

The Truth of Relationship

When Will's body was crushed, there wasn't a thunderous sound like that which can accompany *healthy* timber being felled. Instead, from somewhere within the base of a neighboring grand fir, some forty feet away from the small log cabin that was Will's first and final refuge, there had first arisen a sort of moaning, then a vast shifting, a great movement of wind, and some sharp-small cracklings of thinning branches. When the tree went down, the precious life that was Will's passed from his bedroom *onward* in one explosive moment that held not a single gasping witness, not even him. No witnesses among men, and yet there was a sound.

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There was a cool breeze in his mind that Will had smelled many nights before, a dusty and sweet smell like a handful of fresh elderberries. He found himself standing on the edge of a swift river, so talkative, so very much like the Quinault River that ran beside his home. Looking over his shoulder, as always, he saw his Lily again staring at him with that look she typically used in his dreams, his dream now. Was that disappointment? He could never tell. It was a silent look that became so many things as he witnessed it; her blank look was a language all its own. As variegated as the dynamic sputterings of the river but, still, hers was somehow consistent in tone. *You are not enough*. He thought that was the look. The apple tree was behind her, as always, and as always it transformed from a sapling into a lichened elder as he watched. And back. Nothing was what it seemed. And there they were again, sitting beside the young apple tree in his dad's orchard. Ah. Lily had her hand on her belly and was looking down, and the pain inside his heart, then, was again as if he had, and not her, some dark berry growing inside of him. And in the dreams, as she told him it wasn't their baby, her face became an ugly baby's face, and her words crescendoed until they were a baby's caustic wail which continued on and on, past her, past them, moving outward into the atmosphere and diffusing but never really ending, ever. His own body held that wail from then on, sometimes, he thought; he heard it in his dreams.

Lily married George, his best friend in middle school. At the wedding her face was so incredibly beautiful, he'd heard. There had been dancing, butter cream cake and tiny white flowers that lined the tables.

There are indeterminably more movements and sounds that have no witnesses than have them, and as Lily described, the curved arc of her freckled hand emphasizing her belly, the ending of their relationship -- which really couldn't work anyway could it, she'd said -- her soft and desperate breath merged fluidly with a warm wind-current moving past her face, and then the two of them, Breath and Air, were joined by an unexpected third, a fungal spore, that floated along with them, quintessentially silent; when it landed, so gently, microscopic on a tiny green finger of the grand fir, itself just a few generous paces from Will's house, there was no one to witness its new beginning. Still, some part of his fir knew the moment the cedar-apple rust began and, quietly...opened to it.

There was a cool breeze in his mind as Will stood on the edge of the river. Across, perhaps twenty feet, stood a grove of blue spruce, its uniformity calling to him in a way he never understood, otherworldly in its appeal. There was a certain magic those blue spruce seemed to bear within them, a larger-than-life quality that dreams somehow

bring to ordinary things, he thought. Their glass-frosted blues gave him a special feeling of whipped lightness, and peace. Behind him there was a sense of movement, and then there was Lily -- no, Emily, her brown eyes watching him with a sad recognition. *I know you*. The space between them stretched like a special effect in a movie; she called out, always, but he retreated farther and farther. As he watched, her stomach expanded and a wailing baby burst from her, its cries moving out in an invisible shockwave, pushing him that much further from her. The last thing he could see was the apple tree behind her, red first-fruit, and the ground below soaked as if by blood. Four months with Emily was about all they could manage before things began to fall apart. Maybe it was their odd physical similarity, Emily's and Lily's, which made him unable to trust her. Trust her with what? She hadn't waited to find out.

Trust her with him.

His job at the pulp mill wasn't far away, five scenic miles at most. For him, mornings would always come on as a dull surprise; he was one of those deep sleepers, what did they say? Each time a little death. And wasn't it odd how time seemed to transmute little things; ten years, and the river outside had surreptitiously deconstructed its song and smoothed it into a significantly less sonorous white noise, still comforting, though, in the late evenings. *How does a thing lose its power, or gain it?* Outside, his truck waited patiently near the base of that single remaining tree. Bright orange telial horns, he noticed, had again bloomed on various branches, looking eerie as always like some gelatinous flower. He'd photographed one, a year before, being so intrigued -- and, oddly, frightened -- by them, the jellied presence of the fungi being so strangely foreign in contrast to the natural presence of the fir. An invader. Alien fruit. In his mind's eye, he thought of Lily. Pale skin, black hair. Eyes that were soft, hazel, open. He'd heard last week that her second baby was a baby girl, and ironically it was his current girlfriend who'd told him. He'd never mentioned to her about his time with Lily. So long ago.

There are passages of quiet things within a lifetime that a man may never know. The coarse translation of the entire world into his desires might lie within his means, but the careful transformation of his heart into the world of words could remain as foreign and unapproachable as the gods of men. And yet, a heart does speak, its living language flowing so easily, a warm desert wind through the cavernous mouths of a vast and willing macrocosm.

