

Faded Into Blue

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At least once a week, but no more than once a day, a twin turbo-prop rode up the neck's gravel road—the one that split the Adam's apple dunes in two—and socked the head right in the jaw, splitting its lip clean open. To the east, caught extending into the bay, almost to the shoulder, were the hairs, the beard, the conglomerate of eutrophied muck tangled in an interwoven algal mess along the benthic zone. To the west, caught against the open sky and unblemished sea, was Carrickfinn Beach, shaved smooth by the endless droning razor-waves that cut away even the deepest of divots.

My footprints shaved away behind me, as if I was never really there, and Chekov's rifle slung over my shoulder. Each step tapped the butt deeper into my back like a nail. A necrotic bruise spread, spider-webbing into chlorosis.

Ahead of me were the stones, the heaps of moon rocks, cubed and smoothed. Herbivorous teeth looking for a bite. I flossed through them, dragging my feet to collect cracked bivalves into little piles that could be swept back into the water column. Then, as any worthwhile brusher knows to do, I flossed back through to the beach.

The sand beneath the breaking water enveloped my wellies and yanked down, begging me to stay. I couldn't oblige. There were things to be done, to be ended, before play. I found a dry patch away from the water and waited; my eyes locked on the dunes towering above.

The behemoths were tumors, formed by mounds built on lost disarray, held together, calcified, by nets

of roots. As they expanded, the neck choked, and air struggled to squeeze through nature's winding maze.

There were three things that didn't struggle through them. The first was the hares, who trampled the grass and moss so often that their trails riddled the landscape from hole to hole. The second was the dogs, who followed the hares' trodden map but could not hide beneath the surface. The third was him, the man with only a mouth, who wandered where he should and lingered where he shouldn't, coming and going, very little wanted, very little needed.

He stood before me with a crooked grin cracked below his empty sockets. He couldn't see, but he knew the way. "It's delightful to see you," he said. "Why have you found me on this lovely day?"

"I haven't decided yet," I said. My eyes were snared behind him on his never-fading footprints. Even if he walked near the shore, where razor burn festered most, they wouldn't shave. His mark was permanent and unyielding. His tracks were ubiquitous. I looked into his skull and unshouldered my rifle. "I think I came here to kill you."

His head tilted askew. "Then why have you not already?"

The bolt slid light: open. "Because a small part of me still wants to see."

With a nod, "You, and most." He took a step forward, his naked toes curling around a shell. I expected a crab to run out and crunch between his metatarsals, but the air was too thin for that kind of life.

“I can let you see.”

I held his sickle smile down, tremors on the edge of my lips. “Mind over matter.” The bolt slid heavy: closed.

“Right now,” he took another step forward, “you see regret.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “In coming here, I think.”

“To Carrickfinn?”

“To somewhere new.” I fit the butt beneath my collarbone. “I spent years begging to get away, years searching for some escape. Now the difference is driving me mad.”

“Habitualized?”

“Haunted,” I clicked my tongue. “By you. None of this is my choice. I’m caught on your reel.”

A fly buzzed out of his right socket. “You want what you can’t have.”

“I want to live here without being anchored down by you.”

“Anchored down?” he laughed. “No, no, no, my dear friend. I help you be free. I help you expand and prepare. There is so much to see, so much left in store for you. Let me take you to where you want to go.”

“I think I’ve seen too much.” I found his head between the sights. “Perhaps it’s time.”

He chuckled. “Aim for the heart. That’s where I have a hold on you.”

I obliged.

“All your life, you’ve lacked verve, and now here we are.” He stepped in close and traced his finger around the muzzle. “But please, before you squeeze, give one last look. See, one last time.”

I held my aim.

“I’m yours to do with, my friend. Use me.”

“What would I even see?”

“Oh, the same, the same, and the same. A promise of what will come and what will be.”

“Empty.” I tore skin off my lip. “Your knowledge doesn’t control the future.”

“All actions are truth-making, so the future controls

my knowledge. The choice is there, and though I happen to know what that choice may be, it is still yours.”

