

Our Private Little Forest



It was peaceful; the singing of the crickets flowing with the sweeping breaths of the trees made the whole place dreamlike. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He watched the slowly setting sun pass its hazy rays through the branches and leaves that danced to the symphony of peace. Payton rolled over and rose to his knees, brushing the dirt and dead leaves from his neon green t-shirt, standing up then stooping to claim his faded red backpack-slash-pillow. One more deep breath and he was off, mom would worry if he wasn't home before dark, and she would most likely need cigarettes. Payton pulled his black rimmed glasses from his pocket and slid them on, and the hazy dream world snapped into crispy precision.

The path was simple and was certainly not long, this tiny little grove of trees was less than a block around. Payton was out of the 'forest' in minutes, taking a dissatisfied step onto the pavement then beginning his walk uphill for a block to the apartment complex he and his mother lived in. The world was red by the time he opened the door to apartment 8, and he could smell in the air that his mother had been drinking. He was small for a nine-year-old, but it had its advantages outside of school, he could be sneaky. He always knew where his mother was in the apartment, just by scanning to see where the smoke was thickest. Today she was in the kitchen, but it would be short lived. The T.V. in the living room was blaring an advertisement for Dominos Pizza and he heard the clink of a glass bottle being slid back into the freezer. Payton dropped his backpack quietly next to the door and slid behind the couch with a smile on his face.

"Did I hear my little boy?" she cooed as she sauntered into the living room holding a tumbler of amber liquid and ice. Her red hair was hanging loose at her shoulders and swayed as she walked towards the couch with a smile. Payton began to giggle as she got closer, the glassy sound of ice clinking in a moving glass getting louder and louder...

"Gotcha!" she yelled, and tousled his hair, Payton laughed and crawled from his hiding place. He grabbed his bag and headed for his room, but his mom grabbed his shoulder before he could go anywhere. "Shoes, Payton..." she said, smiling "Always the shoes."

He shrugged her hand off his shoulder and dropped his dirty shoes next to the door, then jogged towards his room.

“How was school today?” she called before he closed the door,

“Mom, it’s still summer!”

He heard her mumble under her breath, probably something about how she ‘knew that’. His mother was young as far as he knew, his friend Jake back in Washington had a mom who was ancient in comparison. Payton sat on the floor and pulled out his drawing supplies, wondering how old a grown up needs to be to have All Simons’ disease, which always seemed like a dumb name.

Payton was drawing away trying (and failing in his own eyes) to recreate the perfection of the Little Forest when he heard his mothers heavy, drunk footsteps approaching. The door swung open, and his mother walked in, then half sitting, half falling she sat next to him on the floor.

“Thass pretty, Pate” she slurred, running her fingers clumsily through his hair.

“I don’t wanna go to the gas station...” Payton whined pre-emptively, “Mister Nowitzke always tells me to say weird things to you for him.” He looked up at her with a child’s pleading eyes.

“Well aren’t you a smarty-farty AND a cutey-patootey?” she laughed for some time at this before continuing. *“Misser Nowitzke is just being friendly dear, come on...be a good boy and help me up so I can get my purse.”*

Payton stood up and took his mother under the arm, and she stumbled a few times as she rose using him as a crutch. *“I love you Patey, you’re a good son”* she blurted after she had steadied herself. They walked into the living room, and she plopped onto the couch next to her purse, then fished out a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to him. *“I expect my change, but you can get a candy bar or somethin.”* She laid down on the couch using her purse as a pillow (a family trait, he thought.) Payton pulled a light blanket up over his mothers’ shoulders and kissed her forehead, then grabbed his backpack and shoes, and headed out the door. It was dark out now and the bugs were relentlessly banging against the glass of the windows in the lobby and spinning wildly around the entrance light. Payton tucked the twenty into his small pocket and headed left to Nowitzke’s Gas and Grocery, oh joy.

“Nowitzke’s Gas and Grocery!” he began to himself, “Do you have a mom? Is your father dead, or away? Give her a kiss for me and tell her to call for Christ’s sake!” he spat at the pavement and smiled at the ‘splat’ sound it made. His eyes could have been shut and covered and he still would have known he was approaching Nowitzke’s, the constant buzz of bug lamps paired with crappy 80’s music blaring from the speakers outside made for a wonderful ambience.

