

It was days since he'd hit "Send" on an email. And that break always felt great.

It's not that Pete was fed up with so-called "modern life". In no circles would he deny that he had everything anyone could want. As a self-employed creative consultant, not only was it his job to, say, illustrate pages for colouring books; but he had the freedom to leave that job and dally to the woods almost any time he liked. Had a great big house, had a wonderful partner, and still had almost every friend and family member still alive.

But this thing, this thing called money. It affected every little decision, every tiny aspect of what made up his life. He wasn't *without* money, really; never missed a bill payment or subcontractor invoice. But it was a constant flow. It needed to be made, because it needed to be spent.

These rules. These Rules-That-Governed-Pete.

They weren't "too much", but they never went away, either. Not suffocating, but stifling. Life consisted of (among other things) using electricity, being warm, and having access to water... all of that costed you your waking hours. He loved his job, but it's not fair to have to trade your love for stress and sweat. You'd think that selling your days would equal carefree

comfort. And, in a way, it kind of does. But the stifling rules always weighed on you. Everyday life was like that. But life at The Cabin wasn't.

He'd bought the land about ten years ago, and he'd built The Cabin with his own two hands. Well, his, and his ex-wife's father's hands too. He was the handyman expert; Pete was just a fantastic assistant. He knew to pass a hammer before it was even asked for; knew what nails someone'd need a fistful of next. He and Steve built The Cabin from the ground up, straight from Pete's own design drawings, and with only a few changes made.

It wasn't big. It was essentially a single room, with a wood stove on one end and a kitchen counter on the other. The only door in the place was for the bathroom (which Pete seldom used), and the sleeping arrangements were a king-sized bed that dominated most of a loft, eight feet above the floor. The walls were all whitewashed pine and there were windows everywhere.

In fact, only one thing made the space feel smaller than it was: being built in the very midst of a hardwood forest, you'd see almost no sky from the inside of The Cabin. Surrounding the walls were maples, poplars, ash, beech, and birch; their flexible grey trunks swaying whenever the fall wind was properly blustery. And the smaller trees (mostly beech) weren't as fussy about the autumn sunshine getting thinner—they stayed green well into the fall.

Every October, when the leaves got more sparse and the breezes gustier and more chill, he stepped away from his home office for a solid week. At The Cabin, the leaves and the breeze had a higher value to the senses' direct input, and Pete always looked forward to drinking them in over an extended little stay.

Here, the Rules-That-Governed-Pete were very, very different. When you're at The Cabin for more than a couple days in a row, your routine becomes less about emails and deadlines. These things were replaced with the beginnings and endings of movies, flipping a record or putting a new one on, and planning the next mealtime (or cleaning up the last one). If Pete wanted to take a walk, he'd have his boots on and a walking stick in hand before 4 minutes had passed since deciding to do so.

And, every October break, a morning walk along the woods' long-forgotten paths was practically a daily occurrence.

These paths threaded the whole wood, and went on for miles and miles, in every direction. One time, Pete had packed a lunch, including a book and a small cigar, and had walked a path all the way to its end, not turning back until it was done. It took over five hours. They weren't "paths" made by years of bootprints and game trails, either; these were remnants of when the land was last logged, probably over 25 years ago. They were wide enough for four-wheelers to rumble down, when hunting season was in full swing. And they were smooth enough – moss grown over ancient granite gravel – for hikers and their dogs. In

ten years, only twice had Pete ever met other people along these roads. Today would be the third time. And it would take over a decade to see person #4.

He walked along the trail, taking care to step on the grassier parts of the gravel, to keep the noise down. It was the sort of thing he'd do without thinking, really. Pete knew these roads pretty well. He bragged that he could be placed anywhere along them and be able to tell where he was within a moment or two. He'd even hand-drawn a map of the place, with cutesy names for landmarks made by nature and by man alike.

Last year, there had been some cutting and brush-clearing done by a "Forest Management" company, widening every path and splintering the alders that lined them. Pete was rattled by the change, but learned to accept (and even appreciate) the change in the environment. The trails looked very different, now, but the map was the same. He tried to take solace in that.

Today, Pete walked quietly as usual, each footfall sounding like the ground itself breathing steadily in its sleep. A tenacious mist clung to the trees, and thinned only slightly where the trails broadened. He found it deeply beautiful here, where the world had forgotten it. Ferns curled and ranged from lime green, to golden yellow, to rich brown; all beautiful, but all dying. It was not odd for Pete to come back to The Cabin with at least one handful of wildflowers. Even at this late season, some could be found, and they'd hang in his kitchen window until they were

properly dried, sometime next year. Today, Pete rounded the familiar corners, eyes open for grasses or blooms that would dry well. He knew just the spot to head to, and not even that deep into the wood.

