

The Clearing

It was on the north side of the hill, where there was a clearing bordered by the forest further down the slope and where the earth seemed to imply some sort of absence, a weakening of its gradient and thinning of the long grass and dry shrubbery that peppered the hill side, a clearing, that to a man building a house, or making a camp, or to a traveler wishing to rest from their journey, was a welcome sign within the landscape. This was where the man decided to build his house. He surveyed the boundary of the property, referring to the coordinates outlined on the map he had acquired from the council, a crude drawing of five points between which if someone were to draw a line would result in an elongated pentagon. After surveying the land he lay on the grass of the clearing, a cool wind grazing his skin. He wanted to lay there forever, the whole day at least, and take in the silent noise of his property, to feel the wind and sun that worked ceaselessly on the ground. He closed his eyes, the sun's warmth glowed behind the pink gelatin vision of his eyelids, and he let his thoughts swim from one space to another, and then another, and another, until they started to become unpleasant, not because the thoughts themselves were unpleasant, perhaps he was thinking about what he was to eat for his lunch, but because as they moved, they opened up some kind of hole from below out of which a sort of draft blew, causing him to tremor. He leaped up from his spot on the grass and found himself upright. How long had he been on the grass? He looked at his watch and saw that four minutes had passed. So much for laying on the grass all day. Could he lay back down now that he was standing? Somebody might be watching and take him for a mad man. He looked around for any oglers nearby, realizing that he was alone for perhaps twenty miles, and decided to walk around the property again, since he was already vertical.

The man set up a small camp on the property, a tent and camp kitchen with a fire to boil water and cook eggs. As soon as the tent was erected the insects made it their home, anchoring their webs and trapping themselves in its folds, traversing its smooth surface and using it as a staging ground for flight, hunts, feeding and waste disposal, drinking the water droplets that accumulate on the impervious material or becoming trapped in those droplets and drowning. The path to his temporary dwelling was regularly barred with fresh web which took only a few minutes to materialize after he had swept it aside with his forefinger. When he entered of a night he rushed to zip the tent's door on the hovering cloud of mosquito that

waited to gain entry, and lashed out, smearing the insects across the surface of the tent when they did.

He began by creating a rectangular string line, the outline of the house. Ten meters by fifteen meters, a sufficient size for a man who lives alone, a small bathroom, a bedroom, a kitchen and living room as well as a deck from which he could survey the countryside. He dug the foundations of the house according to the planning documents and set the concrete stumps, fixed the joists, erected the wall frames and hoisted the roof trusses on top of the frames using only a ladder, first sliding one end of the truss onto one wall and lifting the other end by way of the ladder, then by fixing a lever to the truss he rotated the upside down truss the right way up and secured it to the wall, four triangles of timber jutted into the hot white sky. It was slow and dangerous work and he took his time, often taking walks in the forest or having short naps in the clearing, finding that when he let his mind wander he felt the same disturbing presence of nothing. In the forest below his property the birch trees had rotted where they stood so that if you leaned against a tree or stepped on a fallen log it would fold under the force and you would see that it is only bark, held up by the cylindrical structure of its skin. When walking through the forest the man felt like a giant, having the capacity to push it all over if he wanted to.

Soon, with the meticulous task of fixing weatherboards and the tin roof completed, the man could now sleep in his unfinished house and dismantle his camp. When he pulled the outer sheath of plastic from his tent he saw that between the two sheets there was a construction of web and a network of shiny slug trails, the hollowed carcasses of dead cicadas and grasshoppers and clusters of snails like fungi.

It was as he was hanging the front door that the car arrived. From the doorway where he was fixing the middle screw of the top hinge, the man watched the car roll to a stop on the grass. The car's occupant sat for some time watching the house. The man thought he better make a good impression on what he guessed was his neighbor. He put down his drill and approached the car. The occupant unfolded himself from out of the driver's seat.

“George!” The man says. The car's occupant is his father. A cleanly shaven man who kept his age discreet.

“Son,” replies the Father gravely, leaning his hand against the door of the car as if to get

back in and drive away.

“What's wrong? What's happened?” Says the man, thinking something tragic might have occurred. A death? But who? His mother had died years ago, he had no other siblings or relations he could think of. Perhaps, the father was dying. Bad news from the doctor, cancer, stroke, liver failure.

