

No Such Thing

by Michael Downing

People could disappear in the Pine Barrens and never be seen again. Either by their own choice or when someone didn't want the body found. John Dance knew that was just a part of life you had to accept and couldn't change.

It was barely past noon but it felt like nightfall. The pine trees formed a thick, dark canopy over the winding dirt road — sunlight barely pierced the cover of the branches in spots overhead. Burnt, stunted, twisted pygmy pine trees with multiple trunks dotted the sides of the road, needles shooting out at odd, random angles. A few feet past those trees, beyond the scrub oaks, moss, and ferns, sand pits that could swallow a car the same way the Bermuda Triangle consumed ships were hidden by the underbrush. And in other spots the ground was still scorched black from the fires three summers earlier.

Dance grit his teeth as he steered the Jeep down the road. He hit every bump and ditch hard enough that he was lifted out of his seat, no matter how slowly he drove. His shoulder banged against the roll cage as he jerked the wheel back and forth, trying to avoid the ruts carved deep in the sand but it was useless.

He hadn't been down this road in a few years; probably not since the fires. It was his bad luck to be the only deputy on duty and close by when Sheriff Cole called.

"Need you to swing by Tilden Brown's place," the Sheriff had said. "He hasn't been seen in days."

"So? Nothing unusual about that."

"His Momma's starting to worry. Ain't like him not to show or call."

"Probably just lost track of time," Dance said.

"Maybe," Cole said with just enough hesitation in his voice that Dance knew he had already thought of that, then dismissed the idea.

“Tilden's always worked on his own schedule,” Dance tried. “Never paid too much attention to time, clocks, or calendars.”

There was a pause before Cole said, “That may be true, but he's loyal to his Momma. Never missed taking her to one of those doctor's appointment.”

“Maybe he just forgot,” Dance said.

“Maybe,” Cole said. “But I still need you to drive out there and make sure everything's okay. You never know what that boy is into.”

That was what worried Dance. Everything about Tilden was trouble. He just hoped this didn't have anything to do with the meth lab Tilden kept on his property.

The GPS mounted on the Jeep's dashboard was worthless in the woods. There were dozens of different roads and trails and each could lead someplace you didn't want to go if you didn't know where you were going. Dance knew these woods as well as any other deputy — as a kid he had hunted the trails and fished the streams in the Pine Barrens until joining the Army after high school graduation. There were no other options back then. He didn't see himself taking a minimum wage job at Viking Yachts or Egg Harbor Boats and working shifts until he could put some money in the bank, and he wasn't a college guy. He'd gotten into Stockton State but Dance knew it wasn't for him. He wanted something different and the Army offered him a chance to see the world while he figured out what it was he wanted. After a twenty year career, Dance returned home to New Jersey and found that while the rest of the world had changed, the Pine Barrens and the people who lived there were still the same.

With three brutal tours in Iraq behind him, Dance needed that simplicity more than he realized.

In Iraq he learned you could never anticipate the unexpected and that everyone was a threat. Back home it was different.

For the most part, Pineys kept to themselves and didn't create much trouble. Aside from occasional run-ins with biker gangs setting up meth labs where they thought nobody could find

them, Dance's shifts were usually boring and mundane. Catching speeders who thought that the long stretches of county roads allowed a valid excuse to drive thirty miles over the limit. Rescuing campers who had strayed too deep into the woods to find their way out by themselves. Chasing away drunken teenagers looking for the Jersey Devil.

Never worrying about someone trying to kill him and never looking over his shoulder.

After four years on the job Dance had learned to look the other way most of the time.

Except now he was heading to Tilden Brown's place, and he had no idea how that was going to turn out.

