

## hey man

A lone crow startles out of the alder tree like a shot when it hears the horn blast, dispatching a solitary leaf to the ground. Exhaust leaks out of the idling truck into the bushes lining the driveway while a thin plume of smoke drifts up from the chimney and joins the haze hanging along the pitch of the roof, smudging the light out of the sky and making the air taste like ashes.

A clatter of dog and a hard thunk of machinery hits the bed of the pick-up.

*Hey man how's it going?* The greeting rushes into the cab with a blast of cold air, coloured by a flash of red and black and dirty Carhartts. Working man functionality replaced high school bravado years back. Stained hands pull a worked-in brim down low across the brow and a half-filled coffee mug to his lips as the passenger settles into the seat.

The question hangs unanswered but for a low grunt of receipt. No need or expectation of reply this early in the morning. Familiarity fills the gaps. The truck door creaks in futile protest as it slams shut, at the same time as the truck begins backing out of the driveway. Fresh diesel fumes join the damp air of the cab and attach to the dripping condensation on the windshield. The driver reaches over and turns up the 80's-metal emanating from the dash—the wail of guitar triggering involuntary muttered singalong—further diffusing any need for small talk. Both pairs of eyes point out the windows, seeking nothing.

*Out in the streets*

*The dogs are on the run*

*The cats are all in heat*

The road itself is quiet, two lanes leading to a single track that climbs slowly and steeply up into the treeline. Past the open forestry gate the path narrows further and the road turns to gravel. Low fog clings to the edges, softening the transition between the built and natural worlds. Tree branches reach out and occasionally scrape the sides of the truck, welcoming and warning at the same time. Overhanging trees connect to create a tunnel of grey and green, pulling them deeper. It is the inbetween time, past the waning glow of autumn, but not yet in the wet grip of another coastal winter. Late for getting firewood, but it felt wrong to attempt earlier. No desire to be alone with one's thoughts when the sting of loss was so new.

The passenger twists round in his seat to check on the dog in the back, comforted to meet the ever-vigilant limpid gaze. The dog's nails skitter on the metal of the box, fighting for balance as the truck bounces along washboard.

At a point in the road no different than the space before or after, the truck simply pulls over to the side and back-ends into the bush as far as it can press. The engine cuts.

*Well, let's get at'er.* says the driver, pushing himself out the driver's door and walking to the back of the truck. The tailgate drops too slow for the dog, she's already bounded out and raced into the trees, drawn to the frenzy of the wild.

The men swing the chainsaws to the edge of the tailgate, tinkering with gas and pulling on leather work gloves. Soon the saws are sputtering to life, spewing the distinctive two-stroke fumes into the still air.

*Fuck I'm hung.* says the driver, finally warming from his stupor.

*Ahh. Yeah, little quiet today, eh?* the passenger responds, eyes glancing across. *You alright?*

*Yeah, yeah fine. Just too much rouge last night.* Shutters quickly falling to create an inscrutable mask. No need to expand on the hours lost staring into the fire searching for answers in the dying embers, too numbed to get up and go to bed.

They stride into the woods, moving in parallel tracks, eyes scanning the lines of trees like mercenaries. Passing by the plentiful whitish-brown columns of red alder and more showy cottonwoods littered with yellow leaves, they search for their prey—the long, dense burn of *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, the mighty Douglas-fir.

Once a suitable tree is found, they make quick work of falling it, and begin trimming limbs and bucking the trunk into sections. It is hard work, glorious in its manly singularity. Their sweat soon joins the fragrant riot of resin, wood chips and tangy petrochemicals. Then the monotonous work of dissecting the tree begins—reducing the magnificent, sentient sustainer of life into symmetrical, disposable units of fuel. Perhaps they're oblivious to the irony of the Douglas-fir's nickname—*giving trees*—for their intrinsic ability to donate their lifeblood of chemicals through their roots and fungal connections to the other surrounding trees prior to death. A living donation back to the community that sustained them. Was there enough time for the transfer before the blades ripped into its flesh? Or did it spill—useless, wasted—leaking its riches onto the soft forest floor? How long does it take to pass across decades of riches, of knowledge, of being? Is it one heartbeat?

The passenger steals a glance over at the driver, covered in flecks of sawdust, and worries anew about his friend, knowing too well the pressures put on children left behind. Hopefully next year the annual gathering will regain the laughter-filled bond of music and cold beer. But he can see from the set of his friend's shoulders that he is still working through the first steps on the ladder up and away from the shock of the phone call. He can also see that the bargaining phase isn't bearing fruit.

The driver is blissfully numb for a period of time. The roar of the saw is obnoxious, all-encompassing. It rattles the skull, dislocating linear thought. Soon the relentless drone unlocks fragments from deep within—unleashed by the brain's need to focus on the task at hand—the reflections push up and run together across the driver's mind, replaying the scenes over and over in his mind.

