

“Ugh Trent, let's go, let's go, let's go!”

“Will you stop rushing me? I won't enjoy any of this with you constantly badgering me.”

“We don't want to miss it though!”

“Oh, you mean miss the hike? 'Cause that makes *lots* of sense.”

“No! Miss the chance to have the trail for ourselves. Do you know how annoying it is to hike behind a group of people? They always go slower than you, it drives me insane!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Doesn't take much to make that happen, does it Guy?”

“Come on, already. And don't forget your compass.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

And off we went. Trent and I venture into the forest. It's so beautiful - I could get lost in the beauty. Tree branches dancing in the wind, it would be gorgeous in the fall. In summer it's just beautiful, but fall would be gorgeous.

Luckily, we had someone here who knows what they're doing - *me*. Not a single person is here. We're the only ones. If Trent organized this whole thing, we'd be here at noon on a Saturday. All we'd see were heads bobbing up and down. We reached a fork in the path, classic. We chose the right path. “Right is right,” we figured - I figured. Not long after, Trent and I spot some familiar faces. Damn it.

“Oh my god, look! Stacy! Danny! Elaine!”

“What a coincidence, you guys are here too!”

They're conversing about something. I'm not really listening. All I'm thinking of is how Trent is going to weave in how there's people here after I gloated about my special planning talents. I have to think of the perfect comeback. I can faintly hear them in the distance, why can't they just shut up? And suddenly, they did.

“WAIT!”

Where are they!? Why do they always do this?

“Trent! Elaine! Stacy! Danny!”

I bet this was all Trent's stupid idea. How hard is it to keep up? I can't wait to find that Trent so I can tell him how I really feel. Just retrace your steps, Guy. It's not that hard. If you think about it, Trent and I went down the right path, still classic. So they must've gone down the left path then. Oh, I can't wait to get my hands on that little weasel, I- What the? Where am I? Wha- I don't understand.

“Why am I on that *same* freaking path again!?”

“WHAT'S THE POINT OF THE FORK IF THEY LEAD TO THE SAME SPOT!?”

Ok, now I'm pissed. Trent is really gonna get his. I swear, if he drove off, I'm gonna lose it!

“*Great!*”

He's gone. They're all gone. And I left my phone in the car. Why didn't I bring it - you know why, you know exactly why. Don't panic. You're not allowed to panic. Keep your cool - you're

fine, you're so fine, you're totally fine. Someone will find you... in the middle of nowhere. They'll find my body after months or years. You've always wanted to live in the woods. Nope. Never have. I'm gonna die. No one will be at my funeral. Why am I so stupid?

How long has it been? Oh God, only 17 minutes. Just follow the sun. The sun's your compass. Does the sun go East to West or West to East? No, it's definitely East to West. I couldn't tell you why - it just sounds right. Maybe it's 'cause it's in alphabetical order. You keep going until you hear water. Man, I'm gonna live forever. Why am I so smart?

This trail feels different. Like the rocks have shifted or something. I wonder what plants I can eat. They say you can eat dandelions. Or maybe if you find ants or something. I hate that I've come to this.

"Oh my! Whose footprints are those!? Just follow the prints, they'll lead you out of here! I'm such a genius!"

Man, whoever's footprints these are must be huge, 'cause I've been walking next to these things and they're almost double my size. Sheesh. They've got cool boots though. Such a unique tread - like a squiggle that breaks into segments. Each segment looks like a sun setting behind a hill. Must be one of those heavy-duty boots with lots of support. I've found these things in what I presume to be the middle of his trek, and *my* feet are killing me. This person's a machine. I kinda wanna see whoever this is. Although someone this massive might be pretty intimidating. Of course, I still have my pocket knife.

Wait, is that a cabin? Am I walking toward this person's house? Nah, it can't be. So secluded, where would he get his food? How could a person live here? Ugh, seems like a gross person, that's who. I mean look at this place. The walls filthy with stains of time, this place is practically a fossil. It belongs in a museum. "And look, this is where Guy was murdered when he was abandoned in the middle of nowhere," what an attraction. Even the cockroaches don't live here, let alone some crazy serial killer. Do I go in? It's either this or nothing, it's either die from the hands of nature or die from the hands of some psycho. At least the latter will give me some sort of company. Why am I doing this? Maybe they don't even live here anymore. Maybe 'cause this place even creeps *them* out.