Coming upon the clearing, he stopped abruptly, and his walking stick skidded to a stop in the pebbles beneath it. This particular spot was thick with Pearly Everlasting and a bushy little seedy-grass that Pete simply called “Fireworks”. It was a fork in the trail that split the road into three divergences, wider than the paths it led to. But the grass and the gravel weren’t as alone as usual; the sky became a shade darker and the breeze gusted (although the mist was seemingly unaffected) as Pete’s gaze landed squarely on a huddled figure, sitting at the base of a tree near the trail’s edge. He spotted her right away.

She was sitting beneath the cover of a gangly spruce tree, so hunched over that she more resembled a heap of laundry than a person of flesh and blood. Pete knew it was a woman by the timbre of her hair. Ragged and tangled though it was (truly an understatement), it had a thickness and a wave to it. It hung before her face, and it hid her features from his view. Her torso lifted slightly from the rhythm of her breathing. Her throat rattled with each exhale. She wore what was once a winter coat, full of spruce twigs and holes. From behind the knotted mass of free-hanging hair, she wheezed what was supposed to be a moan that started off as a friendly greeting.

Chilled and startled. Pete couldn't tell exactly what emotions he felt the strongest; nervous, concerned, alarmed, freaked out, willing to help... but those were all reactionary feelings. Things he felt after his initial, lizard-brain registered two emotions, loud and clear: chilled. And startled. His heart skipped a beat when his feet caught upon the gravel, and his scalp tingled thoroughly when he saw her in her shaded refuge.

"Uh, hello?" Pete launched, friendly concern in his voice. "Are; are you alright?" Clearly this woman was homeless or lost; likely both. She didn't move much, upon seeing him, and she didn't get up. Despite her hidden face, Pete could tell that she wasn't elderly; he guessed about 40. A few years younger than him. But unlike most homeless-or-lost, her shoes weren't worn down or even scuffed. In fact, it didn't look like she'd travelled much at all. Her coat was worn out – clearly she'd been in these woods for a long time – but her boots were not. Pete shivered, considering how many times he'd walked this clearing on a wildflower hunt, only for this forgotten creature to maybe have been watching him from her forest hut nearby. He knew of no hut, though, and doubted she lived out here.

Her voice (if you could call it that; the sound was more like the grinding of two stones against each other) came as a whisper, but it only formed one sound, at first. One syllable.

"Kkkkkk..."

Maybe she was choking? No, that wasn't it. Choking on a word, more like it. The hard k sound went on, but spilled into an additional syllable or two.

"Kkkkkk-AN eeeeeee...."

Pete looked around; was there anyone else here? Anyone with this woman? Anyone here to help? He had a pretty active imagination, and this felt exactly like the trap that thieves along a medieval roadside would set up.

Finally, the woman, being haunted by the few words she was so desperate to spit, let them all go in a single torrent.

"Kkkkaa neee-yew... kkkkeh femee... eee-urrr name?" It was the final word that made the rest of the sentence make sense to Pete. But he needn't have put it together himself; she seemed aware that she'd fumbled the pronunciation, and she said it again, just as stone-grindingly but a little more clear:

"Lawwwwww-veleeeee dayyyyy... Can you givvvvve me your name?"

Pete, a kind man, had no hesitation. Nothing in his life had told him to be careful of something as innocent as speech. He uttered the four-letter word and gave her his name. His intention was polite and mannerly – you know, non-threatening – and to then offer her help. Maybe bring her back to The Cabin for a hot shower and a bowl of soup, if she felt comfortable enough for it. If she needed it. She sure looked like she did.

But he couldn't. It was no longer his. His Cabin, nor his shower. *Or* his soup. On the very instant he gave voice to who he was (he couldn't remember the sounds that summed up his life, now), he felt a subcutaneous whoosh; a stirring within his very bones' cores. Like a shiver, if your muscles had the precision to only twitch where they met skeleton. There was confusion, and there was nervousness in his limbs and fingers. The world felt just as cold, but the warmth that was his and his alone was no longer coming from within.

He saw her smile (a bleak, feeble imitation of one, as though she hadn't grinned in years), and saw her shoulders relax as her head lowered slightly. She rose from her seated position, beneath the spruce's boughs, walked into the path, and turned away from him. She faced the direction he'd come, and took care to avoid looking at him, if she ever had in the first place. He stammered, asking her for her name, too, but she ignored him. He found that his feet were instantly rooted to the spot, and it was only with great effort that he managed to lift them enough to



travel a few steps toward her. When he looked up from this struggle, he saw that she was much farther away than would be normal to travel; he'd moved two steps and she'd gotten to the edge of the clearing, walking down the path that he'd come on. He opened his mouth, intending to let loose a "Hey" or a "Wait", but found his lips cracking and his throat dry, as though neither had been used in a long, long time. Panicked, he glanced down to the terrain again, and looking up, she was gone.

And here he was. Tethered to this clearing. No one else was in sight, and the mist hung mutely around him. His voice was gone. Though he struggled to move with intention, he fell to the ground easily.

