Fall

by Brett Garcia Rose

There is the wheezing air behind my ears as I fall backwards through the diminishing sky. Then there is the rice-paper crackling of the tree line and then the wet-towel thump on the cushioned green ground and then there is Sara's distant screaming and then there is nothing.

Fragments, pulsating confusion against the numbness. Sara talking her way down, her voice trembling but strong while I inventory myself, searching for cracks, sending frantic messages down my legs, arms, crosswise along the thickening numbness. Her words anchor me like stakes in the wet ground.

In the distance, other voices. I try to tell Sara to stop talking please, but there's more blood than sound and then wracking coughs and suddenly I feel the pain, white hot in my back and shoulders, spindly and light down my leg. I slide my hand along the front pockets of my jacket until I feel the revolver and then close my eyes against muddy tears.

When I awaken Sara is above me blocking the sky with her huge head and teary green eyes, her competent hands moving fluidly down my body, opening buttons and zippers, removing shoes, tearing fabric, cursing to herself as she works methodically downward. She cuts the jeans away from a compound fracture, the thigh-bone sticking out jagged and sharp, thinking she can stop the bleeding. Pack it with dirt, I say as she stares at the bone. She considers this for a while.

The little girl stands off to the side, watching me with big, frightened eyes.

After a while, tickling my toes, tying ripped shreds of fabric here and there, Sara stops and leans down, her blonde hair surrounding my face, wet tears falling directly down, washing into the blood. Shaking with sobs, cursing over and over.

They'll be coming, I say.

She doesn't answer.

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You have to go.

She's a nurse, plugging leaks, postponing via triage. I'm an engineer, watching essential systems shut down as my body buys extra minutes.

They won't come down, they won't cross the river.

The little girl looks at the river, both ways, then back to me.

You can hear them Sara, you have to go.

I won't go.

Her tears wet on my face; I am cold, hot, numb all at once. Pressure expanding and deflating inside of me; confused nerves course through my body, colliding like trapped insects. I can feel the buzzing in half-filled veins, the rattling echo of my heart as it pushes blood through the holes.

Far above a lone hawk flies long, lazy loops, scanning the riverbanks for prey.

I won't go, she says again, grinding her head into mine.

You have to go, I whisper back.

I can't.

You have to.

I know I have to but I can't.

She covers me with leaves and tree branches and snaps pictures from her phone in every direction for bearings. She keeps stopping to look at me, kneeling down and putting her lips against my nose and mouth to see if I'm breathing. I try to smile with my eyes, nodding weakly.

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At some point during the night it rains. The wet leaves tighten against my skin and I feel better for it. Then the insects come out. I feel them crawling over me, under the leaves, small pains, sharp and random. River crabs too, but they don't bother.

I lay half-conscious in the leaves, undreaming the past hours and days and months and correcting them. Sara didn't have an affair. We didn't come here, a peaceful, favorite, remembered place; a place to talk and to feel, to finish in a better way. We went someplace else, someplace to celebrate, someplace safe and

civilized and romantic. I wore proper shoes and a pressed shirt; she an elegant dress with strapped sandals, soft makeup around her eyes, the scent of her jasmine shampoo trailing behind her. In this other place, we are happy.

We don't cross the two men with rifles. Or we do cross, but we don't see the little girl. Or we do see the little girl but see her sitting by a tree teasing a frog with a twig instead of lying pinned beneath the man, screaming.

Or we do see this, but we silently slip away, thinking it best to find help. The girl lives, becomes successful, happy and famous, and this helps us with the guilt.

Every time I wake up it plays the same way. I walk up casually, plainly. When I plunge my knife into the man's neck, the one watching from the side, the other man freezes, smiling wickedly at me and pointing a revolver at the girl's head. Sara picks up his rifle from the ground, aiming it at him. The rifle sways and dips with her ragged breathing. I gesture with my hand from behind the man to cock the gun, my other hand holding the knife buried in his throat. He is somehow very much alive, keeping still against the knife, not talking.

Shoot him, I say.

The little girl stares at me, eyes wide with horror, blood coursing down her pale legs and forming a black puddle beneath her.

To Sara, shoot him now.

The fading light makes it difficult to see. The rifle dips and jerks.

To the man, drop the gun or your friend dies.

That wound, he'll die certain.

Sara holds her breath, tries to steady the heavy rifle.

Shoot him, I say.

I can't.

You have to.

And she does.

I twist the knife, the man slackens and his body slides to the ground.

He has a revolver in a holster and green flashlight. I take both.

Sara kneels down low, whispers to the girl.

Then we hear more voices, distant voices that we don't trust.

Sara grabs the girl's hand and we run.

We cross the rope bridge that will lead us to the road. I stop, hacking at the supports with my knife, and it goes before I expect, and I go too.