Mister Nowitzke must have seen him walking up because he had his mother's brand of cigarettes ready and waiting on the counter, his greasy face spread in a smile that screamed more mature thoughts than Payton as yet had thought. Payton ignored him and went into the 'overpriced canned food' aisle, and grabbed two cans of generic ravioli, then with dread in his heart he approached the counter.

"Hey sport!" mister Nowitzke began, Payton HATED it when he called him sport, that's what his father called him before he died and mister Nowitzke couldn't hold a match to his father, let alone a torch.

"Hey, champ." Payton replied dryly.

"Ra-vi-oh-li's and-a a pack-a Marb-a Reds-a" Mister Nowitzke said in an absurd Italian accent. "That-a will-a be-a four-a dollars and-a forty-two cents-a"

Payton handed Nowitzke the twenty from his pocket and waited for his change. He began to imagine as Mister Nowitzke took his time, what would happen if a robber came in. The man would kick the door in, knocking the little bell off the wall and scream something like,

"EVERYBODY DOWN! I DON'T WANT NO HEROES!"

But he wouldn't know that Payton Arthur Richards was on the case. He'd grab his ra-vi-oh-li off the counter and baseball throw it at the shotgun wielding thug and as Payton put his foot on the thug's chest in victory, he'd say:

"Change."

"...What?"

"Take your change, kid."

Payton laughed as he took his \$15.58 and his ra-vi-oh-li's, receiving a sideways glance from Mister Nowitzke.

"Hey kid!" Nowitzke yelled as the perfectly functional doorbell chimed, Payton didn't respond but turned and looked back at the greasy owner. "Give your mother a kiss from me... and tell her to call me for Christ's sakes!"

Payton gave Nowitzke as believable a thumbs up as he could muster and left quickly. Payton stopped briefly at the edge of the white aura of Nowitzke's Gas and Grocery to put the ravioli and Marb

Reds into his backpack while fishing out a flashlight for the stop he intended to make before he went home. The walk was peaceful enough, even though he turned his head behind him every ten seconds to make sure his imaginary thug wasn't there seeking vengeance. Somehow, out of the light of Nowitzke's, a can of ravioli didn't seem like enough protection. Payton passed his house slowly to make sure his mom wasn't waiting with supernatural prescience at the front door, tapping her foot in disapproval, then headed off down the hill to the little forest. At the forest's edge Payton had a cold chill run down his spine, this idea suddenly felt very stupid.

He clicked the flashlight on and illuminated the dead fingers of the branches and caused all the monsters to hide, peeking around the trees when they thought he wasn't looking. He went in. He had only lived around here for two months, but most of his free time had been spent in this forest, so he knew the path to his little lean-to hut like the back of his hand day or night. Five minutes of steadily creeping led Payton to his hideout and he scanned the area for a specific rock. When he finally found it, he walked over and rolled the rock out of the way. Payton dusted away the dirt and leaves to reveal a square piece of sheet metal that he pulled, uncovering a two-foot-deep hole with a milk crate in it, which held a Butterfinger, some baseball cards, a cool rock with crystals in it, and his father's dirt covered combat knife. To these he added a can of ravioli then closed and covered the stash again.

The walk back was uneventful until he reached the edge, and he heard a man yelling as well as quick footsteps running ahead of him. Along with the footsteps Payton could hear what sounded like a little girl crying. He quickly clicked his flashlight off and peeked out from behind a nearby tree like one of the monsters he was just afraid of. Her sprint slowed in front of him, and a little figure came into view, she was too far ahead to be clear to him even with his glasses on, but he knew she couldn't be much older than he was.

"Hello?" she pleaded, taking a few steps towards the forests edge. "I saw your light...help?"

Payton's blood froze, he didn't know what to do, this was no criminal whom he could vanquish with a can of ravioli, she was real and needed help.

"Hello?! Please, he's drunk!" she whispered hoarsely to anyone who might be listening.