealt with the world around them. This way of thinking, along with a desperate need to blame others for his own mistakes and wrongdoings, Harold surmised, had clearly led to a lot of Graham's past problems, including his alcoholism and violent behavior. It was unfortunate, but at thirty-five years old, it was unlikely that any significant change was on the horizon.

When they finally emerged from the cave, they continued on the path far down to a large stony, open area. It was here that they would set up camp for the night. Harold and Susan helped Murphy set up his tent, while Graham went off with his rifle. He returned roughly fifteen minutes later with what looked to be three dead birds strung up and hung across his shoulder. Blood from the dead animals had left a darkened stain on the side of his thick, woolly grey jacket. "That was fast," Stephen said, eyeing the birds and patting Graham on the back.

"Doesn't take long when you know how to hunt."

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"No, I suppose not. Practice makes perfect, right?"

"In some cases. But there are some folks who would still make lousy hunters no matter how much practice they got. You have to enjoy it. That makes you better."

"You have to enjoy it? The killing part, you mean? How can someone actually come to enjoy that?"

Graham looked at him oddly. His eyes flashed with cold intelligence. "Killing is natural. It's a necessary part of survival: animals killing weaker animals for sustenance, and humans killing animals for sustenance. It's all necessary. The weak get swallowed up by the strong. You have to be strong in order to persevere in this life. If you're weak, if you sit around sobbing about the *poor animals* or other things like that, then you'll get swallowed up as well. Empathy is weakness. It makes you vulnerable, it makes you into a doormat, it allows people to exploit you and walk all over you. Didn't they teach you any of that at that expensive college your parents sent you to, Mister Smarty-pants?"

"You have a lot of hostility issues."

"Not true. I just have a low tolerance for idiocy."

"And not gleefully revelling in the fact that one can kill defenseless animals is idiocy?"

"*Gleefully revelling?* Who is *gleefully revelling*, you smug asshole? It's simply a natural act. We kill to survive. The strong survive, and the weak perish. End of story. If that concept is too complex for your Ivy League educated mind to grasp then I think you might want to think about coming out here and living with the animals, since you care about them so damned much, that is."

"I just think killing them is wrong if it can be avoided."

"Well it *can't* be avoided, and you're not a vegetarian, are you? So those sound like the words of a hypocrite to me!"

"Guys, please. No need to shout," said Harold, who had come over after hearing the commotion.

Graham scowled at him, then turned around went about setting up the wood for the fire.

"*Jesus*, Harold, what's his problem? I only asked him about hunting, and why he enjoys the killing part of it so much, and he goes off like a lit grenade," Stephen said.

"He just gets a little wound up sometimes, that's all. Try not to say anything to push his buttons. Questioning him about the morality of hunting is a definite no-no."

"I didn't mean to get into any sort of serious morality debate. I think it's odd that a person can get so much gratification out of killing other living creatures."

"He's a bit touchy about things like that."

"No shit."

Later that night, when the others had all gone to their tents Graham stayed up, sitting on an old rock, staring into the fire. The light cast wild reflections against his face, and his cold eyes stared at the flames, as if mesmerized. Often, as a child, he had been sure that he could see faces within the flames; terrified faces, those

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of the damned, the eternally tormented. Their eyes bled, and their voices cried out in horror, but no one could really hear them, for they were no more than ghosts, lost forever in a void of flames and suffering. Now, he thought he could see those faces again, just as he had seen them when he had camped out in this area as a child, with his father next to him, usually swigging from a bottle of booze. This time though, he wondered if maybe his father *was* one of those faces. After all, the old man had shuffled off this mortal coil long ago, and if there was any sort of an afterlife, Graham was fairly sure that his father would be paying for the hell, for the torment that he had put his wife and son through: the constant beatings every time the old man drank, having to go to school with black eyes and fat lips, laughed at and mocked by his peers. Yet, he had not suffered their scorn lightly, oh no. They had soon learned that it was extremely unwise to mock him. Anyone who did, usually caught an even worse beating than the ones his father had so regularly dished out to him. Such were the ways of the world. The weak getting crushed by the strong. He had learned from a young age that this was how things had to be. So, when he had finally become strong enough to stand up to his father, he had done so. He had been sixteen and they had been out here on one of their camping trips. The old man had started in on the booze as soon as they had set up camp for the night, and within a few hours, when he was quite inebriated, he had begun with the name calling, and with telling Graham how useless he was as a son, and how he was a hot-headed fool who would never amount to anything in the world.

