

November 11th , Morning

Jack's wrist had been sprained. As best he could tell. His chores, suffered for it. His plan to collect firewood and check for remaining gas thwarted by a hidden rock and a tuft of grass.

“And a foolish old man...” the laughter in his wife's voice danced through his head.

He created a brace out of some spare parts around the house to support it and keep it as immobile as possible. There had been bumps and bruises as well. One spot in his head with a little blood.

So for the past four days... five days? he was having a hard time remembering, he hadn't done much. He puttered in the house hoping the snow would hold off until Thanksgiving. Let him heal up. He needed his wrist to use the wheelbarrow.

There had been a brief moment when he debated taking the Bronco down to Ray's place, tying a rope around the upside down ATV and dragging it out of that damn ditch. But his fear of not having any gas overruled that idea. As well as a new found respect for the machine that had almost killed him. More than saving the gas was the knowledge deep down that he wouldn't be able to ride the machine anyway. He was too old to get back on that horse.

And really, the gas was a precious commodity. No sense wasting it. For what he was saving it though, he couldn't quite be sure.

He had decided to walk down to the pools. Have a good soak. If nothing else, it would keep him busy while he waited for his wrist to heal. Better than moping around the house. There was still ten days until Thanksgiving, and if all of the stars aligned, he'd have a huge meal, his wrist would be healed, and he'd start hauling the wheelbarrow around town. Collecting what was left of the firewood and fuel that he might be able to find.

The stroll down to the pools had been easy. The aches and pains from the ATV accident...

“Accident?” his wife's mocking laugh teased.

...had mostly faded. To the point where he debated using the wheelbarrow before Thanksgiving.

“Better not, Jack.” He scolded himself aloud. “Let it heal so you don't do any more damage than you've already done.”

The day was clear and sharp. Warm beams of sun slashing through the boughs. Squirrels busily collecting their store. Birds preparing winter homes as well. By the time he made it to the pools, he was sweating.

He tried to remember the last time he'd been down to the pools. Ten years? Possibly. He, like most of the townsfolk, took the pools for granted. The pools were there. He could go whenever he wanted. But he didn't.

He peeled off the layers of clothes and set them on one of the nearby benches. He lowered himself into the lowest pool, feeling the lukewarm water rise up his legs to his belly. He waded across to where the pool butted up against the Little Miwok and the waters created a small eddy. He reached into the river and splashed the frigid water into his face. Letting it run down his chest until it joined the warmer water of the pool. He stayed there for a few minutes then climbed upward, into the middle pool. Remaining there for a few minutes as well.

When his body had acclimated, he climbed up the small stone staircase that acted as a spillway between the top pool and the middle pool. He inched his way in. The steaming water burning his skin and turning it red. His ankles. Then his calves. Up to his knees and then the thighs. Taking a little longer to let his testicles enter.

"Don't want to poach those eggs, Jacky." His father used to say.

He settled the rest of his body in and leaned back. Allowing himself to float. The water surrounded him and filled him with a pleasant burning sensation. So warm. So *hot*. His head lolled back, his ears just in the water.

Jack soaked. The aches and pains of age drifted away, down the Little Miwok to pollute the river somewhere else.

As he floated, he let his eyes close and his mind wander. Rummaging around looking for purpose, or direction. Trying to determine when he had decided to stay. And why.

Theresa's voice joined him, teasing her husbandd, filling his head like the steam that surrounded him. "You always planned on staying, Jack. Don't you remember? You always told me you wanted to be buried in that little cemetery. Right next to your parents."

Jack's face, the only part of him out of the water, broke into a grin.

"You always told me that this was your place," Theresa's voice continued. "You're staying because you, Jack Kincaid, always do exactly what you say you're going to do."

Her voiced dipped in tone. From light and playful, toward hurt and sad. Not entirely, but enough to make the grin on Jack's face subside.

"Why didn't you bury me there, Jack? Why can't I be there with you?"

"You know why." Jack's voice was barely audible over the gurgle of the Little Miwok and the trickle of water flowing from pool to pool.

"Have you thought about who's going to bury you, Jack?" Theresa's voice was growing even sadder. "When this is all over. You'll be the only one here. Who's going to bury you? Maybe you'll just dig a hole, and when it's time you can go lie down in it. Is that how you are going to be remembered, Jack? Just another body in a hole in the ground?"

