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Age 22

### Constantinople

Eternity is dim and cruel. Out of the summer's saffron dimness, exiles of the last glacial age glint dimly; moss and hieroglyphic jags blended into a single shade. This happens outside of time, on no particular summer day. Birds do not sing in abstraction, lost to eternity, unmemorialized in the cold essence of sundown.

The rocks themselves know weight and solidity; can tremble solidly under your fingertips. They are real. The moss is real. You, by extension, are real. But all the same, this section of the forest where the rocks slumber massively is haunted. By the long fermented purity of very ancient things. By eternity itself. They glint in the semi-darkness, cruel, dim, and alive.

Trees tangle and tear the images and truths distilled therein. They are not eternal, only their shadows. Nothing is more mutable than these patterns, sometimes black and resentful and thick, sometimes open to visionary flight. Shifting planes of evening and gyrations of bleeding leaves can be replaced by morning calm, or starlight. The trees and their agon with the sky...it is all vanity. In time, saws and pickup trucks will settle the score. Eternal shadows drip into the flimsy soil, resting while they can in the expectation of night.

The rocks do not budge in their cruelty.

Forest runs into alder thickets, which after a while outrun themselves. Then the sea, or rather, a sleeping estuary of the Bras D'Or, rests with finality, not alluding to greater waters or further horizons. At the margin between alderlands and water lies the reservation. It is very small, tight and fragile like a clenched fist. From a distance, it seems smaller still. And desperate. Little houses with unmowed lawns hang onto the modern world by the nails of their vinyl siding. A desperate rhythm of houses litters the



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road, from lone outposts to tribal compounds. These latter cringe together against something outside of themselves, the first, by order of lineage, standing sanctimoniously in the mess of its increase. By the time you stop to wonder, it is already gone. This is no country for questions. That is the lesson of The Road.

The Road is not a state of mind, it is not a metaphysic. It does not stretch like a ribbon but shambles from hand to mouth through the wretched land. You cannot see more than a dozen paces ahead and that which is lost is irrecoverable. In a chronic state of repair, it passes from pink to black.

Outside of history, not long ago, a ragged cohort wandered through alders with outstretched copper wire. The old well was growing brackish in springtimes ruptures, poisoned but not yet dead. Rebirth depends on death, and it is out of carcasses that the season's minions weave mayflowers and wild roses. Just so, it was this promise of thirst that sent a party into the mud and fog, with shovels and longing.

John Gould Sr. followed the subtle currents of earth and air with his divining rod. What could be more pregnant with supernatural force than the carrier of electric current, the tamer of fire? His shamanic palsy guided the men through a secret landscape beneath our surface world. The ground surrendered God's hidden gift of water after a frenzy of digging. It tasted like a new beginning, cold and unbeheld.

The well and the memories of its birth have been boarded up for years. Whatever images float in and out of its unseen eye one can only speculate.

Winter met them through the tarpaper and boards with silence. No, not silence. Even from the distance of three quarters of a century, a faint solstitial whisper could be discerned. That, and the odd archival photograph is the only record of that long ago passage. Listen hard enough and you can hear it. It is the bending of boughs in a snowstorm. It is the sound of submission. Cold, impersonal, a blanket for huddled masses and mute regret.



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Brothers and sons had been torn to shreds behind imperial banners, recently. Boats rotted on their moorings in sympathy with masters laid in exotic soil. These unpainted silvering effigies allowed mothers and sisters to squint eastwards less and less, to eventually abandon that seascape of loss. Life went on, thinly, perhaps, but implacably. Tragedy was the rock on which they broke their daily bread.

There were the usual maulings, by man, animal and machinery, drownings, drink-soaked-one-man funeral marches and waves of disease. Death was familiar and grisly.

The rhythms of intimate mortality washed in and out of greater harmonies; a ritual year overlaid and directed (undiminished and undomesticated) the anguish of living and dying. There was a season for fishing, a season for trapping, thin days for plying in ghost bitten patches by the train tracks. Long, malarial gleanings through blueberry country awaited in the early summer, to be followed by pilgrimage to the Old Mission, as summer ripened. St. Anne kissed her people with sunstroke and bid them well. The journey ended with the giving of saint's cards and prayer beads. The cycle repeated, walking past last year's tears and crumbs, through festival and mourning.

They called it Centralization, when these penitents returned to helplessness, state mandated. Men in a broken maritime city called it progress, too, and created centuries of despair at a pen stroke. Ancient harmonies were broken, replaced by a solstitial whisper. History began.

Sylvester Doucette was ten that founding winter. He would have clung to his mother on the most brutal nights, and played in the white blistering desolation like a holy fool during the day. Sylvester Doucette is a figure unknown to the records. Even in the inter-tidal muck of folk memory, he is barely a shadow, mostly reached through inference. Levi Doucette had a brother, and his name was Sylvester. His mystics' eyes might be preserved in the ancient moonlight in disused wells, but beyond that, he is lost.

