

The Stone Bearer
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The man came to without the slightest twitch, like stillness filling an old glass jar in a forgotten corner of the barn, being careful not to spill. The familiar sounds of night washed up from the fields and across the porch on which he sat, alone, in his favorite wooden chair. He held his eyes closed for a moment, his hands motionless on the familiar armrests, as he listened to the faint wheeze of his breathing mix in with the cool hum of hidden insects. He sensed the full and throbbing presence of night which had arrived in his brief hiatus, and he knew without inspection it had descended with the sun's brilliant sinking like a peaceful dew, drifting in to seep first around the stalks of growing plants before cloaking the land in something more viscous and sticky than daylight.

He opened his eyes slowly. Warm light spilled out of an open window on the far side of the heavy chestnut door, painting the boards of the porch a pale gray that stood out in contrast to the sea of ink beyond. The flutter of curtains through the empty window frame could be seen in shadows dancing along the floor. Where the man sat, however, the light didn't reach. The space around him was patient, as if awaiting his cue.

Must be about time.

He stirred in his chair and rose slowly, stretching his arms over his head into a taut yawn that quivered down the center of his back and warmed his calves. His coveralls felt cool and slightly damp along his back and behind his knees, and an earlier foray into the fields had left his boots stiff with fatigue. Moving to the edge of the porch furthest from the relative brilliance of the open window, he peered up at the endless sky. Slender

fingers of cloud were passing slowly to the east, sweeping across a field of stars that never failed to cull his truest thoughts from those they'd become through timeless days of constant circulation. The clarity was sometimes a painful gift.

He made his way down the four stairs at the front of the porch and set off steadily for the shed across the cul-de-sac of gravel, adjusting the sweat stained ball cap on his head as he went. The door gave with an easy whine as it slid open across the jamb, and he found the shovel on the first try despite the layered blackness, leaning against the wall just to his left where he'd left it. After pulling the door closed, the man angled the shovel against the faintly visible shed wall and reached for the bandless watch in his pocket. He never had been able to wear a watch comfortably, and so the Ironman wristwatch- a gift from a proud nephew- had been converted lovingly into a pocket watch.

His thick fingers fumbled slowly in the darkness for the button that was tricky enough to find in broad daylight. The man was patient, and soon a queer green glow came out of his hand to rinse the shed wall in its eerie ambiance. He chuckled.

Plenty of time.

He returned the watch to his pocket, scooped the shovel up and over his shoulder, and set out across the nearest field. His legs carried him thoughtlessly across land he'd worked for more than thirty years- land he knew the mood of, the feel of, and the flavor. He knew where to step short, and where long; where the earth began to rise slightly, and where it rolled away again towards the north to eventually find the main waste water ditch. Even though the fourth quarter moon lay silent and waiting beneath the east horizon, he moved across the land he loved without falter or hesitation, like a sculptor's hand retracing a curve of hewn stone. He made his way along the irrigation ditch which

lay on the south side of a broad alfalfa field, listening to the water pass him by in bubbly swirls as it carved a path down the lane before tumbling out into the waiting field. The sound of heavier water could be heard faintly up ahead, and it grew with each step as he approached the water's point of intersection.

The man knelt down beside the concrete box and reached into the swirling water to pull out the grooved slats of wood from their seat. One by one he slid them out, and the water level fell with a rolling gush into the dry dust of the ditch which had been blocked, splashing at first and then lengthening out into a steady sigh like whispering children that lifted up with the wind. Then he took the planks of wood and slid them down the grooves on the other side of the box, securing the passage into the south ditch, being sure to place the weighted one on top. Finished, he rose and made his way along the western ditch to the canvas dams he'd set earlier in the afternoon. Cold water rose swiftly in the trap, swirling in eddies he couldn't see that slapped the canvas in the dark, until finally the eager water rushed out through fresh earthen channels along the ditch-top and into the field. The man listened carefully to the flowing liquid, judging the measure of its coursing path, and then dug the nearest cut-out deeper with his shovel. Working his way back to the junction box, he checked each channel, removing any obstructions which may have floated down the ditch and regulating the flow. He thought of nothing else but the water's course, the lay of his fields and the circles traced overhead by distant stars.

