

Learning to Fly

The warmer weather brought more game, and the snow-melt meant I didn't have to fill the cistern, so there was a brief period when life was a bit easier.

I just re-read that last line. Easier. Ha ha. Ignore that. I do have an eraser, but it's hard as a rock and just smears stuff around.

Animals were more plentiful, but with them, after a while, came that other animal. People started to show up, and that was the end of "easier". The end of everything Dave had built for us, really, but not right away.

The first occasion was actually a bit of a gift, in that it was short, and definitive, and I won.

Hmm. Maybe gift isn't the best term. Maybe won isn't either.

I hope you won't mind if I leave the analysis for later.

I was coming back from hunting, along the fire road, but up in the trees, as I imagine Dave was the day we met. Two men were down on the road, plodding along the dirt track toward the first gate, but not in sight of it. They were exactly what I had imagined people would be, nearly a year into the end of the world as we knew it. Yes, I know it's an acronym. Capitalize it if you want.

They were thin, and dressed in clothing that had gone from new to rags in a very short period of time. Their jeans were torn, but not in that artfully premeditated way, and one of them still had a size sticker on the leg. The over-shirts were expensive, but filthy. It all screamed pilfered along the way. Their packs were thin, as well, and the only weapons I could see were hunting knives in belt sheaths.

That aside, they were hungry. It was apparent in every forward movement, every sideways glance. These were two men who would do anything to eat.

Seeing that, and knowing what it meant made the transaction easier, because I was harder now. I'd been shown the costs of living in this new world, and I knew who I had to keep safe.

This next bit may be where I lose you, reader. Or not, I don't know. I don't know what the world will become. All I could know was what I'd become, and what I could do right then. I think I was all Dave, though.

"You can read, right?"

They didn't do what I'd done. They both instantly looked uphill, and then surged forward along their line of sight, no hesitation. It was eerie, and less than human, and I have to admit I did hesitate for a second or two before offering out the last option for them.

Dave had invested a lot of time in teaching me to shoot, and I had repaid that investment in much more time spent. Beyond that, it would appear that I had some innate talent, so by the time I came to this particular moment, I think I can honestly say I was pretty much an angel of death with the bow. Maybe that sounds like a boast, but I don't mean it as one. It was just one of those costs of living I mentioned, and my words hung in the air like a price tag.

"Stop now, or die."

They didn't, and so they did.

Then, life became like dark water beneath me. I could see into it a few feet, but anything could surface from farther down.

I dragged their bodies back down to the track, and left them lying across it. I knew scavengers would make pretty short work of the bulk of them, but hoped the next inbound pilgrims would think twice before proceeding any further down the trail at the sight of what was left.

Maybe it deterred some, but probably not.

It didn't stop the flow, and successive interactions started to happen much closer in, so it didn't matter in the end. I couldn't be everywhere at once, and I was forced to hunt much closer to home, which countered the abundance of game, and life got that much more difficult.

I would like to say that there was always an interaction. You know, a point of cessation of hostilities where each party could evaluate the risk versus reward before action was taken on either side, but I can't say that. After the first few, I shot on sight.

I did a lot of killing in the name of protection. The temptation here is to justify my actions. Judge how you will. Most of them were men, but I'll cop to the woman who made it all the way to the house, hand on the porch screen door before I caught the movement, and sent her the no solicitors notice.

Ok, that last bit was pretty callous. I'd erase it, but, I can't.

I tried everything I could think of to warn them off. I hauled all the bodies out to where I'd left the first two, and stacked them like firewood across the track. I even dragged one all the way out to the no trespassing sign, and propped it up against the tree it was tacked to. It seemed to make little difference. Dave's valley was pretty remote, but the way in wasn't invisible, and what was left of the world seemed to be very, very hungry.

I could see the writing on the wall myself, after a month or so. I was exhausted, despite being in the best shape I'd ever been in. I got little sleep, and Brin and I almost never spoke. We passed each other along the paths of our tasks, but she evidently had nothing more to say to me, and I was way too tired to try to bridge the chasm between us. That day in the kitchen seemed like a misremembered dream.

I began to prepare, in what ways I could. I started caching food and water farther down the deer track into the lower valley, and expanded the go bags in the tree stand. I stashed the sled near the stand as well. It wasn't as easy to pull across dirt as snow, but it was what I had. I couldn't go very far out anymore, because every trip away was a risk that I'd not be there when someone (or multiple someones) made it past the inner fence. I hated the thought that we'd be forced out, but it was just me against a steady stream, and I had to face the very real possibility that I'd eventually lose.

I also knew I needed to start prepping Brin for a quick exit. Of course, if you've been paying attention at all, reader, I think you can extrapolate all the ways in which I would fail in that. But, in case you can't, and in the interest of fulfilling my narrative obligation, I submit the following.

Believes her father created an inviolable safe place. Check.

Will absolutely not want to leave it, as she's mapped it to the DNA level. Check.

Can't see. Check.

Doesn't trust me. Check.

Doesn't like me. Check.

Would prefer I'd already left. Check.

I could go on, but you get my point. Points.

I struggled with it, agonized over it, but all it really took was for me to fail in a spectacular way. I fell asleep at precisely the wrong time.

I'd like to paint it as the inevitable outcome of trying to be everything to circumstance that was quite a bit wider than my everything. It was that, but I think it was also my mistaken belief that I could hold it all together somehow, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Despite my own actions *acknowledging* the fact that I knew I couldn't. We are such dummies, sometimes.