“You have made a terrible mistake.” Says the father.

“A mistake?”

The father looks to his left, gazing into the landscape for a few seconds before squinting his eyes and asking in a hushed voice, “What are you doing here?”

“I'm building the house. Remember, I took you here before. You don't remember?”

The father says nothing and turns to his son.

“My father has had a turn,” thinks the man, “his memory is gone, distant, aggressive, early onset dementia.”

“You don't remember? I told you about the house I was to build, on the clearing.”

“Have you lost your mind? This is not your property. You've made a mistake.”

The man snorts through his nose and smiles awkwardly, wanting to laugh out loud but the sight of his father, fearful and strange, could not allow him to laugh earnestly.

“Your property is further south of the hill.” Says the father, pointing his index finger north while continuing to look into his son's grinning face.

“A clever joke, Dad.”

The father looks down at the grass and grips the edge of the car door with his other hand as if to steady himself in case of a collapse.

“I bought this-” began the man.

“*You* bought this?” and now it was the father's turn to snort through his nose, not a choked off attempt at a laugh like his sons, but in disbelief, almost anger. He releases his hands from the door and steps toward his son. “Are you trying to ruin me? This will involve me too when the authorities find out about this illegal structure. It will hard for them to believe you are stupid enough to build a house on the wrong side of the hill but *I* believe it. I believe it because you are. I know you are.” The father's fists and jaw are clenched. Who was this intruder who pretended to be the man's father? The man looks at his own vehicle parked on the grass, a jalopy with a broken tail light, unwashed and rust decaying the door and window trims. The father's car, one of those new Honda's with all the futuristic features, bar time travel.

“There's no arguing with you, George. I've had enough. I can't help you.” The intruder

gets into his machine and pulls away from the property without even looking at the man.

The man, unable to grasp the reality of the strange confrontation continued to hang the doors and set the windows into their frames. Only the cabinetry was to be completed before the house could be fixed with the electricity and plumbing. Two days later, the intruder came again, repeating his accusation.

“You've always been a screw up, George. You've really done it this time. The authorities will be here any day now. Any day...”

The man ignored the voice of his estranged father and began the cabinetry, scarcely going outside or taking any rest breaks, trying to forget the intruder and the forest, the napping and the insects and distracted himself in the construction of the shelving, the kitchen cupboards and draws, the bedroom wardrobes and pantry. The intruder came a third time. *Come out, come out, wherever you are. Time to face reality, George. Georgie boy. My little screw around son. My little fuck up of a child. Come out, come out!* The man continued the cupboards and draws from the kitchen into the living room, covering over the windows and all four walls of the bedroom, until every interior wall was transformed into storage space. The man's hasty construction paled in comparison to his previous craftsmanship and as the man ran out of material he began dismantling the timber flooring and the ceiling, the doors, weatherboards and the tin roof, expanding the construction of the crude joinery until he had created a labyrinth of cupboards inside cupboards, each smaller than the next, until they were size enough to store an acorn. *I've talked to the authorities, George. They're on their way. Best you stand up like a man and admit to what you've done. You think you can run from me? You think you can slither away and hide like an insect?* The man clawed his way through the doors of his own construction, in bent fractals of spaces, storing nothing, ignoring the intruder's voice, somewhere near the house, calling for the man to present himself before the court. Upon resting he feels the chilling wind of his thoughts coursing toward him and continues pushing through the doors of the labyrinth, the voice of his pursuer trailing him as he opens each door looking for something. Finally, he comes to rest, lost, ill with starvation and sleeplessness, the dull thud of the intruder's voice muffled by the insulating spaces of the cabinetry. *They are here, George. They are here to take you away. Are you coming out? No? Okay, then. Do you wanna hear the truth, then? Do you want to know what the truth is. I lied. I lied to you, George. I lied about the property not being yours. It was a test, you see. I tested you and you lost. You never could stand up for yourself, George. You could never beat me.*

The man is unable to continue. As the hole of his thoughts opens one last time he sees the clearing, bordered by the forest, the updraft of wind from the valley passing over it, silent and invisible. *I'm going now and I won't be coming back.* Says the intruder and the man hears the car pulling away from the property one last time.