

Ben had noticed it too when they walked in. It was faint, but ever-present, sharp and saline like a fouled brine. Just as Ben would begin to forget about it, the smell would return, retrieved like an unwanted memory, prickling his nostrils into hard O's.

"Different places have different smells, Odd," he said. "You probably won't even notice it when you wake up in the morning. And if it is a dead squirrel, I'm sure Sultan will let us know."

Of course, after he got the kids in bed, he immediately shimmed the knob of the basement door, but it was deadbolted. So he poured himself another bourbon, pining to see how the honeyed firelight from the wood stove would dance off Jessica's auburn hair. A couple more bourbons and a half-filled ashtray nearly erased the cottage's wandering stench and the bad taste that Earl Sloane had left in Ben's mouth. A ghost? Really? He replayed the meaty smack of the creature's palm against the car's window until the network broadcast bid adieu for the night with the "Star-Spangled Banner."

Smack! That's about as corporeal as they come.

As the broadcast settled into static, he listened to the rain spray the house. He didn't trust Earl Sloane enough to leave \$15,000 in a parked car. But where else could he stash it away from both Earl and the kids? He fingered the seams of the knotty pine, but nothing gave. The kitchen cabinets were too likely to be explored. There was a foot of air under the platform bed in his room which left little to the imagination. So he began to rummage through the built-ins, discovering a Bible on a bed of seashells, a local area guide, a drawer full of machine parts, some extra beach towels, a crab pot, a collection of 8-tracks that ranged from country to doo wop, a guest log, a misplaced set of tongs, and, in the bottom drawer, a heap of skulls reeking of dust and death.

Vertebrates. Animals. Critters. Trophies? The waft from the drawer was arid, deep, and unlike the stench that had been following him around the house. He counted seventeen, all various shapes and sizes. Maybe a deer, maybe a raccoon or two, nothing human, but maybe some of these registered too familiar.

Sultan had tuckered himself out sniffing the baseboards and lay dead

asleep atop the throw pillow Ben had set on the floor. He pulled one skull from the drawer and set it near Sultan's sleeping head as his hand shook at the eerie similarity.

•••

*He will forget how squishy they are when they open. He will never remember how good its steam felt on his chin as the cold rain soaked his covered head. He will not remember shivering. He will never take solace in the luck of this lost cub stirring at the shore of this lapping river; how it went limp in his grip. He will never relish the hot fat smeared into the gauze around his mouth. There is only eat, cold, and home in the moonlight.*

*He does remember the tree avalanching toward him. And them. The orange light that sifted him into a silver bed. The cuffs. How they petted him until he healed. He couldn't recall how many times he had walked into the orange light. Outside of it, it was only eat, cold, and the moon. He will find a ride home.*

*He will not remember seeing the orange light appear again, hovering like a 3,000-pound firebug above the tree line. Afraid, he will flee the riverbank, forfeiting the young sea lion to the sand, its taste still wrapped around his lips. Why will they keep coming for him? Why will they not let him die?*

•••

With the weather cleared, they spent the day swamping across a soggy side of Neahkahnie Mountain, encountering poison oak on a few occasions, but no treasure. No gas either. They drove into Cannon Beach proper on fumes for dinner.

"Why are there so many missing dogs?" Audrey asked, pointing at one of the telephone poles slathered with a phone number and a photo of an absent Scottie. "Is it like a dog plague?"

Ben held his tongue as well as the leash, the end of which Sultan was really testing. "It's not a dog plague, Odd."

They found a place to nosh fish and chips while staring at Haystack Rock.

"So," Audrey began, "if the President is a criminal, why should any other American not just do whatever they need to get ahead? I mean, it's like the law almost."

Ben gulped his beer wrong, coughed, and wondered if Audrey was implying something about their situation. She was not a stupid girl, and he felt she could see his muddy fingerprints all over her life.

"Mortality," Sam answered.

"I think you mean *morality*, buddy," Ben interjected.

Audrey scoffed at her brother's mistake and let her eye wander across the puddled patio to find a table of teenagers her own age — three boys and a girl. One of the boys, his hair the color of wet sand, was staring right at her as his friends talked. She blushed and looked away, but when she returned, his eyes were still trained on her. A third and fourth glance away didn't stop him. Who does that? It was so forward. So confident. Could she do that too?

"Well, it's been a pleasure making mud with you gentlemen today," she said, "but I think I need to speak with my own species."

Ben followed her line of vision across the patio, the first time the boy had shied away, and Ben groaned deeply enough to wake up Sultan at his feet.

"I don't know, Odd."

"This is exactly what Suzy Archer, of Spokane, would do," she said.

The Pete in him understood.

"Then be my guest," he said, "but don't say I didn't warn you."

As she sashayed across the patio, shedding dirt from her boots, her body bolted electric on what Suzy Archer was all about. It was liberating, like crawling into a new skin. The group stopped talking as she approached their table. She looked right at the sandy-haired blond boy, ran her fingers through his hair, and said, "Help me! My name is Suzy Archer. I am from Spokane, Washington. I think my dad is losing his mind."

"Take a seat, Suzy A.!", the girl said. "Yeah," one of the guys said, "Suzy A.!" When she sat down, she felt the last of Audrey Driscoll expel through her nose. She wasn't sure who was left, but she wanted to find out.

Ben watched his daughter meet-cute, before shaking his head and turning to his son.

"I'm sorry we didn't find any treasure," Ben said.

"I don't care about the treasure," Sam said. "Hey, if I have to be Aaron Archer, shouldn't Sultan get a new name too?"

"Like what?"

"What about King?"

Ben laughed into the end of his beer.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

"Oh yeah, fine," Ben said. "That sounds great. So you really didn't care about the treasure?"

Sam shook his head.

"Then what were you up to? Why are we all boot-deep in mud?"

Sam kept his eye pointed at the table. "I was looking for a ghost," he said. "I need to know that they are real."

Ben lumped, and sucked in a great deal of air through his nose.

"Is this about mom?"

Sam nodded. "I miss her."

"Me too, buddy." Ben swallowed the last splash of his beer and patted Sam's shoulder. "Me too."

Sam started crying out of his one good eye, which made Ben just fall apart. A boy should be able to cry out of two eyes. He already regretted saying what he was about to say, but he couldn't stop himself. "You know our neighbor, Earl?"

Sam wiped a big streak of snot onto his sleeve, and said, "Not really."

"Well, Earl thinks that thing we saw out on the highway is a ghost."

"Yeah?" Sam perked up.

Ben nodded, but Sam's face went dark. "What is it?"

"Do you think all ghosts are like that one?" he asked.

"Probably not," Ben said.

Ben paid the check and then called across the patio, "Suzy, let's jet!"

"I've got it, Dad," she said. "Jessie will give me a ride later."

"And this Jessie knows how to get you home?"

"It's not our home," she said. "But yeah."

Ben groaned again, but held his tongue. Pete Archer was the kind of man who didn't want to raise a fuss.

As they walked back to the car, Ben noticed some crime scene tape roping off a slab of the beach as a yellow excavator lifted the corpse of a German Sheppard out of the falling sand. It was stiff, with all four legs extended like some furry end table set upside down.

"Well," Sam said. "I guess we know what happened to those missing dogs."

Not all of them, Ben thought.

*To be continued in Part II ...* 