He felt at home, surrounded by something so honest it moved of its own accord, and he lapsed into a distant gaze that was consumed by that ceaseless swirl of intangible momentum. The flicker of leaves bouncing in the starlight sighed across the broad field like the rippled echoes of atmospheric breathing passing through the coolness. He

imagined the silvery whispers of damp roots intertwined beneath the soil- the flashes that diffused from one to the next through spongy earth- and he wondered at the stories shared by close dancing stalks as they swayed in the breeze of worlds all their own. In their presence, he could feel an undivided focus, a sacrifice to and simultaneous love of the arduous labor of pushing up through the soil and having their lives- of shaping water and earth into something more, knowing even as they did that they too would be shaped by something greater.

The man had come to realize a genuine and subtle meaning in their unfolding movement, a purpose to which they gave themselves wholly and from which they refused to sway. He'd seen the way they hung on during long droughts, clinging in patient desperation to their plot of choking dust, for that was all they knew to do. He'd learned to walk beside them and whisper encouragement, and they'd taught him in turn to appreciate the rain, and sunshine, and to treasure the value of a season. The man had come to savor the pounding thunder of springtime storms that lashed the ground with untainted power and sought to pull the tender black soil up into the clouds. He liked to rise early with the fields on the morning after, watching the sun's patient return and the way the plants merely dug deeper to begin anew with the first light- both innocent and wiser. He sensed their acceptance of a world too grand to be realized- a nebulous bedrock on which he daily sought to anchor his own life.

The human world reverberated with the unsteady rumblings of its own creations, and the smooth, laminar course he wished to maintain often shook with the perturbations of the surrounding earth. Scanning the vast, prickled abyss of stars overhead, the man wondered just how far into forever those discordant vibrations had to travel before being

wholly absorbed. He wondered what lives were touched in their passage, what places- and with his imagination he sensed the story of their exhausted sinking into the timeless weight of stones. Turning away from the land at last, feeling the need to be on his way, the man crunched across the gravel lane to the shed and put the shovel away before climbing up tiredly into the cab of the truck.

He fished the keys out of his pocket and placed them in the ignition. A warbling chug greeted the turn of his wrist as the engine sprang to life and settled into its powerful rhythm, and he shifted once in his seat while waiting for the machinery to warm. The man swung around beside the house and pointed the headlights down the drive, shifting into second gear with a solemn sigh the world absorbed.

On the road, he drove the truck lightly, shifting lazily up through the gears before coming to rest in fourth as he coasted along the straight stretch of tar that led into town. He drove with the window down, one arm resting on the vibrating metal of the door and the other on top of the wheel, in as comfortable a posture as he could muster. After two months he still had not grown accustomed to the routine. He thought to turn the radio on, as people do. As quickly as he did so, his hand flicked back through the cab to undo what had been done. There was no sense in it.

There was no sense in his wife being away when he came in to the house just after sunset, worn yet fresh from time spent in air rising up lightly from growing plants. He missed her smile when he drank the glass of water too fast at the kitchen sink and sent slivers of sparkling overflow down the skin of his chin and neck. He missed the way she could fill up their quiet house with the sound of beans falling from their shells. He loved

the life they shared together, which pushed up through the fertile soil of time with the same relentless desire to *become* as that which laced the land around them.

The parking lot was empty save one abandoned car which lay on three wheels and a rusted jack in the far corner, slumbering in the type of gentile silence which recent artifacts attract. The man pulled his arm in off the door frame and steered the truck up alongside the well-lit concrete curb, where he cut the engine and leaned back against the cracked vinyl baked slick by the heat of countless summer afternoons. The dim red glow of fluorescent lighting beamed down from a buzzing source mounted somewhere just above the cab, shading the dash an obscure color he could not fathom- one which lingered just beyond his visual grasp like the muffled sounds of strangers sharing a debate in the next car.

He closed his eyes.

The blacktop lot, equipped with enough spaces to handle the entire town at once should the need ever arise, still seemed new after nearly two years. The paint which divided the flat expanse into partitioned stalls still sparkled when the light found it just right, and the asphalt had yet to fade or waffle from the soothing effects of time. In the bigger cities, the man knew, the franchise stores stayed open until eleven as a matter of course, to better serve the clientele, and it would certainly be no different here. He would wait six more minutes- the only car in the lot- basking in the droning lights upon the smooth and gleaming tar. He knew that type of precision should have instilled a real pride in him, given him something to take hold of when he looked out at the world around him, but it merely confused instead.