His mother and father came from the mainland. They had been urged by the flickering of gas lamps, one night that they should consider their prospects in a more healthful climate. The next night, it was their shack in flames that flickered as they were hauled away with the bare scraps of their belongings. Unlike most of the government's nocturnal reappings, they did not have family waiting for them. Other Doucettes were sent in the opposite direction, to the other concentration camp. A distant relation agreed to let them squat at the fringes of his 40 acres in return for hard labour. Winter struck.

Father died of consumption a few years later. Mother crept into a hole inside herself, and emerged less and less. The boys (for Levi was born just before their parents parted) were adopted by the distant relation, a man named Urban Francis.

Urban Francis was driven by god, industry and a righteous sense of what the world owed him. Indian agents were always courteous to him, even at the height of their terror campaigns, and he had no trouble getting his 40 acres. He was a hunting guide for rich Americans, when he wasn't incapacitating draft animals with tree stumps. The Americans gave him a Hemmingwayan lexicon. 'Old Boy' and a pious nod were his stock greetings.

Among his broken draft animals he counted the older Doucettes. The younger ones had to earn their keep; there are no free rides in life, by god. Since the beginning, Sylvester had milked his cows and fought back the alder tides on his land. In return, the boys got to sleep in his house, which he had built in preparation for winter, and history's birth. It was Urban architecturally rendered, with no patience for light, and sharp, eccentric accusatory angles. But there was a wood stove, and beds, and later on, a radio. Stories of cowboys crackled into Levi's consciousness, and inspired him to become a brave, lifetimes thence.

"Wild Indians. Lord deliver me from these wild Indians." Refrain became half prophecy. Levi was sent away to receive the full bounty of a religious education, and two



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years before the other reservation children. It was a source of relief and unleavened pride for Urban and his family. With every vacation, he grew smaller and smaller. Eventually, he slipped away like a wizened leaf, first to his relatives at the other end of the province, then, one torched barn later, into new and undreamt destinies. Everyone knows the rest of the story.

Sylvester was alone. He spoke to none but his brother, and was found to be uneducable by the authorities. “There ain’t no cousins after sundown where he hail”, Urban was known to offer as an explanation.

The world was abounding in signs and wonders in those days. Albert Gould’s wife had only monstrous births. Undlay Johnson, from up the way, lost both arms and most of his face in the War, and delighted in rolling his cigarettes for an audience. Mary Ann Christmas spoke to wiggulutamuj when her parents’ drinking forced her out of bed at night (on cold winter nights, immaculate as the vapour of your breath and flannel nightdresses). The road gave passage to innumerable drunkards, one or two deemed especially sage. A silent boy with mystic’s eyes did not stand out.

Urban’s first two children were stern faced, raven haired and interchangeable creatures with extensive English vocabularies hard won from residential schools. They both went on to university, and graduated into myth never to return. Helen, his third daughter, was twisted by polio into a state of grace. Every Sunday, Urban led her into his hearse black Ford, into the little white church and the sea of black within. Sylvester pushed her wheelchair, and the angels received her wordless heavenward appeals. She was a cult object, an affirmation. As a piece of the True Cross, she was treasured; as a daughter she was condemned.

Consumptive beauty and famished spider nightmares shared the same body. When she was upset, Helen would sway, back and forth, lost in the motion, insensible. Sometimes, she would strike the wall with her head hard enough to splinter the drywall.

Sylvester could loosen her from her private agonies. Perhaps he spoke to her, during these spells, under *The Angelus* and the peeling remnants of the Redpath-bag wallpaper, in the crucible of the rest of the family's neglect. Who knows?

He touched her with the palm of his hands.

Sylvester knelt before the girl's wheelchair with his arm outstretched, hand pressed against her wasted legs and festering wounds. This is what Urban saw when he walked in. He would not have seen how the light built dreams with the dust. He would not have seen *The Angelus*. He would not have seen his daughter's face or thought of St Theresa.

Urban grabbed his adopted son, and threw him out of the room. The woodstove was half a step away, and the kettle was boiling. Burning is like freezing, past a certain point. It was the whimpering of a dog, inured to the winter and to suffering, which Urban spoke to, disappointed by the lack of a scream. "Your pain is a revelation", he said.

Your pain is a revelation.

Sylvester recovered, in a fashion, enough to carry on his chores. Helen was sent to an institution in the Hearse-black ford, and quickly forgotten. No one offered any explanations about the crippled daughter's sudden departure, or Sylvester's untreated scars. It was no one's business anyways.

One night, Sylvester was sent out to get some water from the old well, the pipes had been acting up. For over a month his face had grown discoloured and distended, until the charitable could not bear to look at him. Some kids found him the next morning, covered in a light layer of snow in front of the well. There was a small wake, and a funeral service.

In 1973, Levi found death and Montana.



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Urban became an antique horror decades before he died. Thus reminded of his existence, the Reservation Band Council opted to name a proposed community centre in his honour. Bulldozers have already cleared a spot, and stand importantly in their ruin.

Up above, where the rocks slumber massively, their industry is the teeming of flies.