“I’ve seen before, and it’s hardly truth”

He smiled a delicious smile. “For you, a bounded man, not quite yet; for me, unbounded, always.”

“So, I see one last time, and then what?” I dragged my finger across the trigger, each ridge catching the edge. “Will that let time go lightly?”

“If you choose.”

The gooseflesh rose beneath my layers, mammalian irony. It would be so easy to shrug the weight off my shoulders. All it would take was a twitch, a spasm. Through the trailing smoke, he would slump to the ground, a little emptier on the inside. I would walk away, washing my hands in the sea and letting my feet sink into the sand, and then it would be my turn to smile. But no matter how far I would go, his rotting stench would carry. It would trickle in and crinkle my nose, and I would know I had spoiled the land. The only way out would be to remove him. Dead weight to carry, back on the shoulders.

I lowered the rifle.

His open palm extended. “Follow. This is your time.”

How nice of him to offer.

Like the dogs, we walked along the hare trails, tiptoeing through the dew-ridden grass and over the swollen carpet moss, between the towering dunes and past the blowout.

Sometimes, when the wind wandered lost through the neck and had no place to go, it would nosedive deep into the hare holes. Running, hiding, and encompassing itself in solid comfort like a child under a bed. But every child must move on. Pressurized, the wind would erupt, a cacophony of brittle deconstruction as the roots wriggled and the sand fell apart. Blowout. The hares lost a home, and the dogs broke their feet in the ditches that remained.

We passed several blowout carcasses on our

way. The smell hammered into the nostrils much like the wind invaded the holes, resulting in a snot-filled explosion. The maggots wriggled in the rotting flesh, and the dipterans swarmed in clouds above, clogging the mind.

Life beyond death, a comfort and a curse.

“May I ask you one question?” he said with a flicker of his tongue.

“You will anyway.” I hopped over a waterlogged moss bed.

“Why do you no longer find this necessary?”

I hesitated, letting the distance stretch between us. “It’s time I be myself.”

“This is yourself.”

“I’ve moved on.”

He laughed. “Yet you come back.”

The sun came back, if not for a moment, breaking through the cumulonimbus blanket that suffocated the land, that swallowed every last plane taking off towards the sky, towards the south, towards the crowds. A ray or two peeked through, seeking home, a permanent dwelling place. Then the holes filled in, the rays dimmed, and the moment was over.

“I can’t help myself,” I said. “I’m on your reel. That’s why I brought a solution.” I shifted my rifle.

“Will that bring you satisfaction?” he asked.

“At least a little. You’ll probably live on, but at least I can say I tried.”

“True. It is always worthwhile to try.” He stopped in front of a door—three-feet by six-eight, four indented patterns lacquered maroon, and a little scratched hook, begging for holiday—embedded into a dune. A brass knocker hung near the knob. A bit low for most people, but just right for me.

I reached to enter, but he grabbed hold of my wrist, jagged nails digging into my skin.

“One moment, my dear,” he stepped beside the doorway and yanked out a fistful of roots from the dune. The sand collapsed, and, in its place, a four-paned window appeared, once edged with white, but now

crusted yellow. The curtains draped to block out the sun, but through the crack, there was a flicker of light. Someone was home.

“Will I just watch?” I asked.

“You will see,” he commanded before knocking three times at the door.

From my sunken perch between the couch cushions, I heard the three knocks, the starting gun. I dropped the tea bag into the boiling water and sat back.

Twenty years spent between the walls, navigating the spackle and eschewing the mold. Once a week, once a day, once an hour, turning to go, but going nowhere. Twenty years spent running twenty feet just to arrive at the same house, and then another twenty feet just to arrive once again. An endless feedback loop stuck in descending cyclical time. Anywhere’s a better place to be.