You know, it's actually not that bad. Nevermind. It is that bad. As I hesitantly step inside, I'm immediately punched with the stench of cheap liquor mixed with mildew and mothballs. The scent filling me with a dose of terror, and as ironic as it is, a pinch of comfort. It vaguely reminds me of the smell of my grandparents' old house. Doubt I'll have as good of memories here though.

Each room feels as though it has some sort of presence in it. This creepy kitchen looks like all the appliances are either completely dead or completely alive, no in between. This couch looks like it's seen better days, I'm scared to find out who it's made of. I'm willing to bet all of the trail mix in my bag that this bed is smuggling *something*. It doesn't matter anymore, I'm too tired to deal with it. I don't care.

Finally, horizontal time. I can't remember the last time my feet have been in this much pain. It's like someone took a pokey, splintered rolling pin and was rolling that thing from heel to toe. I could probably find the *exact* rolling pin in this weirdo's kitchen. I have absolutely no confidence in the structural integrity of this bed, let alone this cabin. I mean, the wind isn't even that strong and it's making the house creak in the most unsettling ways. Oh God, I hope it's the wind. IT'S GETTING LOUDER, THAT'S NOT WIND.

I'm gonna die. I'm actually gonna die. Where in the world is my pocket knife? This thing is tiny, it's not gonna do anything. With boots like the ones I think they have, it's no secret why this person is stomping around the place. Reminds me of thunder, the way his boots hit the rotten wood floor, with the creaking lingering after each step. I wonder where he's going. Surely they will leave soon. Maybe it's Bigfoot himself. This person's sighs and breaths are alarmingly loud. Almost animal-like. Oh God, maybe it *is* Bigfoot.

I have to see what this person looks like, I can't not look. It's damn near impossible to sneak up on someone in this giant cat toy. Maybe that's why they live here, for security reasons. One corner away from the reveal and all my questions will be answered. That's my hope.

Oh, wow. Wasn't that far off from my Bigfoot prediction. From what I can see, which is just the back side of him, he's taller than I anticipated, and definitely hairy. Older too, nothing younger than late 50s. Big, broad shoulders and overweight which is evident by the way he takes such heavy breaths. He's making a drink or something - maybe an alcoholic? Ok, ok that's enough.

I'm out of here. Oh damn, my bag. Ugh, if I had just brought it, I could just sneak out behind him. Don't worry. The dude probably can't hear, either.

Letting my assumptions get my guard down, I take a normal step. And if the whole cabin hadn't winced at my movement, I'd been on my way.

“WHO ARE YOU!?”

My God, this guy sounds like Bigfoot too. Why am I so stupid?

“I'm not an intruder! I promise. My name is Guy, and I'm lost. I found this place to get some rest, I was going to leave in the morning.”

“You get lost so you think it's ok to break into my home?”

So this *is* his home. Ever since this man has turned around, I'm finding myself not being able to take my eyes off him. Look at him: the right side of his face, his arms and hands - all covered in scar tissue from what I presume to be burns. How else could he have gotten them? His tired, hazel eyes with bags so big and puffy, I could fit all of my childhood trauma in there. How long has it been since I've said something?

“It's alright if you look, but it's not nice to stare.”

Oh, God. He noticed.

"I'm sorry. I guess I just wasn't expecting you to look like this."

"Yeah? Me either. Now in case I hadn't said I already...LEAVE!"

"Hey! Get your hands off of me!"

"I don't know how you got here, but I don't care where else you go."

*THUD*

What the hell happened? Why am I back in this gross bed? Was I just dreaming? Ugh, I'm so confused. Regardless, I'm out of here. I swear I've been possessed or something. Did this dude hit me or something? My head feels like a melon when you put 100 rubber bands on it. It's like it's gonna explode. Oh no. There are the heavy footsteps again, left my baby knife where that dude clobbered me. The door creaks open. His guy's face is even scarier in the daylight.