Finally, his shut eyes dimmed, and he imagined the oversized store collapsing into an unnaturally shiny darkness, one prickled by the reflection of street lights on the gleaming glass storefront. The non-stop neon sign hummed on imperturbed, as if proclaiming an effervescent triumph across the valley lest the people grow uneasy on long, flat nights that don't even wobble. The man imagined his wife's figure moving with a self-assured swiftness across the aisles, checking them each one last time before opening the tall, flat hole in the glare and stepping through. She would lock the door, giving it one good shake, and then come home.

With a start, he remembered her favorite radio station, the one she enjoyed while winding down on the ride back, and he snapped alive with a freshly discovered purpose. From the corner of his eye, he caught the darting flash of the door as it swept through angled rays of light, and he knew there were but moments to spare. His hand fished across the cab to twist the knob with a motivation that overwhelmed any gaps in his coordination, and all at once the ancient speakers were shivering in the door panels, blaring out a feast of trumpets and snare drums with all the stomach jarring reverberation of a his mother's kitchen being shaken out into a windstorm. Caught off guard by the blitz of sound, he instinctively held his breath until he was able to tweak the knob back to idle, and then laughed inside himself at his blown surprise.

He waited expectantly throughout the remaining three or four seconds it took her to cross the concrete and knowingly pry the door open, unable to quell the sheepish grin that had spread across his face. She climbed up into the cab and cocked her head in his direction, displaying her patented look of amused admonishment, with one eye perched in

happy accusation above the delicate curve of her nose and the primly drawn smile underneath.

“Why thank you, Edward,” she said. “How very nice.”

“Just rushed myself a bit is all.”

“My guess is you nearly tore that radio right out of its holster.”

“Seems to be set in there pretty good,” he chuckled.

He eased the truck into gear as if it were an exercise in care, and let the idling engine leverage itself gently across the pavement, unassisted. As they rolled forward, he turned to the sweet brown swirls of her eyes and laughed with her again about loose stereo knobs and something deeper that passed between them like a river of thick honey. The man reached for the slender shape of her hand in the silence which followed, embracing her and the treasured moment which arose to hold them- a fresh and vacant solitude that breathed too slowly to be heard.

The first night she had worked at the store he had put the tractor to bed early, washed the grit off of his brow and out from beneath the shelter of his nails, and set out to surprise her. The sun had been just on the verge of catching the whole horizon aflame, rinsing the hood of the truck in an amber syrup and filling the rearview mirrors to capacity on the drive into town. He'd let his left arm dangle in the wind on that trip, with his fingers spread limply to feel the firm massage of still air being split apart by their passage. They'd felt hot and numb in the parking lot, however, like earth pulled tight by too much sun, as he'd shut the truck door and crossed the still smoldering blacktop in the direction of the store. The fluorescent lighting inside had been just bright enough to

eclipse the soft hue of dusk as it rolled in through the windows and down the aisles, and his eyes had felt like his hand for a moment as they adjusted- dull and strained.

He had wasted no time in picking out a bottle of orange soda from the cooler and seeking her out at the front register. She had been half-bent over the counter when he approached, her face hidden by the sideways grain of her hair, her arm waving a single pack of chewing gum back and forth in a vain attempt to trigger the store's UPC reader into life. He had watched from what had seemed a good distance, just three feet away, as she straightened herself to manually enter the gum's product code into the computerized register, offering the customer ahead of him in line an easy smile that was neither nervous nor embarrassed. Then the customer had paid, taken his change and left, and the man had crossed the awkward desert of three linoleum tiles to see her. He hadn't been able to believe that just two hours previous he had driven her into town and dropped her off.

'EVE' the new name tag had announced- in bold, unconstrained block letters.

Eve.

Eve... I know you, Eve.

I miss you all of a sudden... and you are right here...and I don't understand what is happening...how one place can take you so far away with no warning or why this place is here or how in just a few hours you could create a smile that is you and still somehow perfect for this place that the sun must strain to reach...