Will peered up the trunk of the grand fir, a meandering expanse of 120 skyward feet. His camel-colored Toyota truck was dwarfed under it, as was everything. He'd tried hugging it one day, ridiculous, months after Lily, when he was sure there wasn't a rumble of car tires along his gravel road, the sound of the rare visitor dropping by. The bark had a ridged, cool feel against his palms. He'd pressed his bearded cheek against the tree and waited. Would he feel the life of the tree? Well, he wasn't sure he'd felt *that*, but the act of hugging something had affected him on a primal level, he was sure. Funny, that a symbolic act of hugging can evoke the presence of the real thing. He remembered the way Lily'd felt, her cheek against his; sometimes he felt like he still moved within the feelings he'd had for her, though not so much anymore? Even a thought of her and a warm presence could appear somewhere inside him, still and glowing.

Light never stops shining, he'd read somewhere. Or, if it does, then it's absorbed into something and becomes something else altogether. Heat maybe. Feeling silly and a

little chilled from the moist river air, he'd released the tree and headed into the house.

A lot had changed since he was twenty. All this time and now it seemed like his whole life had been about trees. Was it five years after Lily left, he'd cut down most of them nearby? The hemlocks, the spruce, the western cedars -- all the diversity except that grand fir, to build himself his little house, something Lily used to talk about wanting. His clear-cutting, though, in retrospect, seemed to have been a catalyst for something else, some ineffable power that transforms one thing into another with no apparent change in form. His house. So delightful one day, he had to admit now felt like a tomb at times.

And here he was, fifty, lying in bed, rowed honey-colored rafters separating him from an endless constellation of stars. Was this, finally, where he would grow old, alone? Is this where he'd die, in this room he'd made? This grave he'd built, something thick and potently cedar that would keep everything out but the earth's fresh water. Why had he taken all that dynamic growth and turned it into something static? Well, the fir. Too late he'd understood the effects of cutting down its neighboring trees, those subtle repercussions that manifest in one life due to the changes in others'. Now, a fine crack licked gently down the southwest side of the fir; at places four inch strips of bark hung down like so many dog tongues.

He'd learned. The lives of trees and their delicate nuance. When surrounded by a family of protective woods, a healthy tree might very well decide to dedicate its energy towards its upper leaves and the intake of radiant energy...instead of developing a hearty bark needed to protect its trunk from the elements. Take those surrounding trees away, though, and then introduce a winter scenario, and that bark's cells, now exposed, are suddenly ill-equipped to defend themselves against the warming and freezing of a typical Washington winter -- days into fast night and those sudden fatal temperature drops. The exposed cells get warmed, sun-coaxed out of their easy hibernation, and then a chill nightfall races in and the newly awakened cells can't adapt quickly enough. So, freezing and death. And then things like splits can happen.

All this he learned too late. All kinds of things can enter into a tree after that. Fungi, balsam bark beetles, heart rot, and it's the little sequences of things that can contribute to the overall demise of a tree. This is the truth, he knew now, that loggers often fail to discern. Or choose not to. The truth of relationship.

There was a cool breeze moving through him as he stood looking across the river, the dense spruce a cyanine heaven across the water -- which was a little lower, it seemed? A little less swift, if that was possible, and carrying the smell of Fall through the air. A fish-flash of movement caught his eye and he looked up and saw, smiling woman across the water, his mother in a bright red dress. Auburn hair. She was gone when he was 10, but never truly gone, at least if his dreams had anything to do with it. What could summon a woman to abandon her family and leave a boy in the dispirited hands of his father? Well, something as potent as *variety*, he'd learned later. Freedom from a small town and the small-town minds that burden it. He wondered if she'd found it. Maybe her smile meant that she had. Wouldn't it be curious if he got across the river some day and found a woman's shoe on the ground there, right where she'd been, he thought? But then maybe that would mean she hadn't made it to wherever she was headed. He smiled and waved, and when he looked again he saw her once again leap into the river, then gone. For just a moment, a red river.

Will would sit for hours looking across the Quinault. He'd sit on the bank by the tree in the early evenings, and at times his sitting seemed more than just fatigue from the mill; at times there was just something that didn't seem to connect his intention of *standing* to his actual body. Wasn't that the very thing that made his body *his*...that he could move it? So then, when he'd yelled at Lily, and she'd run away exactly as he'd wanted, was she not in some sense his body too? Something inside him made her move. Well, what was it, inside him, that made Lily get pregnant with George? For God's sake. He watched the evening shift slowly towards a smoldering amber dusk. Night.

There was a chilled breeze in his mind as Will stood rigid by the edge of the river. Something felt different this time, he sensed. There was a feel of urgency, or potency in the air itself and, beside him, his favorite fir soared high in its eternal stretch toward a churning night sky. He touched the tree with his dream hand and it trembled slightly. A whole shifting of mood seemed to pervade his dream in a way that wasn't familiar. Everything powerful and dark. He strained his eyes behind him and far in the distance was the familiar apple tree, lichened and decrepit. It held its shadowy old form. He thought he saw his Lily sitting under it, her back to him, holding a dark child. Sadness, as well as a desperate desire to cross the river, now suddenly filled him. It flooded in. Sadness. In his bed, a foot twitched.

There was nothing Will heard in the physical realm when the fir crashed, its huge base long compromised by rot, its upper trunk slicing down like an axe through his tiny cabin. But inside, deep inside his long, long dream, his lifelong dream and his final dream in this world, Will began to cross the river.