Tilden's property was about three miles off Route 72 — five or six acres with an old double-wide trailer sitting in a small clearing surrounded by tree stumps, sand pits, gravel, and weeds. Dance eased the Jeep to a stop and cut the engine. Tilden didn't get to town much. Most people saw him buying groceries at the Chatsworth General Store once in a while or taking his mother to the doctor. A couple times each year he made it to the Shop-Rite near the Parkway in Manahawkin to pick up the chemicals he needed to cook his meth, but the rest of the time he was a ghost — someone you heard about but rarely saw. He had a wife and daughter but neither one had been seen in a while; there were rumors that his wife had had run off but nobody knew that for sure.

Dance took a look around at the rusted car frames, the old windows still puttied to their frames that were leaning against the trailer, and stacks of scrap metal and piles of wood scattered throughout the yard. He knew it couldn't have been that hard for Tilden's wife to find a better life than this one, no matter where she went.

The yard was mostly pine needles, weeds, and sand. Tilden's red pick up was parked outside the trailer. A few other trucks on blocks, hoods open with engine parts scattered around the clearing were nearby. Each looked to have been started with purpose but abandoned soon afterwards — eventually forgotten as Tilden moved on to something else.

A small shed stood at the edge of the clearing, sun-bleached wood planks, black tar paper roof, and padlocked door. A generator was connected to the shed with a spiderweb of wires and cables.

Dance popped a stick of gum in his mouth and got out of the Jeep slowly and cautiously.

There was a stillness in the clearing - the silence was heavy.

No signs of bikers. That was good, Dance thought. He didn't care one way or another about the meth or what else went on in that shed — it was only when the state troopers and county politicians got involved that it became a big deal. Usually when re-election campaigns sputtered and lost momentum, and the incumbents needed headlines to build support and pull in a few more votes. The last thing Dance wanted to do was get into something with one of the bikers. Alone — without back-up, and nobody close enough if he needed help.

Or worse, have Tilden take a shot at him for no reason other than showing up on his property. It was too hot to put on the Kevlar and there was never a reason to use it — most times it stayed in the trunk of the Jeep, but Dance had second thoughts as he walked from the Jeep.

Dance had learned in Iraq that you never heard the bullet like you did in the movies.

“Hey Tilden,” he called.

His words echoed and bounced off the trees then slowly faded, leaving that deafening quiet. Two large mutts poked their heads around a corner — neither made a move towards him, and after losing interest, each ambled back behind the trailer.

The quiet was broken by the loud, sudden drone of an airplane and Dance looked up to see a hulking four engine C-130 passing overhead, its landing gear engaged as it made its approach towards McGuire Air Force base twenty miles west. As the plane disappeared beyond the trees the sound faded into silence.

He took a few tentative steps towards the trailer. "Tilden," he called again, looking around.

The screen door to the trailer opened and a girl stepped slowly outside. Twelve, maybe thirteen, Dance figured, but no older. Long, stringy hair that fell off her shoulders. Barefoot. Wearing an old green plaid Catholic school dress with a dirty white tee shirt beneath it. She looked old beyond her age and sadness wrapped itself around her; Dance wondered if she even remembered how to smile.

"Hey Mercy," Dance said, approaching her. "How you doing?"

Her face was a blank slate and nothing in her expression changed as she shrugged.

"Looking for your daddy," he said. "He around?"

Mercy stared back impassively. "Ain't here."

"That right?" Dance said. "Know where he is?"

Mercy shrugged.

"Your grandma's been looking for him," Dance said, walking forward cautiously. "He was supposed to take her to a doctor's appointment but he never showed. Said he didn't even call to let her know he wasn't coming."

"He's gone away," she said flatly.

Dance stood at the bottom of the steps and looked up at her. "That right?"

She nodded. "Told you. He ain't here."

Dance looked around. "Nice day. Maybe he's off doing some hunting in the woods?"

Mercy just returned his stare without saying anything.

Dance wiped a hand across his face, mopping away the sweat and sliding his sunglasses off the bridge of his nose. He stared back but her expression didn't change.

"Kind of hot out here," he said off-handedly. "Mind if I get something to drink? Maybe you got a glass of water or something before I head back to the station?"

