

ELEGANT LITERATURE

WICKED WONDERLAND



#027

SOMEWHERE THERE'S A FOREST

T.J. ROBINSON

WE SIT IN THE CAR, watching the rain drum against the roof of our father's cabin. It's an A-frame sitting in a green clearing surrounded by the forest, row after row of pencil tree trunks and glistening green ferns. My brother rummages in his pockets and takes out the key for the front door.

'Come on,' he tells me.

Inside the cabin, nothing has changed. The first floor is one open room with a steel tub for a sink, an old wooden dining table, an iron potbelly stove. Upstairs is the attic, with two beds, the mattresses bare and the pillows stained yellow. The windows are small and grimy and there's dust piling up in the corners. The place smells like dead wood and sneezes.

I can hear each raindrop hitting the roof. My brother fills the potbelly stove with wood and scrunched-up newspaper. I unpack our groceries into an empty cupboard: packets of chips, salted crackers, tinned fish, a bottle of bourbon and a warm case of beer. At the bottom of the bag is a marble-grey plastic container filled with our father's ashes. I put them on the dining table and crack a beer.

My brother asks me, 'Where do you think we should scatter him? We could hike out to the waterfall? The old creek? I think there might be a hill he liked the view from, it's just a few hours walk away.'

I stop myself from saying that he can throw them in the potbelly stove for all I care. Instead I say, 'I don't know, Cam. I think he would have wanted you to choose.'

He says my name, 'Todd,' like a reprimand. 'We should do it together.'

He strikes a match and frowns as he lights the fire. I can't help but see our father in him—that pinched brow and curled lip.

Later, we cook sausages on the potbelly stove for dinner, share memories of our father and drink half the bottle of bourbon. My head is swimming when it hits the pillow. I hear Cam wish me a good night before I fall asleep.

I startle awake—something is moving outside the cabin. I can hear the undergrowth crunching under its heavy steps. There is a pale,

eerie light streaming through the bedroom window. My brother is a shape on the bed next to mine, a steady rise and fall under a pile of old blankets. I lie in bed and listen as the thing outside circles the cabin. The snap of sodden twigs, the wet suck of mud, the whisper of a moving tree branch. There is no other noise. No call of a night bird, no skitter of possum claws, no howl of wind. I feel my heart pulsing in my chest.

I slip out of bed. The window fogs with my breath. The dark wall of the forest quivers as the thing lumbers past. I shake my brother through the blankets. The light from the window hits his face and he seems to glow in the darkness. He looks more peaceful than I've ever seen him.

I say his name again, but he does not wake up. I would scream at him, but I'm afraid that whatever's out there will hear me.

In the morning, I find myself wrapped in blankets, lying under the bedroom window. Cam's bed is empty and I can smell frying butter. I button up my shirt and climb down the stairs. He's cooking scrambled eggs in a skillet on the potbelly stove and sipping from a can of beer. The container with our father's ashes is on the table where I left it. The warmth in the room presses against me.

I tell him about the noises in the night and he squints at me. He says it might be one of the big cats, ferals that have bred out in the wilderness so long that they've turned enormous. He finishes his beer, puts the skillet down on the wooden table and lets the scramble sizzle in the fat. We go outside to investigate.

My brother walks out into the forest and weaves his way around the slim trunks. He crouches here and there to inspect the undergrowth, twigs and dead leaves soggy from the day of rain, tufts of green grass sprouting up through the soil. He pinches some dirt and sniffs his fingertips. I stand there in my mud-ruined sneakers.

He says, 'You were dreaming.'

I look around the forest, breathing in the smell of sap. I nod and we go back to the cabin.

We pack a lunch, and our father's ashes, and set out for this hill. Cam tells me to walk ahead of him, to make sure that I don't get left behind. He holds the map and the compass, and whenever he needs to check we're going the right way he whistles for me to stop. As we walk, my eyes scan the underbrush. I jump at every rustle of leaves. My brother chuckles behind me.

After two hours my body is covered in sweat, my tartan shirt pasted to my back. We stop in a grove of gumtrees, and I pull long breaths as my brother sips from a water bottle.

Sitting on an old stump in the clearing is a wicker basket of dried native flowers. It takes a moment for my brain to fully register that it's really there. Goosebumps prickle along the back of my neck. I ask my brother, 'What is that?'

He shrugs. 'People leave things out here.'

I nod and sink down to the ground, resting my back against a tree.

My brother packs away his water and gestures for us to keep going.