When I was young, when I still uncovered the stones in the yard, poked at ant colonies, and marveled at tubular arachnid silk, I tried to escape with a stuffed military sack pack over my shoulders. It was filled with three pairs of socks, four shirts, zip off pants, extra Benadryl, eight expired cans, one half-eaten bag of chips, a journal with no pen, dog tags, coyote tags, a tarp, some wood glue, three and a half pocket knives, a double-a radio, and surplus triple-a’s just in case. Yukon, ho! The edge of town, ho!

I begged for crop circles in the fields beyond. I begged for targets. I took aim. Fire.

Twenty feet, and another twenty feet, and another twenty feet.

Dichotomy paradox. I never arrived.

But one time I had left. At least, I think I did. That’s what he told me. That’s what he showed me. I had punched the head in the chin, socked some whiskers clean off, and made it my own. I had embedded myself in the folklore and lost my chains. I had moved on.

And then I had moved back.

Three knocks echoed from the maroon door once again. The tea was steeped, but now it was cool to the

touch.

A glimpse beyond. A crack in the surface, now coming to shatter. I wanted to punch it, weather the cuts, vaporize it, breathe the silica air. Eutrophied muck grew from my chin in splotches, tangling around my throat and collapsing my trachea. The wind had nowhere to go, so it dug deep and erupted, a pressurized bomb set off by my own stagnancy.

I opened the door, and the man with only a mouth entered.

“Wipe your feet,” I told him. “You always leave footprints everywhere.”

He streaked my welcome mat with grain-fed mud. His toes would never shine, but it did the job. Not that I cared much. My feet were plenty dirty too.

“Thank you.” I dropped some ice cubes—an attempted salvage mission—into my tea and took a few good sips.

“Dear me,” he whispered through a grin, “it’s quite dark in here. I feel like some wriggling earthworm, and I’m sure you do too. Do you mind if I open the blinds?”

“You can’t even see.”

He shrugged and let the light in through my four-paned window.

Three photos were on the wall. One old, one absent, and one new. The old was of an infant tossing his stuffed bear down the stairs. His plaid overalls were opaque through the sun stained blue tinge. The absent was a stock photo surrounded by a sea-shell frame. A do it yourself masterpiece made from a do it my way kit. The new was of a beach, clean and solitary with moon rocks rising from the plain. Rain-jacket armor over water-logged skin.

“Why are you here again?” I asked. “It seems a little rude to show up unannounced.”

“If I was unwanted, perhaps it would be.”

“You are unwanted.”

“Your façade is charming, however deleterious. No matter. A more pressing matter is at hand it seems. So, if you don’t mind me asking, why the knife?”

It felt warm in my hand. Ten inches of serrated steel molded into a fine point. By the pricking of my thumbs, it hadn’t been sharpened in years, but it still tore.

“I think I want to be rid of you,” I said. “Seems fitting.”

“You don’t want to be rid of me. You want to be rid of what I can show you.” He took a step towards me, laying one splayed toe down at a time. “You need me. You’re not happy without me.”

“I’m not happy with you.”

“I’m your only connection to the time you left.”

“You’re a virus to the time I have left.”

He grabbed my hand and brought the blade to his throat. “Then kill me. Kill the only thing you have left.”

Eighty-four hooks, cast by rusted steel rods, burrowed into me. Their barbs—some treble, some jig—caught me. The string was held taught. There was no step I could take without being pulled back. There was no thought I could think without being yanked back to the head.

“You need to see,” he whispered.

“I want to be done with this.”

“You belong there. Let me take you back.”

“I can go back on my own. Without you.”

He laughed. “How silly of you, my dear. Do you really believe that?” He pushed the knife against his skin. “You will never be that full again. But if you truly want to, go ahead, grasp at your straws. Just remember that I am your only option for something more.”

“As if you’re giving me anything more than straws.”

“What I show you is real. When you see, you’re truly there.”

“I can do better than you.”

“Then kill me. Drag that blade across my throat, watch me die, and remember that it was you that threw away your only chance at life.”

I squeezed the handle.

“I’m your only passage to that moment, your only way of actualizing your aim.”

I stared into his sockets, into the flesh fading into

darkness. I needed to be, not just to see. I needed to fire. The pack was still in the basement, the clothes were clean, the cans were still past due. I could still run.

