

## The People Who Weren't There

"Put another spot of wood on the fire, boy. I'm freezin' cold. And it's getting dark now that the moon has been eaten by the clouds."

*Eaten by the clouds.*

The boy wondered, silently, what the moon tasted like. He settled on toasted cheese sandwiches after seriously considering apple pie. Warm pie and heavy cream.

Throwing a few more piñon branches on the makeshift heater, the boy did as he was told. He always did as he was told. Even when he had to be told three times. Or five. Thankfully, he had his old man's tanned belt to remind him.

He sat on a blanket, momentarily lost to his father's firewater soliloquy, as the fire licked softly and then more fervently at the smelly wood. It was how his mama had kissed his father this morning before they set out from town. Softly, slowly. Then with some fire, like she wouldn't see him again for weeks.

Mama was right. She wouldn't see him for weeks, and even then she wouldn't see him alive. Mama always was right. Even when she was wrong. Thankfully, he had his old man's tanned belt to remind him.

The stars were brilliant that night sitting on the lips of the clouds, filled up as they were on the moon.

---

It rained. He remembered the giant drops, the cold. It rained hard, and his father was piss drunk. How could he forget the bitter anger and biting words drifting sharply around the cigarette perched resolutely between his father's chapped lips?

"Your mother doesn't understand, or she won't. But I know you're fucking crazy, boy."

The fire was dying rapidly under the weight of the wet.

His father hadn't always been mean, but he'd always been a drunk. Always.

Like fathers and sons across generations, they made a church of the wilderness that stretched along the valley outside of the mining town in the Colorado high country. They fished. Hunted. Trapped. His father taught him about seasons, about the wind. Taught him how to track bears and how to chase women. He knew that seasons and wind screwed with bears and with women. His father had told him. His father had told him a lot. Knots, gin rummy, the harmonica.

"No son of mine is going to spend his days talking to people who aren't there. No son of mine is going to be the town freak. No son of mine is going to fuck up my legacy. No way. No how. No son of mine."

These were the final, scorched words from a father to his son. The words of the people who weren't there made sure of it.

---

Thomas. Everyone, however, called him by his nickname. Wolfe.

His last name James. His middle name Lee. He was nearly 11 when his father died by a fire in the rain.

When the search party found the elder James nearly two weeks later, his body was putrid carrion for bears and his soul had been shelled by the wind. For several minutes, the three grown men fought through heavy tears as the grief and anger collected enough to propel the balance of their search. They set out west intending to return to the campsite near dusk, hoping they wouldn't find a dead 10 year old.

There was no sign of the boy for awhile as they walked through the forest, but they found him after an hour - a mile away sitting immobile, covered in blood and dirt, next to the Little Snake River. He was like a ghost. He couldn't remember what happened, even when they threatened to beat recollection out of him with their massive hands. Nothing. The people who weren't there made sure he did not remember.

Back at the campsite, Wolfe devoured a handful of elk jerky offered in an attempt to pacify his hunger and activate his memory. Angry, the lead searcher grabbed his collar and shoved him forward to look at what was left of his father. He closed his eyes tight, and tried to wrestle free. Then, Wolfe retched at the smell and blacked out.

At the funeral, his mama couldn't bear to look at him. No one would look at him. He remembered the way the light fell on the pine box, the chittering of the organ dancing among the simple oak pews. He also remembered the cold stares, and whispered accusations. He had become the freak his father rambled about. The people who weren't there had made sure of it.

---

Seven years later, Wolfe had only a handful of fractured, mostly cold, memories of his father. And, a dull pocket knife. Green. The knife used to be sharp. So did the memories. The years had dulled them both. The years and the people who weren't there.

Wolfe pulled on his sharply polished boots, cinched up his belt, and then buttoned the second to top button on his starched gingham shirt. Dabbing musk on his neck, his mind flirted with the past and he grew lightheaded. His father's scent minus the alcoholic sweat. Regaining his presence as his reflection scattered back into focus in the mirror, Wolfe caressed a Boss of the Plains Stetson onto his head, fingering the brim. He had a date. No time for retreating to darkness and toasted cheese sandwiches.

Maggie had grown up in Oak Creek. She was 10 months younger, but an inch taller than Wolfe. Her raven black hair was soft like the underside of an angel's wing. It touched the top of her butt when it wasn't pirouetted down her back in a ponytail. She smelled of lavender and spearmint, but insisted she didn't wear skin cream or perfume. Her eyes were sort of smoky quartz, but lightened some when she laughed which she often did.

Standing for several moments on the faded porch, Wolfe tried to quiet his mind before eventually rapping swiftly on the screen door. She was ready. Taking his hand, they set off down Sharp Avenue which bisected the center of town north to south. It was their fourth date, and Wolfe was unaccustomed to physical touch. Her

hand felt soft, but his heart felt gritty as it beat harder and as his hand began to clam up. It didn't help that people on their porches were staring, whispering reproach as they passed.

His mother had left town a few months after the funeral without a word. He had heard later that she ended up somewhere in Wyoming. Somewhere she could forget about the people who weren't there, and her son who kept them. Somewhere she could move on with living without the constant reminder of death. Wolfe missed her voice. And, her baking. Warm apple pie. Heavy cream.

"You're quite the local legend," she said, squeezing his hand as the tentative syllables drifted from her lips.

"Am I?"

Until then, they'd talked about how magnificent the golden Aspen leaves were on the edge of town near the cemetery. About the way the wind turned the leaves into a million miniature chimes calling forth another autumn. About school, books, the future. They'd talked about a lot, but up to now they'd managed not to talk about this.

Fourth date. The seasons. The wind. Fucked with women. His father had told him.

"I mean ... you did kill your father. That counts for something around here. He mattered in this place, to these people."

He dropped her hand, and quickened his pace.

*"No son of mine is going to fuck up my legacy. No way. No how. No son of mine."*

"I know you didn't really kill him," she said. "I know about the ... voices."

*"... I know you're fucking crazy, boy."*

*Did she really know? Could she? Could anyone in this town?*

"Is that how you got the nickname Wolfe with an 'e'," she said. "I really want to know, Thomas. Wait up, dammit!"

He stopped on the sidewalk, outside the mercantile, so she could catch up. She took his hand and looked into his blue eyes, silently apologizing.

“The moon,” he said.

“The moon. What about the moon?”

“I like the way the clouds sometimes swallow the moon, when the moon is in the throat of a storm cloud. The wolves stop baying for a time.”

“So that’s why they call you Wolfe,” she said “It’s a good nickname. Fits.”

“Does it?”

“Do you want to get that soda and talk about the math test on Monday?” she said. “I’m not so good at geometry. I could use your help remembering the difference between triangles.”

They walked, hand in hand, in to the mercantile.

---

Wolfe pushed through the heavy rod iron gates, up through the stones, and eventually found a spot high on a hill to look up to the heavens. The leaves were softly serenading him. He closed his eyes and let the people who weren’t there carry him away. Touching the etched granite, feeling the deep letters, Wolfe howled at the moon which, tonight, tasted like vodka. Clean and cool.

*Donald “Dink” James*

*Nov 2, 1863 - Sept 16, 1902*

*Beloved Husband  
and Father*

*Sheriff  
Routt County CO*