I rub the sweat around my face, feel the grit from the dirt on my hands. I say, 'Why don't we just scatter him here?'

My brother looks at the basket of flowers. 'I don't want to leave him here.'

I sigh out a laugh. 'You want to leave him on this hill of yours? What makes that so special? Did he take you there? Did he actually say something nice to you? Did he give you a hug? Maybe we should build a statue on this hill.'

He chews his cheek as my words tumble out. He kicks out his foot and the basket of flowers tumbles to the ground.

I tell him, 'I'm going back.'

'It's not much further.'

I pull myself up. 'You can keep going without me.'

I start walking back along the path, pulling a fern frond out of my way. Soon I hear his footsteps behind me, his voice, 'You won't find your way back without me.'

We spend the rest of the day avoiding each other. I sit on my bed reading a book while Cam cuts wood out back. After an awkward dinner of freeze-dried curry, we go to bed. When I wish Cam good-

night he nods and turns over, facing the wall.

I wake up to that sound of movement in the forest. The cabin is cold and still. I stand and feel my skin prickle as I look down at my brother. He looks calm as carved marble.

I throw my blanket over myself and creep downstairs. The burning coals in the potbelly stove are nearly dead. I take the wrought iron poker leaning against the wall and walk outside. The sky is clear as a glass bowl and filled with silent stars, spilling into each other. The soft light turns the trees into blue shapes against the darkness.

Something is moving out there. I hunker into my blanket and stalk out into the woods, gripping the wrought iron in both hands. I follow the stomping sound and swaying trees, walking in a circle around the cabin. My bare feet sink into the mud. A jagged root pinpricks my sole. Leaves drag across my cheek.

It's ahead of me, but I can't see it. It has no shape—no shape that my brain can translate. My heart is expanding, touching my breastbone. That thing has stopped moving. My mind can sense it out there in the darkness, in the space between the tree trunks.

I feel its eyes touch me. They are not human eyes. They are not animal eyes. They are not eyes at all, but they are still watching me. I run and stumble through the undergrowth, dropping the poker in the mud. A low branch flicks me in the face and pulls the blanket off my body. I leave it in the forest and force the cabin door shut.

As soon as the weak sun bleeds through the morning mist I start packing my bag. My brother shifts the blankets off his body and scowls at me.

I tell him, 'We need to leave.'

He says, 'There's nothing out there.'

He follows me down the staircase and laughs a little as I stuff food into my rucksack. When I pick up the plastic container of our father's ashes from the dining table he tells me to put it down. He runs his fingers through his hair and laces his fingers.

'Stop being selfish,' he tells me. 'I need to find the right place for

him.’

I want to throw the ashes in his face. I want to hurt him. I want him to admit the way things were.

I put the container down on the wooden table and walk outside. I sit on the front step and stare into the forest, the anger turning sick in my stomach. He stands behind me in the door frame for a moment. He says, ‘We’ll find a place for him tomorrow.’

I think out loud, ‘You always belonged to him.’

He leaves me sitting there, looking through the trees and foliage, to the point where the whole world becomes a forest.

That night we barely exchange a word. It takes me an hour to fall asleep, staring up at the darkness in the rafters.

My eyes flicker open—that weird light is filtering through the bedroom window. My brother’s bed is empty, his blankets tussled to the floor. Something is outside the cabin again, forcing its way through the forest.

My breath quickens as I slip from my bed and creep down the staircase. The cabin is filled with dull shadows. The back door is hanging open, showing me a slice of silent indigo trees and ethereal light. Our father’s ashes are gone.

I catch the shape of my brother walking between the trees. I walk out into that fey forest, the sky swollen with unreal stars. Low hanging leaves brush along my body as I run. My brother is moving towards the thundering footfalls of that thing out there, towards the rocking of the overgrowth as it moves away from the cabin. Is he chasing it away, or following it deeper into the forest? I want to call out, but my throat grips around his name. He’s cradling something in his arms, holding it tight to his chest—our father’s ashes.

He’s moving faster, slipping through the underbrush with ease. I try to keep up, scrambling over a fallen tree, sliding on mossy stones, pulling panic breaths. My face is wet with tears.

My brother is getting further away from me as the eerie, star-filled light begins to recede. The dawn creeps in, the trees beginning to glow green. I can barely see him now, a small piece of movement in

the shrinking darkness. The strange and silent night closes after him, like a door slammed shut.

The morning light touches my face and I can finally call out my brother's name, again and again. The birds begin to sing all the way through the forest, their songs flowing together. I keep searching, but all I find is the trees.