Autumns passed, colder and bleaker. He was only aware of the autumns. Leaves dried sooner and fell from the trees as early as late August, and when the skies became grey, not a hint of that October crystal-blue could be seen. The wind never stopped blowing its temper-tantrum gusts, from September right through November, when the weather was too cold to be outdoors without gloves or a coat. He missed gloves.

Casey looked out the window at the mist that hung around the cottage's front yard. One gust of wind, and that'd be gone; but no such luck today. Another cold grey October morning.

On the front step were the four or five totes that she'd unloaded from her car when she arrived last night. It was finally time to make this old place her own.

She had bought the cottage about eleven years ago. It was just about as long span until she bothered to do something with it. Sipping her morning coffee, she locked the car with the button on her key. She had already locked it, last night, but the staccato "bip bip" that her car replied with was always comforting to hear.

It was such a sweet space, warmly appointed but forgotten for years. A decade of dust and cobwebs stuck to every surface, and the feathers on the stuffed hawk in the corner were crumbling away. The yard was overgrown. The step was covered in leaves. The firewood piles had long-since fallen over. But the building itself was relatively new, and everything still worked like it should.

She'd gotten a small fire crackling in the woodstove, and rinsed her now-empty mug in the kitchen sink on the opposite wall. This week, she was bound and determined to clear out the last owner's belongings, and start planning out her own comforts, too. She'd bought this cottage at some sort of joint estate sale, and had never met its original owner. Not that she

knew of, anyway. Apparently he'd built the place with his own hands, loved it. Visited it often. His job allowed him to come out once a month or so. Sometimes for a week at a time, particularly in the Octobers.

Good for him. The more time out here, the better, she thought. If she gets her way, Casey will spend *most* of her days here, working from home and commuting to meetings that couldn't be had remotely. She got here last night, and it was the second time she'd ever seen it in person. What a peaceful little gem, even considering the racket that the forestry guys had turned this forest into for the past few years. Their work was finally completed over the course of this summer, after 5 or 6 years of heavy chainsaw tunes and gasoline fumes. She craved a morning walk in the woods. Start to familiarize herself with the freshly-carved up trails, and see how accurate the last owner's hand-drawn map of the area was.

Casey stepped over the threshold and onto the porch, and picked one of the walking sticks stacked by the door. She turned right, entered the forest, and made her way to the logging roads. The gravel crunched beneath her soles as she noted how clean this company had kept their job site. There was very little grass growing on the path, and no moss had crept in yet either. The road's edges were lined with six-inch spikes rising from the ground; short, ragged stumps of alders from yesteryear, cleared by the construction.

She followed his map, turning left at “Garter’s Pass” and travelling straight past “Ferny Hollow” on the right. This hand-drawn map was utterly adorable. She soon came to a fork in the wide road, which the mist opened up just a little to reveal.

It was there she found him. Impossible to miss. He was crouched on the edge of the clearing – the edge of the road – where some vegetation was still managing to grow, despite the several inches of gravel that were poured here years ago. He was wearing a badly tattered overshirt of what was once flannel and plaid, and his hair was peppered with cobwebs and dried flecks of maple leaves. He was quiet, and seemed aware that he was a startling sight. His face was not old, but a handsome mid-forties. Despite the fact that he clearly hadn’t showered or shaved in a long, long time.

His fingers trembled, moving surreptitiously, as though without direction from his brain. They slowly – methodically – grasped at the thin stalks that the Pearly Everlasting grew atop, severing them with his rough fingernails. She didn’t dare get any closer, but was close enough to notice that his index finger had a filthy callus where the thumbnail met it, pinching stems one after the other. His back was bent beyond double, and was so curved that there was no way there was still a spine inside. More likely it had melted away, leaving him frozen in his hunched position, kneeling low to the dried autumn grass.

“Hhhhhell oh” he said, a rasp of a voice made dry with too much time outdoors and not enough time warm. He didn’t rise from his knelt position and he didn’t stop picking flowers. He didn’t even turn to face her. His hand expertly pinched and tore the dried stems, separating them from their roots below.

Casey gripped her walking stick, and looked around for someone else, for anyone else; for help.

The huddled shape of a man lifted his head; still facing the other direction.

Yeah, fuck this, Casey thought. She made her mind up to leave and was interrupted by more spoken words on the instant.

“Dohhh nitt bee... dooohh-n’t be afraid.” he struggled to use his voice. The way he read these words, as if from a page in a book resting in the palm of his hand, was mingled with so, so many undertones. A sadness. An exhaustion. A flutter of desperate breath. A resignation and a giving up. A hopefulness, too. And all of it sounding as though the words were made in a mouth that had a hint of a smile to it; although none was visible. He had been practicing these words, Casey thought. “I’m owwwwnn-lee here to pick summmm flowers. Can you give me your name?”