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When I awaken again it is still dark, a country dark split by the moon, stars reflecting off the mottled glass of the river like neon jellyfish. I stare straight up, holding my eyes open, ignoring the dark, blurry fade around the sides of my vision. I am cold and tired, breathing shallow, liquid breaths. The voices descended upriver some, going the wrong way at first, receding and disappearing and then zigzagging back, becoming louder again, taunting.

To keep awake, I think backwards and forwards, randomly jumping circles we've crossed; the steward who opened the wine on our first Valentine's Day; his name, where he lived, what he did the next day, who he served before us, who he might go home to. Vacant faced amusement park operators in Disney who spun us around, humorless taxi drivers who delivered us and drove on. Old couples who watched us stroll in the park, children who smiled at us, street kids who could have mugged us but didn't. People we collided with, merged with for a time, then bounced off and eventually arrived here, this moment.

My skin blue, crusty and gritty from the rain. I hear the wind muscling the trees, the river caressing stones, pulling relentlessly forward as I lay still against the ebb. Under the wet leaves, the revolver feels cold and smooth in my hand, the weight of it comforting, substantial. The ground beneath me is soft and muddy with my blood and I am for some reason happy to feel this. I practice with the revolver, try to make sure it's pointing upwards, tilting it

back and forth, guessing at the angles and memorizing them. The sky turns crimson as I fade again, the air thin and chill, night sounds folding into day sounds.

A muted crack to the top of my head sends fresh pain shooting down my entire body, vibrating in my back, my leg, everywhere at once. I look to the side and see the shape of the boot as it comes again, crushing my nose. My eyes blur and stay blurred.

When I try to look up no one is there.

Sideways, no one, no shapes that I can see. I pull my chin against my chest, gritting my teeth; looking down my body I see their legs by my feet. I raise my eyes, trying to focus, desperate to see. Two of them standing, laughing, no more than flannel blurs. One is poking the bone in my thigh with a rifle barrel and it hurts a lot less than it should.

The rising sun full on behind them now. I tilt the revolver, aiming like I practiced, trying to hold it steady as I fire, click-click-click. I keep firing long after the bullets are gone and the men lay dead at my feet. I pull my chin up further, dry firing again, at their heads, their feet, everywhere; I click until I my finger cramps up and won't move again. The gun hot in my hand, the silence unnerving.

I keep my chin up as long as I can, dizzy and squinting, until I start shaking and my head drops back into to the mud. Against the sound of the river, I hear the voices again. I twist my head to the side and roll my eyes upwards, looking through the leaves behind me, but I can't see them. When I look back down, towards my feet, I see the man's hands clamped on my ankle, dragging himself towards me. I try to jerk my leg, to kick, but it won't move. It takes him a bit of time, pulling by my jeans, my knees, even the broken bone from my thigh. When he finally stops, he is sitting upright on my abdomen, listing to once side, blood trickling through rotted teeth down into his beard. More blood gurgles through a hole in his chest as he breathes shallow, wet breaths, but he doesn't seem to notice.

I see the knife in his hand and I hear the voices calling again and I am confused, trying to look around him. I raise my head again jerking my eyes wildly side to side. I want to tell him to stop, to wait

just a little, but then I feel the knife sliding in and grinding against the muddy ground beneath me and I feel blood and air wheezing out and there is nothing else to do.

As he tries to unstuck the knife and pull it out there is an explosion of sound and the man jerks backwards, leaving the knife between my ribs. I tilt my head and see a man in dark, cracked sunglasses, looking down the barrel of a pump shotgun. He talks on a satellite phone or walkie-talkie giving numbers, coordinates, elevations, asking for paramedics, airlifts. Then he cradles the shotgun in the crook of his arm and stares blankly. I close my eyes and just wait. I don't feel anything.

After a while there is Sara above me, rubbing my temples, asking me please open my eyes, please, and I do, but I can see nothing. Her hair surrounds my face as it has so many times before, just like this, a translucent, golden fortress. I know she's there, only the two of us inside, and I smile and breathe her in, taking as much as I can hold and not letting it back out, and she's crying again, squeezing my hand.

She kisses my lips, my head, saying my name over and over again.

I'm ok, I tell her. Sara, I'm ok.

I feel her tears falling softly on my own cheeks, running slowly down until I can no longer feel them.

There is the scattering of birds vacating trees, the ancient chorus of river frogs, the mourning wail of a lone coyote. In the distance the angry beat of a helicopter echoes in the early sun. There is Sara lying next to me in the leaves, the jasmine walls of her silky hair warm against my face, tears streaming down her muddy cheeks, Sara, holding my cold hands, saying my name and whispering softly of our lives. Then there is nothing.