*The call. The frantic drive. Calling others, receiving their pain, their panic, with no answers to give. The run into the hospital. Too late. Too late. Why couldn't I have gotten there a few minutes sooner..*

*His brain desperately tries to reconcile the image of his brother laying out on the table draped in sheets, but it still doesn't compute, instead it's like floating above a scene from a TV show, someone else standing beside the bed, someone else in the bed.*

*But at the same time he knows that it is his brother. His flesh, one of four. DNA rearranged four different ways, separate but the same, sharing the dark hair and deep brown eyes the family is known for. Brothers-in-arms. And yet he was the one that always had to step up, carrying the weight of the family, the business. Feeling the eyes of the town on his back. Small towns never like a success story after all, and though today the eyes carry empathy, earlier they were full of sneer and judgement.*

*That pressure always seemed to elude the brother. The responsibility. The business. He shook it from him, never letting it set hold. The gentle ease at which he lived his life was evident even in the way he chose to leave it. On his own time. Everyone bristled at his lethargic pace, the loose, open approach to life that shone in sharp contrast to the hard push of reality the rest of us seemed held to—but perhaps he had the answer all along. Perfect fodder for the eulogy to come—a heart too big, a man wise enough to truly live one-day-at-a.....*

The howl is so sudden, so primal, it pierces the ear protection and overrides the buzz of the saws. Pain—red and elemental—creating a call for help so immediate the pair drop their powersaws in the same motion as they turn them off.

*SHADOW!* shouts the passenger, running in the direction of the yowling.  
*What the fuck?* yells the driver, steps behind him.

Crashing through the brush, they home in on the sound—pitiful, frenzied—and after a few hundred metres they finally come across the dog. At first they don't understand what they are seeing, but then it becomes clear. The dog is pinned in place, impaled on a broken limb sticking up from a fallen tree. The branch has entered her belly just below her heaving rib cage, but in cartoonish fashion, it has driven deep enough to make the dog high-centered, its feet flailing in place. A trickle of blood surrounds the impact site, but both men immediately wonder what will happen if the stake is removed.

The urgent yelping shakes them to action. The passenger jumps onto the fallen log and tries to steady the animal. He surveys the branch and the wound with a quick sweep.

*You need to pull her off.* he directs the driver.  
*Aw. Fuck. Won't she bleed out?*  
*I don't know but...we've gotta do something.*

The driver reaches out to the thrashing dog and grasps her firmly by neck and haunch, wincing at the dog's fevered yips. He braces himself against the log and with a short tug, pulls the dog toward him, up and off the limb. Blood rushes out of the wound and drips onto the ground, red on green. He clamps a hand over the wound, feeling the warm pulse, seeing stars begin to float in front of his eyes.

The passenger lifts the dog from his arms and starts quickly trotting back to the abandoned saws.

*C'mon, we gotta go. She'll need the vet.*

The trio stumble back through the deer trails to their cut-block. The wood forgotten for now, the driver grabs the machines and equipment and pushes them into the back of the truck.

*Bring her into the front.* he commands, waving away the look of uncertainty, and pulling the dog and passenger into the cab. The truck starts effortlessly and with a spin of the tires on the loose gravel they lurch out of the roadside and speed forward.

The air is electric, crackling with intent. The dog's short panting breaths are punctuated by sporadic, human-like moans. The music is wrenched off, so nothing but the sound of crunching gravel distracts them from the dog's whimpering. Pain fills the cab. Raw and throbbing.

*She's gonna be fine.* the driver says, glancing toward the dog. But his ever-steady tone cracks, and he needs to grip the wheel to keep his hands steady. Suddenly—as seems to be the case these last few months—the dam breaks and he feels warm tears slide down his face.

The passenger looks over and recognizing the significance, allows the moment to unfold.

*He was there. I felt him in the room. You know?*

*I know man, I'm so sorry.*

*It was, like, I was there looking at him, laying there, and he was still Dust. He was gone, but he wasn't gone.*

The two lock eyes across the dog.

*He wasn't the brother I thought I'd bury.*

*I know. I know.*

This time the green tunnel feels long and otherworldly, slowly transporting them out of the protection of the forest into the precariousness of the world beyond. The driver looks over again and even though he knows it's in his mind, he can swear it's his brother sitting beside him, holding the dog carefully. His brother smiles reassuringly, eyes shining, and speaks:

*Hey man. It's ok. It's gonna be ok this time.*

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*Blaze the star. Shake the bar for you. A sunlit room. I'll go there soon. I know.\**

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\*Try to Praise this Mutilated World, 2067, Rheostatics, 2004 True North Records