

They were tourists.

That's what he told the kids as they whipped through the dusk out of Portland into the foothills, the A.M. radio still dry-heaving the latest on Watergate and Vietnam through larger and larger chunks of static. He just needed a few days to figure out his next move — *their* next move — and what better place was there to think than the beach?

"Don't we have school tomorrow?" Audrey asked from the backseat in the kind of incredulous tone only natural to a 16-year-old girl.

Well, Bonneville Dam it. He would have to call their schools in the morning. Did the cabin even have a phone? He really hadn't thought this out. Ben Driscoll cinched a brand-new Parliament between his lips then punched the dash lighter a little too hard as he tried to smile into the rearview.

Audrey caught him in the mirror, one brow raised and waiting. She had inherited her mother's stink-eye; a practical heirloom from his deceased wife.

Sam didn't even look up from the book in his lap. With a flashlight cradled in his neck to illuminate the pages, Ben's 12-year-old son looked older than his station. Bearded with shadow, the light playing off the wire-rimmed glasses that sat atop the eye-patch over his right eye, he looked like some kind of intellectual dwarf pirate minus the hat. Ben wondered, with his son's sorry lot of late, if Sam raised his head for much of anything anymore.

"What's the matter, Odd?" Ben said to his daughter. "Don't like it when your father goes groovy? Makes an impromptu plan?"

"Ew," his daughter said, visibly shuddering even in the dark of the station wagon. "You are so far from *groovy* you don't even know how to use that word. Nobody *goes* groovy. Groovy is just ... *groovy*."

Ben sighed and checked the gas gauge. The needle was still hovering around half a tank, thank God. With the gas stations in Portland recently shuttered behind their *OUT OF GAS* signs thanks to OPEC, he had had to abridge his getaway plan. His buddy Rex had rented a little place outside of Cannon Beach over the last summer and had passed along the info. After laying low for a few days, they would be reborn. Now he just had to figure out how to

tell the kids their old lives were dead.

As they passed the summit, it began to rain in sheets. Ben had the sensation that they were driving underwater. Next time you commit grand larceny, genius, Ben said to himself, maybe don't do it in October?

Approaching U.S. 101, somehow the rain intensified. Ben could barely make out Sultan, their terrier mutt, whimpering in the rear of the vehicle, but Audrey was on it, turning around to comfort the dog.

"Did you know that there's supposed to be treasure buried on Neah-kahnie Mountain?" Sam said. "It's supposed to be haunted. Cursed. People who go looking don't come back. Can we go?"

"Yawn," Audrey said.

Ben thought about his own ill-begotten treasure. He had stuffed \$15,000 into the spare-tire well of their Plymouth Satellite. Buried beneath suitcases, picture frames, bikes, and one muddy terrier lay their future, but oh how cursed did it already feel.

Cancer doesn't just dig one grave. It has enough gravity to sink whole clans. He had lost their house just to pay for losing his wife. Stuck in a two-bedroom with two kids, and then every morning on site there's awful Marilyn Horn with her checkbook, erecting her family's dream house one signature at a time.

It takes quite a while to drive from North Portland to the West Hills. Lesser men get to thinking.

By Monday Marilyn Horn would start asking about her lumber and she would find her foreman gone.

"Let's see what the weather has in store, buddy," Ben said, "but a hike sounds like fun. This week is all about fun. In fact, I say we play a game. Have you guys ever wanted to be someone else?"

"Only like every day of my life," Audrey deadpanned.

The rain went full riot, and for a moment there was no way to distinguish elk from tree, and Ben just had to swallow faith that 101 was still heading south in front of them. The full moon was no help.

"Let's pretend to be a different family," he said.

Sam turned off his flashlight and Ben tried to blink away every psychedelic color that throbbed at his peripheral. The station wagon's roof kept

getting pummeled, and the emptiness of the passenger seat next to him had never felt so vast.

"But I like being Sam Driscoll," Sam said.

"You sure about that, buddy?" Ben asked.

An orange light flashed above the car, revealing the dark, flailing arms of the trees at the side of the road, but Ben could not tell what direction the light had come from as the rain and sky had bled into a single thing. Seemed too low to be a plane but Ben couldn't be sure, and they hadn't passed another car for miles, meaning they were the only ones stupid enough to be out here.

Audrey was the first to see the stranger standing on the shoulder of the road.

"Bad night to be hitchhiking," Ben said matter-of-factly.

"Aren't you going to stop?" Audrey asked. "It's pouring."

"We're only going a few more miles," Ben said. "Wouldn't do them a lot of good."

"But I thought you were *going groovy*, Dad. Joining the revolution?"

"Oh, for crissakes," Ben muttered as he pumped the breaks and guided the Satellite toward the shoulder.

"Dad," Sam said.

"What's that smell?" Audrey asked. "Is there a beached whale around here? I think I'm going to barf."

Sultan began to growl.

As Ben focused, he noticed that the figure in the rain hadn't made a move toward the car. He wasn't even looking in their direction but at the tree line instead.

Sultan barked.

"Dad," Sam said.

His arms were at his side. Had he even stuck his thumb out?

"Dad!" Sam said more emphatically.

He had no bag. No jacket. Just a soaked Pendleton plaid buttoned to his Adam's apple, and something else . . . draping off his arms. Ben immediately thought of limp tentacles, as if this stranger were wearing a dead octopus like a shawl. He had no face. Was he wearing a mask? Ben thought he could see wet tufts of dark hair, an earlobe peeking through the covering. No, not a mask, but a wrapping, heavy with rain and soil and eclipsing his entire head. He was just eyes and a mouth embraced by gauze.

"Dad!" Sam said. "Is that a mum-

my!?"

Then, quick as a jolt of lightning, this thing was at the front passenger door, smacking the window and shivering the handle as it moaned in some sort of guttural cow dialect. Audrey screamed and Sultan barked incessantly. Had Ben remembered to lock the door? As perverse silver linings go, he realized that he had stopped unlocking that door after Jessica died. Ben peeled out onto the highway, but the thing persisted, running the length of the station wagon, and smearing the rear passenger-door window with a viscous liquid emitted from its bandaged palm that resembled chocolate pudding.

It would be another two miles before Audrey stopped screaming, Sultan stopped barking, and Sam would unfold himself from the fetal position to watch the rain wash the smear of goo off his window.

Ben welcomed back the persistent sound of the rain on the roof. On the radio, Nixon still refused to hand over his Oval Office tapes to Archibald Cox.

"Dad?" Sam asked. Ben looked at his son in the mirror. He had taken off his glasses, but his right eye remained behind the patch. "Was that a monster?" he asked.

Ben couldn't say. He didn't know exactly what a monster looked like.

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Rex had said the Surf's End House was cozy, which, in real estate, means small. This place wasn't cozy, it was rustic, which, in real estate, means dilapidated. Located at the dead end of a short access road, Ben had noticed only one other property on the street as they drove up.

Rain had been punching this place into the sand for years. Buckling slightly through the middle, wild vegetation bookended either side with what appeared to be the pressure of a vice. The worn, cracked shingles of the siding dripped with black lichen, as if the house had been crying though mascara. The station wagon's headlights exposed a patchwork of fuzzy green moss up on the roof. Ben could see a single fern growing up there too next to the chimney. Besides the fern, the house also came with a stone-faced old man sitting on the covered porch, a

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