"How ya feelin'?" Was trying to kick you out but you collapsed. Kicking an unconscious man didn't feel right, even when he broke into my home."

"Oh gee. Thanks."

"Now that I know you're alive, feel free to leave anytime."

"Oh, ok."

Yeah, I'm out. This man is so strange.

“I found your pocket knife on my floor. You should probably take it before I throw it out.

Although you're probably better off getting a new one. That thing couldn't cut through a mud pie in a rainstorm.”

“I've been meaning to get a new one, I just didn't think I'd be in a situation where I'd need it.”

“Consider yourself reminded.”

“Yeah, ok. Well thanks for everything, I'm gonna head out.”

I grab my useless pocket tool, my bag, and scoot my boot over to the door. Get me out of here.

Get me out of here. Don't run until you're outside. The door is *so* far away.

“I was a fireman. I'm not gonna hurt you.”

“I didn't think you were.”

“You may think you're hard to read, but I barely know you and I can tell you everything that's going through your head.”

“You don't know me.”

“You're right, I don't. But I know what you're thinking. For example, I know that my career took its toll on my body but when you saw me for the first time last night your life flashed before your very eyes. Now, you don't need a genius to tell you that. You've been in my house for several hours now and yet you're still here. Part of you wants to leave but there's also a part of you that trusts me enough to stay.”

“I was going to leave, before you attacked me. And then again just now. What's your point?”

“Just don't assume you know someone when you don't know their story behind them.”

“Kind of like what you're doing to me?”

“Yes, exactly. Now that we both know what not to do, why don't we try and fix it, hmm?”

“Umm, ok, uhh, what's your name?”

“Yeah, It's Harvey.”

I reach out my hand. As I shake his hand, I feel his dry, scaly hand somehow mixed with a slight clamminess in his palm. I notice his under-groomed presence as he accidentally cuts me with one of his dirty fingernails.

“Guy.”

“I know, you told me last night. Right after you chose to stay.”

“I didn't choose to- Why am I even still here?”

“Let's start with that. Why are you here, Guy?”

“Well, I needed shelter. My friends left me, I don't know where they are. I'm all alone.”

“It doesn't surprise me they did. You're not very likable yet, are you?”

“You've got some nerve. If you're so great, why are you here then? You're the one living in this dump.”

“I couldn't stand the thought of people saying I couldn't do something. When I was in high school, I was small. I was weak. I was meek. People didn't expect much from me. Senior year, I made a pact with myself. I was going to save people. I wanted to help people. I wanted to do good. I trained and I studied. I earned my spot. I was on top of the world. One day, we got a call. House fire in the suburbs - a call that I'd got many times before. We got there before anyone else, which is typical for us. The house was on its last legs before it would crumble. The family was in the master. The father was ok. The mother, son, and both daughters all collapsed because of what

I thought was from suffocation. I carried the father out to save his life. It was my duty to save all human life. What I hadn't realized was the fire, the family on the floor was his doing. Once he recovered, he killed the two police officers who found out his lie and fled. I left my field in disgrace. It was my fault. That was 44 years ago. And now I'm left here, rotting into my 70s, bitter with two scars.

Every night, the look in the father's eyes corrodes my mind. I can't get him out of my head. I knew I wanted to help people, but now I see some people are more worth saving than others. And he knew what he was doing too. He knew I'd carry him out first. I'll never forgive myself for that.

Those kids, the mother. Nothing they did would've warranted that. They were just children. They still saw the world as a happy place. And they trusted their father. But trust is a dangerous game. So much effort to build and so little effort to break. It just doesn't seem worth it to me, not anymore."

"Wow. I had no idea. Harvey, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I know you are. A tale like that tickles everyone in the right places. Now It's your turn.

Why are you here?"

"I just told you, my friends ditched me."

"No, I know why you're here, in my house. But why are you here, in life?"

"I don't understand."

"Why are you the way that you are? Why did your friends leave you?"

"I don't know what to say. I don't know."

"I'll tell you why, because you're selfish. You've got an ego so big it can't fit in that bag of yours. Someone hurt you. Who?"

Welp, I guess we're doing this.