She had looked at him, and together they had instantly swallowed the previous hours in a moment which they alone had authored, reminding themselves in that single instant of who they were. She had forgotten to charge him for the drink, but a brief, fumbling search for truck keys back out on the asphalt had reminded him, and after

paying he had left, feeling a dull pain he could not touch that stuck to the back of his mind like a glue and gnawed at passing thoughts.

As they wound their way back out of town, the ambient haze and double shadow of evenly spaced street lights slowly gave way to a landscape of distant stars and low, sloping hills soaking in nightfall. Sporadic lampposts, the unmistakable markers of farmhouses, dotted the felt-textured scene like buoys far to sea, shedding a pale fuzz that failed to penetrate the vast and fertile spaces all around. Corn stalks flickered past in the periphery of his vision.

“Anyone drop by tonight?” he asked, before clearing his throat of an undesired tickle.

“Paul stopped in a little after sundown. He said the weather up north by his brother’s place has been unusual for this time of year- too much rain at the wrong time and not long enough of a break in between. The kids have been making some certifiable Grade A mud pies, though. He’s a little worried they’re in it for the long haul,” she laughed, “and that he’ll come in one day to find the golden retriever half sunk in the ground and happy. And June swung through again. It never fails with her: every aisle is a marvel when that woman comes in. She smiles at me when she checks out like she’s just won something.”

When she stopped, the man allowed a brewing cough to finally rattle out unchecked, the momentum of which quickly fostered the birth of multiple smaller tremors in its wake until his throat at last gained relief. His eyes watered with the strain of the involuntary effort, and he leaned back lightly against the seat, drifting, as if slow

motion were a fertilizer for bodily calm. He felt the subtle twist of her body and heard the rustle of her uniform apron on the vinyl as she turned to search him out in the dim cab.

“You look tired,” she decided. “Are you alright?”

He nodded, his hand poised like a spiraled seashell in the path of one last potential gush of air that subsided even as it threatened. He wished she didn’t have to wear the apron. “I’ll just grab a glass of water when we get home.”

Her palm traced a warm path across the knobbed arc of his knuckles.

“You push so hard, Edward. Watching you listen and react and move is like sitting on a pebbled beach beside the ocean. Its like you hear the whole world’s urgent whisper in the life of a single flower. And I wonder sometimes to myself, knowing the answer even as I do, what I would really be asking if I asked you to stop.”

He answered her with a squeeze of his hand. Corn stalks gave way to fence-posts and the occasional, hulking shadow of a cow staring unconcerned across the road, eyes opened wide as crystal balls.

“Rest with me tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll check the fields early myself and then we can go down to the river.”

He felt her voice coming up from underneath him in a balm each time she spoke, flowing with some honest magic he could not describe, but that he knew, swelling around his ribs like an embrace and gathering in a light knot at the root of his throat. He wanted to say something very complex all of a sudden, in the way the ripening of a blueberry is complex, but the flavors of gushing snow-melt and sunlit horizons were flooding the back

of his mouth and beginning to well in the corners of his eyes. “That sounds good,” he said.

The remainder of the ride home passed like the leaping silences that slip through the rooms of children when they finally sleep after long days at play. He turned the truck off of the highway and onto the crunching gravel of their drive, letting the steering wheel come back around to the top lightly, like water rising in the ditches along the edge of the fields that crests and breaks open into its grooves.

“You carry the stones that other people have authored and forgotten, Edward. They pop up out of the world with no place to go and no one to hold them, and you find them because they cry out when you walk by. All that you find, you pick them up and carry them out to spread them across the fields and soak them in the sunlight and fresh rains. I know because I see how you do it, and because I can taste them in our beans, and in the corn, alive with their new discovery.”

The man got down from the truck, turning completely around to push the door shut with the open palm of his hand. He walked across the spongy, dew-soaked grass of the yard and found a seat on the front steps, his arms propped on his knees and his head aimed freely out over the fields. He did not collapse when she came to sit down beside him and released the stored sound of good wood from the step’s creaky stiffness. Nor did he look straight up into the heavens, but instead they looked together at the stars which hung just above the field and twinkled to the rhythm of worlds all their own. A river that had been rising inside the man ran slowly down his cheeks and spilled out into the night, washing up over the house and across waving fields to be escorted along by the impromptu sounds of night.