

## Before I Go

The trees of the valley were beginning to straighten their spines and exhale after a long day of hunching under the sweltering sky. The midsummer wind carried a smell of dust, honey, something neither Angel nor Treelore could name but loved the way it sparked laughter on their lips. In the cab of Angel's truck the radio sung hazy and low. Treelore sang much the same way, his voice sweet and unpredictable. A young man of seventeen, his wide eyes framed by round glasses, his spindle fingers twitching to reach out and grab the world whole. Where Treelore was wirey, Angel, nineteen, was strong. His tendons snaked down his arms like creek beds, his dry laugh was a sun baked desert. They felt unstoppable, their skin drank in the starlight. When Angel killed the engine outside of the old house, Treelore grinned with excitement. This was a night for drinking, for watching the way Angel's eyes crinkled up when he smiled, for kicking around a skeletal house.

The house was a falling down mess. Where it once was sheltered by a black shingle carapace, its roof was now riddled with skylights. The floor sagged beneath their weights, its old planks sighing as they walked. In what the boys guessed was the parlor sat two moth-bitten recliners that faced out into the backyard. The wall that once was there had since rotted away. The parlor was filled with sweet summer air and fire flies that worriedly bumbled about. Angel and Treelore settled into their seats without bothering to brush away the dust. Both boys had come bearing gifts: Treelore a pack of Luckies cigarettes, 'borrowed' from his father. Angel sat a six pack of warm beer between the two chairs. There was a gentle quiet in the valley, a reverence paid to the boys and their tradition. Each Midsummer's Eve, they sat in these chairs, they drank, smoked, and surveilled their kingdom of wildflowers that ran wild in thickets. They were gods of summer. They were Angel and Treelore, fast and wild.

Except something was different this Midsummer's Eve. There was a flatness to Angel's

eyes, a sense of desperation in the way he pounded beer. Eventually, Treelore stopped nudging the conversation along. He watched Angel down his fourth beer and a sense of dread welled up in Treelore.

The light faded, leaving two smoldering smoke cherries, lightening bugs, and a dark void that swallowed all else. Treelore was summoning the courage to ask Angel what was wrong when suddenly Angel was up out of his chair. He watched, stunned, as Angel vomited from edge of parlor into the backyard flowers. His heaves wracked his body. Treelore cautiously got up, and laid his wide hands on Angel's back, fearing he might fall from the house face first into the jungle garden. When Angel was finished, Treelore steered him away from the edge.

"Angel, let me take you home."

Angel nodded minutely and allowed himself to be guided from the the house's bones out into the night. Treelore half lifted him into the truck cab, buckled him in, and went around to drivers' side of Angel's truck. Treelore brought Angel home, and walked the two miles back to his house. The air was alive with the chirruping of insects but Treelore felt a chill run through him.

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"What do you mean you've been drafted, Angel?" Treelore's voice was barely above a whisper. He was not looking at Angel. Treelore wanted to cover his ears with both hands and stomp and sing to drown Angel out.

"Treelore, I've been drafted. I'm shipping out for basic in Kentucky today. They're sending me to Vietnam."

“No, Angel, you’re—”

“Treelore—”

“No! Angel you listen! You’re not going anywhere. It’s fine, this is all just a misunderstanding. It’s...”

“It’s happening, whether you or me or anyone wants it. Treelore, I’m leaving.”

Treelore felt the pinpricks of heartbroken tears. He scrubbed them away with angry fists, furious at himself for showing Angel his hurt.

“But you’re my best friend, Angel...”

“I know, Treelore, and you’re mine. I’m so sorry. Look, there’s something...I have to do and if I don’t do it now, I’m afraid I never will.” Angel looked down at his shoes, his voice dropping to a pained whisper.

“What is it?”

Angel took a deep breath, as if deliberating his next action. He leaned forward lightening quick and crushed his lips to Treelore’s. Treelore was frozen, eyes wide, the static in his head dialing up in volume. It lasted for a long second, before Angel broke away.

“That.”

Treelore was speechless.

“Stay in school, Treelore. They’re not drafting college students...”

Treelore waited, all his words sunk down to his stomach. He wasn't sure if he was about to choke or throw them back up. Angel turned, and walked back to his truck. He drove away without another word.

Treelore was consumed by the silence.

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Five years later, Treelore was in his junior year of college. He was a prodigal son returned home for the holidays. His mama had almost forgiven him for going to college across the country. She sensed her son was running from something. She always said, the ghosts in your attic will drive you mad long before the skeletons in your closet will. Treelore always wondered if ghosts and angels were interchangeable. He was sitting in the overstuffed La-Z-Boy by the window. Pale amber Christmas lights dripped from the gutter. The house smelled of nutmeg. Christmas was four days away. Treelore watched moths beneath the lights, watching the subtle dip of powered wings. The shrill ring of the phone lurched him from reverie.

“Hello?” He asked.

“Treelore?”

Treelore felt his stomach fall dead away. He knew that voice.

“Angel.”

There was a soft, tired laugh.

“Yeah, man. I’m home. I’ve been home. Can you come see me?” Treelore managed to choke out ‘Yes, of course, he’d be there in ten.’ He called to his mother in the kitchen that he was going out and he’d be back by dinner. He ran out the door, nearly forgetting his thick, downy coat from the peg by the door. Winter in the valley was biting. It breathed soft ice into your joints and left your lips blue and cracked. His father’s car engine sputtered before flaring to life. He sped off towards Angel’s house.

Angel’s mother opened the door and invited him in. Treelore found Angel sitting on a raggedy couch in his parent’s living room, the tv whispering. A cane was propped against the

couch next to Angel. Treelore almost couldn't believe this. Angel, alive and sitting before him, with long unkept hair and sad, tired eyes. Angel, who Treelore had spent nights dreaming about, his mind painting pictures of him dead in a jungle trap, dead in a rice paddy. Dead, dead, dead.

Angel spoke first. Angel always spoke first.

"Hey bud. I missed you. Come, sit with me." Treelore somehow willed his legs to carry him around to the couch and gently set himself beside Angel. Treelore's eyes danced to the cane and away and back again.

"Is it yours?" Treelore asked, cocking his head toward the cane.

"Yeah," Angel said. "I have to walk with it now. My knee was shredded up in booby trap. I waited three days for a medic. When they found me I was delirious with infection, burning up something awful."

"Oh my god. When did that happen?" Asked Treelore.

Angel hesitated.

"Six months after I shipped out...I was sent home after they fixed me."

Treelore felt a cold feeling settle in him. It was soon replaced by blistering hot anger.

"You left me hanging for five years Angel! I thought you were dead..."

"Treelore, I know I'm—"

"No, don't—"

"Treelore listen, when I got back, I couldn't see anyone. I couldn't talk to anyone. I just slept. I wasn't me when I came back. I needed...I needed time, Treelore. You can understand that, right?"

Treelore felt the anger leech out of him. He looked at Angel, and felt a wound that had refused to drain for the past five years.

"Yeah, of course I can. We don't have to talk about it tonight." There was a soft silence

that seemed to swallow the static cooing of the TV and the clatter of cooking activity from the kitchen.

“Your hair’s long now,” Angel said tentatively. He reached out and with a gentle hand tucked a lock of Treelore’s natural hair behind his ear. “I like it.”

Treelore felt a rush of warmth in his chest. Angel took Treelore’s spindly hand in his own calloused one. They were seventeen and nineteen again. They were Angel and Treelore, wild boys who had never seen a jungle beyond the thickets outside the bone house. Maybe, Treelore thought, tomorrow they’d drive out there. Maybe he’d hold Angel’s hand as they drove.

Just maybe.