"I did. I hurt myself. I hate how I am. I didn't have any siblings and I didn't have any friends. When I was growing up I convinced myself because it was because I was too good for everyone, they weren't worth my time. I thought I was special. I thought that because that's what everyone hears when they grow up - that they're special. But my specialty was pushing everyone away. And it still is."

"What do you mean 'it still is'?"

"Well, I'm here because I'm lost. My friends left me. But my plan was to leave them first. I wanted to leave my friend Trent in the forest. I wanted him to be as lost as I am now. I didn't like how he'd treat me and didn't think he was worth it - worth me. So, I asked him on a hike in the most secluded place that was available to the public. Whatever happened to him once I left would've been on him since he had driven me to it. I didn't anticipate Trent's friends being there as well. And I now realize that he had the same plan as I did. It was no conscience they were there. I'm not the only one with special planning talents anymore. I pick everyone apart. It justifies walling everyone out. I hate it, but it's how I live."

"Not much of a life, is it?"

"No. It's really not. It's cold, and it's lonely."

"I'm no stranger to that. That's why I built this place in the forest. No shortage of firewood out here."

Oh, please make a fire. I'm freezing my butt off. When did it get so cold? Maybe when the walls came down.

“Hey, if it's not too much trouble, you think you could light a fire? I'm getting a little cold.”

“Yeah, just let me grab the matches from the other room.”

He's got a medal on his wall. What's it for? Not for rescuing that murder, is it? No, he wouldn't be awarded for that, that'd be crazy.

“Harvey, I noticed you got this medal on your wall here. What's that about?”

“Oh yeah, my Medal of Merit. My very first call was at a pet store, guess someone had a canister of cleaning fluid too close to a heater or something. Big explosion. When we got there half the building was ash, the smoke so thick we'd need an axe to break through. Not one of these animals had signed up for a cremation, so we carried out each and every cat, hamster, snake, mouse, you name it. Really got thrown into the deep end with that call. Burned up my hands real good reaching into a metal cage. The cat made it, but my hands almost didn't. They gave me that medal to show it's not just human lives we'd set out to save.”

“Sounds like you've had quite that career. Too bad it was cut short.”

“I had at least 20 more years left in me. They told me I didn't have to quit, that it was part of the job. But I couldn't live with myself. I didn't need the constant reminder.”

“Do you ever wonder what your life would have been if you hadn't quit?”

“Every day of my life. I picture it as this everlasting tug-of-war between redemption and guilt. What I’ve come to realize is that guilt always wins.”

“I suppose you’re right. I can’t remember the last time I redeemed myself for who I am. I guess I never have. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“I do. You’re doing it right now. You’re opening up, showing that softcore you were talking about. You need to do that with your friends.”

“I don’t know if I can. I don’t even know if they’re still my friends. They literally ditched me in the middle of nowhere. No doubt I had it coming though, I mean I was gonna do that too. The taste of my own medicine is as bitter as any.”

“Do you wanna take a ride?”

He’s not gonna kill me, is he? What’s he doing? Why does he care so much?

“Where are we going?”

“You’re gonna get that redemption you so desperately need. It’ll be the best thing you could do for yourself. Swallow your pride and take a chance on vulnerability. You need to save you from yourself.”

“Oh, alright.”

As we step outside, I notice a new sun. One that not only gives light, but warmth too. I know it has been there all along, but I’m seeing it for the first time. Harvey heads up to his garage, which until this point I thought was an oversized outhouse. The large door swings upward with a latch that clips to the ceiling, so it doesn’t come flying down and hit you in the rear, which Harvey

says happened to him more times than he wants to admit. Nothing in this garage is new - except my new found respect for this man. Metal tools are faded, woods are rotten, even this stone cat statue has moss on it. Not a hint of bright colours.

This man's truck is even more beat up than his house. I can't even tell what colour it used to be, the rust corroding this vehicle like an illness. He's got three different brands of tires on and the back window is completely gone. The seats are covered in duct tape, some gray and some black. Can't believe I'm saying this but this truck is deceptively comfortable to sit in. Not much room though, almost better off in the back. The truck wheezes and gasps as Harvey starts the ignition, as we putter down the dirt road with the subtle stench of gasoline which is likely leaking in the back - that can't be safe.