She hesitated, then gave a slight shrug before turning around for the trailer. Dance followed, stepping quickly inside and closing the screen door behind him. The smell of ammonia was overpowering and he fought back tears as the odor filled his lungs and his eyes watered. It wasn't the way it smelled when they cooked meth, with those thick chemical fumes that choked off your breath.

This was different.

Like a heavy combination of disinfectant, detergent, and cleaning solutions.

While Mercy went into the refrigerator for a pitcher of water Dance looked around the trailer. He took in the stained wallpaper and yellowed paint. The dingy sofa and upholstered chair, old metal card table and plastic lawn chairs that served as a dinette set. Busted cabinets and the faded picture of Jesus tacked to the wall. He looked down at the dirty linoleum, stained and discolored except for a three foot section bleached almost white, like someone had spent hours scrubbing clean a nasty stain.

Mercy took a small jelly jar off the counter and filled it with ice water.

When she handed him the glass Dance took her hand and held it.

"What happened?" he asked. "Where's your Daddy?"

"He's gone."

Dance shook his head. "I know he didn't go far," he said. "His truck's parked outside. Don't think he went walking wherever it is he had to go."

Mercy shrugged quietly.

"Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Mercy pulled her hand away and went back to the kitchen, stepping carefully around the spot on the floor. She took a deep breath and held it as her eyes finally met Dance's stare.

"Ain't supposed to touch me like he did," she said. "Told him he wasn't supposed to do that but he wouldn't listen. Kept coming into my room at night and he wouldn't leave. No matter what I said or how often I told him no."

"Ever since my Momma' left he's been doing it," she said.

Dance felt a breath catch in his chest.

"Some times when he would get to drinking and other times when I think he felt like it," she said.

Mercy looked at Dance with eyes that had suddenly welled with tears. "Told him it wasn't right but he didn't stop."

"Just kept doing it until I couldn't take it no more."

The small hairs on the back of Dance's neck bristled and he let out his breath.

In a quiet voice he asked, "Where's your Daddy, Mercy?"

Dance stood over the small mound of sand and rocks about thirty yards deep in the woods. The smell of cedar and pine was heavy all around. He could see the trail that had been cut through the underbrush — pine needles and tree branches scattered in different directions where Tilden's body had been dragged from the trailer. The dogs had tried digging at the grave and dirt had been thrown over the nearby ferns and moss but Tilden was buried too deep although that hadn't stopped the dogs from trying. Dance walked a wide, careful path in the opposite direction, making sure not to leave any of his own tracks in the sand or on the dirt trail.

Mercy sat in the front seat of the Jeep as he put her daddy's twelve gauge behind the back seat and covered it with a blanket.

"Be back tomorrow to feed the dogs," he said, sliding behind the wheel. "Gave them enough food and water to last until then. That'll keep them out of the woods."

Her eyes were open wide but there was little emotion as she nodded. Dance wasn't sure how much of what he said had been heard.

Dance glanced at her as he picked up the transmitter and radioed the Sherriff.

"Hey Cole," he said.

Cole's voice came through the receiver. "What you got?"

"I'm out here at Tilden Brown's place but he's nowhere to be found. Looks like he's been gone for days."

"Ain't like him to disappear."

Dance didn't respond and he let the silence hang.

"Find anything that gives you some kind of idea where he went?"

Dance shook his head. As he did he caught a glimpse of Mercy staring straight ahead.

"Truck's still here. Left his daughter all alone." He said. "Looks like he left in a hurry."

"Probably got into it with those bikers," he added.

Dance steered the Jeep carefully back down the road, taking the time to navigate cautiously so he didn't bounce Mercy from side to side in the ruts or ditches. She sat in the seat, eyes straight ahead, hugging a paper bag filled with clothes and a few possessions. A dirty brown stuffed bear poked out of the top of the bag.

"Think I'll take you over to your Grandma's place," he said, glancing at her. "I'm guessing you'll be fine there."

For the first time that he could remember, Dance saw Mercy smile.

