



DAVID BURKE
COMING DOWN

My dreams are plagued by evil men.

I've lived and worked in the woods for forty years, but it's never the wild animals I'm afraid of; when I'm mired in desk work and a midnight knock echoes through the park office, I'm reminded of their real world implications. I move to the door as a man leans into the foyer, his knees wobbling, his face the essence of fatigue. His name is Dan. He's here to announce he's left you, alone, at the top of a hill.

When talking to customers, I tell them to place a quarter above Georgian Bay on a road map and there you'll find us: White Hill Park, a tiny patch of government protected green, and Silver Peak thrust 4,121 feet up from its centre. It's a long climb through green valleys, then up a narrow switchback, your hands grasping for birch trees to hoist you over ragged cliffs. At the peak, nothing but bleached stone the length of a football field, and the dazzling view of a sun-smearred lake.

But you know this already. Dan tells me it's the eighteenth year the two of you have climbed White Hill—a day with a friend to reduce the divide of work and time, and I listen with rapt attention. Dan, however, is nearly hypothermic.

I boil tea, wrap his numb feet in a towel and cover him with a blanket. I could make phone calls and hazard the silence of the park office, but Silver Peak is no place for a man right now. The storm came as a surprise, collected in curling clouds swept down from the north. I spent the day computer-bound, watching it gather, preparing the chalkboard weather report for tomorrow's campers. Nothing but clear skies for the rest of the weekend, though an agony of rain still crashes over our office, our park, my hill.

This late night emergency has brought me back to the old days, reminding of boy scouts and canoe trips: the reasons I took this job in the first place. Dan begins to nod his head in sleep, so I rustle through the storage shed, find an old canvas tent we rented to campers twenty years ago. I spot hockey sticks stuffed in a bin, their blades worn thin from parking lot tournaments. I cut off a tent wall with my pocket knife, roll the sticks a few times on each side of the canvas, then poke holes through the edges and lace them together with twine. And there—a stretcher.

It's 4 am when the storm rolls off the peak, slipping down the perilous slopes and across the forest, spent of its energies. I hear the rain retreat to the occasional leaf tap, a sprinkle, a plunk in a puddle. I make a phone call, ask my morning replacement to prepare for a hike.

I tie my boots, throw some water, energy bars, and a first aid kit into a daypack, and wait under the porch as an SUV barrels into the parking lot. Park Ranger Shawn steps out, straps a pack to his shoulders, and paces along the trailhead. He was transferred from one of the bigger parks down south, and I've never liked

his surfer-dude style. But the forest, they say, is the new ocean.

“Why haven’t you called the medevac?” he asks.

I shrug my shoulders, allowing him to believe that I’m a crazy old man who’s lived too long in the woods. I’d like to tell him how I strive for self-sufficiency, and despise the technologies like satellite phones that rescue weekend warriors from stubbed toes and indigestion, but I really don’t see the point. He is the way he is. And after what I suspect was a massive heart attack and twelve hours of exposure on the top of a mountain during a thunderstorm, I have to admit I haven’t given you much of a chance.

“We’ll be fine,” I say.

Shawn points at the canvas and hockey sticks hoisted hobo-style over my shoulder as if to say, “That’s your stretcher?” but my eyes tell him it’s all we’ll need.

There’s silence as we thread between the lakes, the sky beginning to lighten and the sides of our pants soaking from the rain-laced trailside grass. Park Ranger Shawn leads as though his forestry degrees give him the right, while Dan and I walk together, our boots heavy in the wet earth. He’s reminded of his race down these slopes at dusk, his heart pounding, his eyes fighting darkness for the trail. This is his first time climbing White Hill without you.

We haven’t talked about it, but I know Dan made every effort to save you. I know he rolled you over as you hit the ground, made tight fists and punched at your chest, wrapped his lips around yours and breathed his life into you, and I know he was devastated when none of it worked. He curled with you on the side of the hill as black clouds smothered the sky, but he had no choice; he had to leave you there to suffer the storm, alone.

I like to get to know the people who walk into my office to buy permits, ask questions, and tell stories about the black bear they spotted sniffing berries on the roadside. Was that you, yesterday, hidden under the shadow of a ball cap? You can excuse me, I hope, for forgetting your face—this hike is filled with the suspense of discovering who you are, or were—but I make a point of leaving people alone, should their looks determine what they desire. And your look was focused, driven for the peak.

We step above the forest. I can picture you here, dizzy after the staggering climb, the peak now revealed. Your last steps leave you short of breath, your fingers tingling. Suddenly a sledgehammer hits your chest, your heart cracks, and nothing works but your awareness of pain. Your arms stretch skyward for the peak just beyond your reach, but you hit the rock, smear your cheek against the gravel, and slide down to a mossy crag. Here you find your resting place, your eyes rolling under your eyelids or open to the crest of a hill you never made.

Park Ranger Shawn is the first to reach you. By the time I crawl up there is nothing to see. He is of the new order, the kind that knows the woods through the classroom, and dresses the part as prescribed in glossy U.S. magazines. He has tossed aside the pine boughs Dan covered over your body, taken the requisite pictures, thrust your cold limbs into a sleeping bag and wriggled it over your hips. He has

dismissed the solemn, silent rituals that I assumed would attend the discovery of you, cramped and exposed on the rocky peak.

"I wish you would have consulted me on this, Shawn," I say.