I'd done a twenty-four hour stint, starting with chores early, and a trek outside the outer fence to hunt. I did ok on that, but then had to return and dress it, and set up the smoke-house. Then it was chase off a family of four in the early afternoon that made it to the inner gate (strike one). I didn't kill anyone. It was my first time with kids, so I thought that was good, but turned out it wasn't, because they were recon for a larger group (strike two). That group was smart enough to wait until early the next morning, and chores, fire, food, and night watch burned up the rest of my time awake (strike three, you're out).

Brin woke me in the pre-dawn chill, kneeling beside the chair I'd fallen asleep in that faced my bedroom window, and whispered,

"There are people downstairs. A lot of them."

I think my emergence from deep sleep made the transaction easier because I wasn't prepared. There was only me thinking I had to sell it to her, and her proving me wrong.

"We need to g--."

"Yes, I know."

Three words to illustrate how much I misunderstood her.

We escaped out my bedroom window.

The roof outside sloped toward the back corner, where a substantial trellis connected the roof to the ground. I'd figured it out a few weeks earlier. There was a trellis, but nothing had been planted at its base. If you drew a straight line out from that corner of the house toward the closest point of the inner fence, the tree stand was almost perfectly aligned with it. I'd stood at that point, looking back at the house, and it was clear that the house had been constructed with no sight lines to it from the front or inside, save two upstairs windows. The room I'd been given, and Dave's room.

I'd discovered that the fence panel there was held in place by clips, not sheet-metal screws like the rest of the fence.

He'd never said, or even suggested, but I was inclined to think that Dave had been a chess player. Everything about his preparation screamed it, once you started to look for it. It made his loss that much sharper, but it was clear he'd built this potential eventuality into it.

I was worried about how to guide her, but it was needless. She'd gone out the window first without any prompt from me, as I backtracked to the door, and locked it. I shouldered the bow, and grabbed a pack from under the bed, filled with some additional supplies and all the arrows Dave had on hand. It was heavy, and it was difficult to exit silently with all that mass on my back, but I managed. Through the bedroom door and down the hall, I could hear sibilant whispers, and small creaks on the staircase. By the time I'd gotten out the window, she was at the top of the trellis, and I saw her transition from the roof to the trellis with obviously practiced ease.

I followed her down to the lawn below. She headed unerringly toward the fence, not waiting for me to lead her. It was clear she'd already done this many, many times. Thank you, Dave, I thought as I followed quickly behind. She reached the fence before me, and undid the clips holding one side of the metal panel in place with little fumbling, having released it even before I'd even caught up. She bent the

panel back away from the post, and slipped through the gap, holding it open for me. Once through, I replaced the panel against the post, and re-clipped it.

I turned to her. She stood, waiting. I spoke softly.

"How far did he drill you on this?"

"I can get to the stand, or the hollow beyond the trees."

"I've got to go up and see what they're doing, and grab the bags. Wait for me in the hollow. I stashed the sled there."

She just nodded, and walked confidently to the stand ladder, touched it, reoriented herself, and made her way to the wall of trees a few yards farther on. She disappeared between two of them, touching one first for course correction. It was amazing. In my mind, Dave was wafting toward mythic status.

I scrambled to and up the stand ladder, and then knelt at the rail, looking back over the fence and toward the house. There'd been only a sliver of a moon last night, but the eastern top edge of the surrounding mountains was lighter than even a few minutes ago. I could see the house pretty well, and could see two figures moving carefully and quietly along the nearest side toward the back corner we'd just left. My bedroom window was still open, but yawned blackly, with no discernible movement inside.

I was conflicted now. Part of me urged a silent retreat. Take the bags, load the sled, and go quietly. Keep her safe.

Dave would want that, right?

Fear and expectation sorted.

But....

The sun was still well obscured by the horizon but was rising toward it fast, and color began to wash back into the world again, pushing grayscale aside and sharpening focus. I could now see that the two figures standing at the back corner were men, and one of them wore a familiar down vest. It was the father of the family I'd driven off yesterday.

The anger remained, and now grew to a fever where, if I'm honest, I forgot about Brin for a bit. Yep, the whole point, waiting for me below in the darkness. Not my finest moment.

I couldn't help it. I took the shot.

It was perfect. I got him at the base of his throat, and he went down without a sound, from alive to inert in the time it took his body to come to rest. I remember thinking that his wife and kids would have to sell it without him to back them up from now on, and my anger liked the idea. I drew again, and sent one at the other guy.

Center mass, and he dropped too.

I was exultant, and nothing else mattered right then. I put one straight through my bedroom window, just in case there might be someone looking out. I would take this back from them.

I would kill them all, and everyone who came after. This belonged to Dave, and Brin.

It belonged to me, too. It was mine.

From below and behind, I heard a quiet voice.

"Jake."

It all drained out of me in an instant, and I returned to myself. I grabbed the go bags, and dropped them through the opening in the floor to the ground below. After the quiet thuds of impact, I replied.

"Yes, sorry. Be down in a second."

Then, we loaded up the sled and left, heading down the deer track toward the opening valley below. Brin rode on it, cradling our bags. She didn't say anything for a while, but then,

"What did you do?"

"I don't want to tell you."

More silence, but then she made it clear that wasn't enough for her.

"I *need* you to tell me."

So, I told her.