"I guess in that case I'd be following in your footsteps then, eh, Dad?"

"What did you say, you smart-mouthed little prick?"

"You heard me. I said I'd be following in your footsteps. Being an absolute zero, a drunk who can barely provide for his family and beats the shit out of his wife and kid constantly to try and somehow soothe his own feelings of inadequacy, to try and make himself feel powerful and important, even though inside he knows that he's a total failure, and that's why he's so *fucking angry and violent all the time!*"

His father immediately sprang up and took a swing at him. He had attempted a long sweeping right hook, and normally he connected with these, but on this occasion, being as drunk as he was, Graham took a quick step backwards and the old man missed completely and stumbled forward, almost falling over completely but only managing to maintain his balance by the thinnest of margins. His legs were wobbly, but despite his state of physical disadvantage, his fury knew no limitations and he cursed and charged forward like a bull, his eyes cold and dark, just like those of his son. He swung wildly at the boy, but again Graham was able to use quick leg movement to step out of the way and dodge the blow. This just made his father even more angry. His eyes squinted, and a long throbbing vein stood out in his forehead (as it did whenever he was angry, or when his face showed an expression of intensity). He came forward again, but this time when he swung and missed, Graham leaped forward and with all of his power smashed his right fist into the old man's jaw. His father fell down, holding his hand to the side of his mouth, spitting out blood. "Okay you *worthless pile of horse shit!* You're finished now," said his father sneering and getting to his feet. Graham saw him wobbling and as the man charged forward screaming bloody murder Graham stuck his foot out and tripped him. He fell flat on his stomach, his face in the dirt. That was when young Graham went and picked up his father's rifle, which he had left beside the fire, right next to his still half-full bottle of Jack Daniel's. He knew that there was no other option. Even if he was able to subdue his father that evening, when he sobered up the next morning it would be curtains for Graham. His father had threatened to kill him before, and his mother too, but after such a humiliation as this, it was very likely that he would not just make an empty threat, but that he would act. So Graham had to act first. There was no other choice; the alternative would likely mean either his own death, or a beating so severe that he would be left on life support, perhaps as a vegetable. That was not going to happen. Not now, not tomorrow, and not ever. He pointed the barrel of the gun at his father's head.

The old man raised his head and looked up at him, his eyes bloodshot, blood dripping from his mouth, a pitiful expression of unquenchable rage still burning on his face, but now there was something else mixed in with that rage, there was something that Graham had never seen before, and had never expected to see on his

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father's face: there was vulnerability, there was the feeble, hopeless look of complete inadequacy, the faint flickering flames of the fire a few feet behind them faintly shone on the dirty angry face of a man who knew himself to be a complete failure, and a man who had chosen to torment those close to him in order to somehow mask the failure within himself, but no mask could cover the woeful expression on the face of Graham's tormentor, and he savoured it as he held the barrel to his father's head. "I guess you never were really such a *tough guy* after all, eh Pops?" Then he pulled the trigger and watched the top of the man's head literally explode.

He stepped back and looked at what he had done. Half of him was horrified, but the other half was exhilarated. He felt a sense of strength, a sense of power. This man would never lay a beating on him again. He had made sure of that once-and-for-all.

He had then taken the gun and thrown it into the river. When he arrived home he had cried hysterically, and told his mother and subsequently, the police, that a hunter had accidentally shot his father. "*What happened to the hunter? If it was an accident why did he take off?*" the police investigator had asked him. "I think he was scared," Graham said, wiping tears away from his eyes, "he was scared that he might have to go to jail for what he did, so he took off running. I chased after him, but I couldn't catch him."