“One more time?” I said.

“One more time.”

I nodded and scratched the blade off his epidermis.

His hand slithered around and caught hold of my wrist, jagged nails digging deep into my skin. A tug, a yank, a direction. He pulled me over to the four-paned window and stood me up straight.

“See,” he commanded.

I saw myself through the window. My mug was empty. No more tea, no more melted ice. A blank slate. There I was, rain-jacket shrugged around my shoulders, damp jeans clung to my legs, and wellies up my calves; and there I was, flannel draped across my back, jeans held up by a frayed rope belt, and eight-year-old socks threaded around my toes.

“What is this?” I said.

“Identity,” the man said before shrinking away into the corner.

My face dripped more than the tears, more than the mist. It melted into the fabric below, into the slouch and grumble, encysting into my stomach and anchoring me down, anchoring me from thought to reality.

I mumbled through the window, but I couldn't hear. I needed to hear.

I took the butt of the gun, and I took the handle of my knife, and I shattered the glass between myself. The shards crunched beneath my wellies and cut through my threadbare socks as I stepped forward. With no divide, a look—nothing more than a glance—into my eyes, into an understanding. There was no separation; there was no distance. One in the same, I was I.

“Why do you keep coming back?” I asked myself.

“If I knew the answer, I wouldn't.”

I looked into my eyes, young, yet weathered. Metals and nutrients leaked from them, bloodshot. Barren land seeping into barren water. The fish kill was heavy.

“Cut the barbs and run to where he can't find you,”

I said. “Anywhere but here.”

“They're in too deep. I may cut too much.”

“Then stay. Please, for the love of me, stay. Don't come back.”

“He'll take me back,” I said, shaking my head.

“Offers I can't refuse.”

I adjusted my grip on the handle and ran my finger along the barrel. “It's time to be rid of him then.”

Over in the corner, the man with only a mouth took a break from sharpening his teeth with his tongue to shudder and laugh.

I sighed. “You know I can't carry that weight.”

“Can I even live without him?”

“Maybe, but it's not worth the risk.”

I nodded. “Then where does that leave me?”

“Still lost, I suppose.”

I hummed, two-toned. “So, I should stay.”

“In both places, yes.”

“And forget?”

“Yes.”

I laughed, crinkled skin folding at the corners of my eyes, lapses of blue-green flickering with the occasional combustion. “I guess there'll never be an answer.”

“To what I'm seeking? Not a chance.”

There were other places beyond the dunes, beyond the home. One was on the back patio of a three-storied townhouse. The air was crisp, the food was dense, and the pages to thumb through were endless. Another was among the jutting rocks with cracks filled in by snow, above the valley, where the mugs were filled to the brim, the pots were melted, and the bread was homemade. There was another in the middle of the street, surrounded by chalk and broken brakes. There was another, but I did not know.

“Tell me this, at least, is it better where I am?”

“No, but it will be. Give it time.”

I nodded and looked myself up and down, taking in the nooks and crannies that only I knew about, the places where the hooks caught and the waves shaved.

“Thank you,” I said, before turning away, back to my

chilled tea.

I smiled a heavy smile and left, wandering through the winding maze of dunes until a twin turbo-prop socked the head in the jaw and led me out. When I reached the shore, I flossed through the herbivorous teeth and revisited the shore, where I flipped off my wellies and sunk my toes into the sand. The man with only a mouth lurked behind the tall grass as he always would and watched my digits fade into blue. I didn't have the strength to carry him, nor did I have the strength to leave him behind, but perhaps someday I would have the strength to take his hand, for once, and help him see. Hope is a dangerous thing, however, and it's best not to dwell in it.

By the time I walked away, I was beneath the stars. They winked at me every step of the way. Behind me, the endless droning of razor waves cut away my prints, as if I was never really there, but the shore left little grains under my nails, in my wellies, and inside my ears. Little seeds sown as reminders. Reminders that I was there. Reminders that I had nowhere and everywhere to be.