"He was gone," he says sadly, but with a bit too much finality for my liking.

"I would have liked to have been the judge of that."

Shawn rolls you onto the canvas. We both take an end of the stretcher and hoist you up, our hands wrapped around the hockey sticks, our forearms tense with your weight. Dan forges ahead to clear a path, sweep a branch away. We are macabre furniture movers, careful not to bang up the merchandise.

We step off the white, sun glazed peak and descend through the forest, taking careful strides down the rock and mud, my hands wrapped tightly around the curve of the hockey stick's blade. I feel your shoulder nudge me as the stretcher sways. My steps are precise, each firmly planted in the earth, each cumbersome stride bringing us closer to rest.

What would you be doing today, if not this? Work, probably, like the rest of us, but how did you make your living? Whatever it was, I imagine your job was forgotten once the clock was punched, a necessary suffering, your hands raw and cracked after a ten-hour shift. Back at work, your legs would still contain the memory of your hike, each step catalogued in your swollen knees and tired thighs. Your hips would creak as you hobbled to the lunch truck, where co-workers would ask for details. "It was nice to get away," you'd tell them. "But it's good to be back."

I've taken a million steps on this hill, so many up and down that I know every stone, every puddle after it rains, every branch reaching over the path. I see the rock clearly: a tiny patch of moss, one side slick with mud. I've sat for lunch on this rock countless times, but today my boot doesn't take, and one step in a million goes wrong.

I feel you slide off my shoulder. Shawn plunges to the ground. The sleeping bag rolls into a tuck and we watch through mud-smearing faces as you tumble down the slope, twigs snapping as you roll to a rest, wrapped around the gnarled base of a thick pine.

We collect ourselves, wipe our faces clean, and listen as Dan plods down the trail. He has fallen behind, and now, he pushes a branch aside and stops in the clearing, his eyes wide at what we've done. The look on his face doesn't change, flat from exhaustion and loss. Perhaps he thinks it was his fault all this happened. Perhaps he feels he forced your choked heart to push too hard, to break at the peak.

Park Ranger Shawn holds a splintered Sherwood in his hands. "This," he says, "this is ..." but the words fail him. I watch the first hint of anger seethe beneath the brim of his hat. I'd like to get things out in the open, settle this, but we can't leave you here. Together we reach down and tug at your body, lifting you. Our first steps are minimal, careful, fraught with your weight, but now we feel closer, holding you in our hands.

The mud trail twists around swamp and between birches, across a creek and beside a driftwood-tangled lake. We are tired, drained, a silent caravan of

mourners, and we do not stop to rest, fearing we'll never get you back up, fearing the earth will swallow you for good. The trail soon gives to boardwalk, bridges over wet grasslands and hummocks of mud, then to pavement. With a few solemn strides we stop beside the office. With careful motions we bend you to the ground. I cradle your head in my hands, softly let you down to rest.

We stand beside you, exhausted. Dan breaks our vigil, leans against the brick with trembling knees. He readies himself for the guilt, the phone call to your wife, the funeral, the questions.

Park Ranger Shawn wipes his hands and tucks in his shirt, then turns his back and steps through the park office door. It closes softly, an air-cushioned glide to the jamb.

I sit on the sidewalk beside you, guard you, my heels braced against the leaf-strewn curb. There's no one but us, the trees, and my crowded thoughts.

I spot Shawn through a window covered with kid-crafted paper butterflies. He is on the telephone, gazing at me. I avert my eyes. I rub your shoulder to comfort you in this awkward resting place. Who are you? What face did you deserve? I loosen the drawstring, pull the hood from around your neck, let the wind hit you one last time. I run my hands over your cold skin, reach with gentle fingers to close your eyelids, and brush the hair, a smattering of grey, behind your ears. I see a few wrinkles above your forehead, a two day beard across your cheek. There's a look of surprise on your face, or maybe it's calm.

I don't hear the door open and close, but I can feel Shawn standing directly over my shoulder.

"I've called the ambulance," he says.

"No point in that," I say, looking at your once proud face. "I'll drive him in." I want to keep this funeral march going, out of respect for a man I've never met, but with whom I feel a deep and binding connection.

"It's on its way," he says.

"I'll drive him in," I say, standing up to face him. "It's not a problem."

"Enough of this boy scout bullshit," Shawn says. He is tall, strong, young, and he towers above me, the froth of his anger about to spill over. "We desecrated that poor man's body."

"We did the best we could," I say, my throat constricting.

I surprise myself when I strike him, across the cheek, my left hand curled into his shirt, a button popping. I feel a shove in return, hear a grunt, and suddenly my eyes swell shut with pain, my ears deadened by the thud of a landed blow.

I lean over the pavement, a red stain dripping down my chin and pooling on the curb. Behind me, the wail of sirens echoes through the rock on the road into the park, an ambulance wheeling past SUVs on their way to holiday paradise. With Shawn standing distant, I collect myself, staunching the blood with a swipe of my hand. I stand above you, horrified at this act of disrespect, but with a few gentle motions I order your limbs, place them at your side, and try to stretch out the cold and inward clutch. I must make you look presentable to strangers.

The ambulance arrives, a square white tub of blinking red lights, and pulls

up beside your body. Three men in blue uniforms spill out of its doors and race to you. I watch from a distance.

It's time to say good bye. It was a pleasure meeting you.