And they had believed him, his mother, the police, all of them. This had given him an even greater sense of power. He had killed and gotten away with it completely. He had gotten rid of the man who had done nothing but beat him up constantly since early childhood. Sure, his father had taught him a few things about nature and hiking and camping, but the bloody noses and swollen lips and black eyes and the constant feelings of pain and humiliation eclipsed all of that. Those days were all over now. He had put an end to that. And no one would ever treat him disrespectfully like that again, or *God help them!*

Here was the boy who had been used as a punching bag for years, now a teenager, close to the verge of blossoming manhood, with the blood of his own father on his hands, and yet his conscience had felt completely clear then just as it did now. This had been a necessary action to him. He had merely done what he perceived as being necessary in order to survive.

Now, as he stared into the flames, and saw the strange, wild crackling orangey-yellow shapes within them, he thought, just for a moment, that he saw his father's face, the same angry, wasted, pathetic face that had looked up at him just before he pulled the trigger. Then, just as fast as it had appeared, the image was gone, a ghost lost to eternity. The stars stared down from up above. Orion, and the big dipper, the constellations glittering faintly far beyond: tiny flickering dots illuminating the black void of space up above. They did not care what went on down below. Just like the moon, they were oblivious to it all. They simply shined on, watching casually while man destroyed man, and man destroyed the earth. Graham didn't care for the stars at all, nor did he care if man destroyed man, or even, for that matter, if man destroyed the earth. It was all inevitable in the end. It was bound to happen, and only a fool would waste his time caring or trying to stop it. The world did what the world saw fit. That was all.

He reached into his backpack and touched the large bottle of whiskey that he had tucked in at the bottom, underneath the few changes of clothing and toiletries which he had brought. He rubbed his hands across the smooth glass and felt a sudden and desperate need for a drink. The urge was overwhelming. This was the worst craving he could remember since sobering up. *No. No, you can't have a drink. You've done so well. You made the decision to change, and you've stayed disciplined about it. Don't ruin all of that now. Discipline! That was the key. Stay disciplined. Don't let your urges and impulses rule you. You are their master, and you have control over them, not vice-versa. Don't let it all slip away now just because of some silly urge.*

But his longing for a drink, for the powerful taste of the whiskey in his mouth, warm and bitter against his tongue, would not subside. Then Harold came out and set next to him by the fire, temporarily taking his

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thoughts away from the bottle in his bag.

"How come you're still up? It's late," Graham said, looking at him quizzically.

"I know. But I couldn't sleep."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I always have trouble sleeping. As long as I get a few hours, then I'm good to go. I've always liked the nighttime anyway. Things are much more quiet while the world is sleeping. I like it that way. Sometimes I think that the whole human race should just be quiet and sleep. Sleep forever. It'd be much better that way."

This was followed by a long silence as they both stared at the fire.

"When I was a kid, and I was out here camping with my old man, I often thought that if you stared long enough at the flames you can almost make out faces within them. You could actually see the faces of the dead, staring back at you from some place far beyond."

Harold squinted his eyes and looked deeper into the flames. He did not see anything resembling human faces. Nothing but formless flickering blazes of light. "I just see flames."

"No imagination."

"I guess not."

"Do you ever think about starting to drink again?"

"I hadn't for a while. But for the past couple of days I have. In fact, I tucked a bottle away in my bag before leaving home. I might well have had some this very night if you hadn't come out here."

"You don't want to start drinking again, Graham. That would be the worst thing that you could possibly do."

"Would it? Really? I think that maybe coming out here with all of you was the worst possible thing I could have done. Your friends are really starting to annoy me, and so is your wife with all of her whining. Don't you know that women aren't cut out for this type of thing? They whine and complain too much. You should have left her at home. I would never bring my wife out here in the wild."

"Susan and I do everything together. That's just the way we are. We're very close."

Graham rolled his eyes. "Sounds like she's got you whipped. Yes sir, it sounds as if she's got you wrapped right around her finger. You'll do whatever she wants to do whenever she wants to do it. Don't you know that a man has to be in control of things? I thought that was common knowledge, at least to men who have any backbone."

Harold shook his head, unsure of what to say and neither of them spoke for a long while.

When Harold finally broke the silence, he saw that Graham was again staring into the fire in that strange, lost way, as if hypnotized by it. "I'm going to go and get some sleep. See you tomorrow."

Graham didn't respond.

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