"Thanks for doing this, Harvey. I owe you one."

"The only thing you owe is to be kinder to yourself and the folks you surround yourself with.

You'll be glad you did it. It's gonna be hard, but that's how you know it was worth it."

"I'm really scared, I still don't know where to start."

"You need to apologize. Whether they accept it or not is on them, but you can't move on until you do that. It'll probably take time, but luckily you're a young guy, no shortage of time there."

Damn, this thing really doesn't drive well. Shakes you like it's trying to get coins out of a piggy bank. I can feel my brain ponging back and forth, really should have asked for a helmet or something. At least, he's giving me the chance to redeem myself, something I'd never thought I'd be able to do. Can't harp on him too much.

“Guy, is that them? In the bushes?”

“Nah, I don't know what that's about. Weird.”

“They're young folks, like yourself. Regardless, I'm pulling over. A little too suspicious for my liking. Your gut doesn't lie.”

OH. MY. GOD. This can't be happening. This really can't be happening. It's them. It's really them. Not one of them is breathing.

“Call an ambulance! Call an ambulance right now!”

“I can't! I left my phone in Trent's car!”

I feel sick. I can't breathe. Who could have done this? I guess there was a killer in these woods. But it's not who I thought it was. Or was it exactly who I thought it was? It should've been me. I should've died. They should've got me. No one would've missed me. I feel as though I'd joined them. Feel like the killer and the victim.

“Guy! Come look at this.”

The compass. Trent's compass. Shattered pointing West. The sun rises and sets with them. The taste of what could have been will forever haunt my tongue. I can't look at them anymore. I can't look at myself. I can't be here. I'm going home.

Analysis:

My feedback for my short story draft mentioned how I should incorporate more use of senses and descriptive language. I attempted to implement these suggestions in several spots around my story, which I have underlined along with minor spelling and grammar errors that I caught after proofreading. Most notably, I added more detail when Guy first entered Harvey's house. I incorporated the sense of smell, describing the scent of the cabin as a mixture of mothballs, cheap liquor and mildew. These three items give a brief preview of Harvey's character - as Harvey is a heavy drinker, who doesn't quite take care of himself nor his possessions. I then link the scent with a memory of Guy's, though this memory of his only gives him a temporary sense of security, as the following events evidently break this feeling. To further support the notion of Harvey not quite taking care of himself properly, I added little details about Harvey's hands upon introducing themselves to each other. I note that his hands are dry on the outside, yet clammy on his palms which is not an ideal condition for one's hands. I continued to incorporate the various senses when Harvey and Guy are about to drive off in search of Guy's friends. I added this 'transition scene' in hopes of both smoothing out this area of the story and also keeping my feedback in mind. In this new paragraph, I start with mentioning how Guy is beginning to see the world in a new light, with a new warmth. Following the description of the garage and a brief anecdote, I implement the sense of sound upon Harvey starting his old, rusty truck. I describe the sound of the truck starting as the truck wheezing and gasping. This use of personification further solidifies the notion that Harvey doesn't take care of his possessions, also supported by the smell of leaking gasoline as they drive off. Upon reflecting on the twist ending of my story, a new perspective began to grow in my mind. When the two men find Guy's friends dead in a bush, Guy thinks "I guess there was a killer in these woods. But it's not who I thought it was. Or was it

exactly who I thought it was?" This can be interpreted in a number of ways. First off, Guy's philosophy of 'whatever happens is your fault because you drove me too it' is now redirected to himself, giving him the ultimate example of karma, and suggests that Guy sees himself as the one who murdered his friends, as he drove them to take such drastic measures in the first place. Additionally, this line may also suggest that Harvey is the murderer, as Guy's initial gut impression of Harvey was a killer. After changing the line "My gut doesn't lie," to "Your gut doesn't lie," adds a whole new layer of suspicion to Harvey's character. Perhaps Harvey went out while Guy had collapsed. Maybe the killer isn't either of them, but someone else. Leaving the identity of the killer a mystery and up to interpretation for the reader to draw their own conclusions and speculations is a fun little way to leave the reader thinking after finishing the story.