Jack's eyelids twitched, but didn't open. He didn't like the conversation. He hoped he was dreaming.

Theresa's tone softened, "I miss you, Jack. Come home soon. Come home..." Her voice faded from his head.

"I miss you too."

His eyes opened. Unsure if he had been speaking out loud. Or if he had imagined his responses. The whole conversation for that matter. He was fairly certain that Theresa's voice was just something he was manifesting to keep himself company. Since she had died, he often carried on conversations with her in his head. But they tended to be one sided. Him commenting to her about things he thought or experienced. In those conversations, he usually imagined her, sitting across the table from him, or lying in bed next to him. She rarely said anything. She would nod sympathetically. He imagined her as listening to him.

Her starting the conversations was new. Hearing her laughter and her voice, as if she was standing next to him. It was comforting. As long as he didn't think about it too hard. Because if he thought about it too hard, he might start to wonder about his sanity.

It was one thing to offer up words towards the heavens imagining that somehow Theresa, looking down on him, could hear and understand. It was another thing entirely to have her laughing at him and chiding him for not burying her in the Quimmering Springs cemetery. Then defending himself against her remarks. As if she was standing (floating) right next to him.

Jack reached on arm out, toward the stones making up the downhill edge of the pool. He steadied himself and lowered his feet to the gravely bottom of the pool and slowly stood. His

aches felt good. That wasn't quite right, he thought, the aches didn't feel anything. Like they had taken a momentary hiatus from reminding him of his age and pending mortality.

His shoulders were immediately cold as he rose from the pool. The temperature in the top pool often reached over one hundred and ten degrees. The air of the late fall was topping out around fifty every day. The immediate differential was invigorating. Jack breathed in deeply, letting the cool air fill his lungs even as the remainder of his body still radiated heat. As the heat abated, a sense of calm flowed through him. He wasn't crazy. Wasn't losing it. Just a little lonely. He'd never been overly social, but he'd always had people around.

He eased into the middle pool, letting his body cool slowly with the water. Talking to Theresa was nothing other than a coping mechanism he rationalized. A means of carrying on in the face of an abandoned town. A town that apparently had been full of quitters and people that really didn't care. About the The Springs. About friends. About any of it.

He waded through the lowest pool. Resolved to be mindful of his "conversations" with Theresa. To not let the quitters get the better of him. Besides, Thanksgiving was only a few days away. Then Christmas. Then it would be time to start making some real plans about the future. Where to go. Maybe he'd stay. Give it another year or two. Make Mark Sommers work for it. Whatever plan the kid had for taking the town away from...

Jack stopped. Halfway out of the last pool. Warmth still filled his body, but he could no longer feel it. On the ground, partially under some leaves and pine needles, right under the bench where his clothes waited, was a candy wrapper.

It wasn't old and faded. It was still bright and orange. He slowly approached the bench and absently pulled his towel from the pile and wrapped it around himself. Using the bench as support, he crouched down as far as his old knees would allow.

The Reese's wrapper was empty. He couldn't bring himself to touch it. To reach out and pick it up. It was like the potatoes in the Deacon's Store. He saw it, but had no desire to see it. It shouldn't be here.

"Unless some kids came up the hill last week..." Theresa offered.

Of course! Jack wanted to feel the relief. Feel the anxiety wash away like the pain in the pools. Kids. That made all of the sense in the world. Except the feeling didn't wash away, didn't float down the Little Miwok. The sense that he wasn't alone grew. In the quiet of the forest his skin crawled and the desire to run from the candy wrapper filled him.

“Don’t be an old fool,” Theresa reprimanded him. “You’re starting to jump at shadows.”

“I don’t like it,” Jack responded aloud. Then clapped his hand over his mouth. He stood, keeping his eye on the wrapper, fearing that if he looked away it would begin moving. Skittering across the forest floor. Crawling toward him. Jack had no desire to witness something like that.

“What’s wrong Jack?” Theresa asked, her voice in his head not as caring and nurturing as usual. The lightness gone. “Talking to yourself in the forest? Does that worry you?”

If his hand hadn’t remained covering his mouth, Jack may have once again spoken aloud to his dead wife. Responding to her as if she was standing there with him instead of being a comforting memory running through his brain.

“Mmmph,” he forced out between his lips and fingers. He slowly pulled his hand away, as if to prove to himself that he could. His lips stayed tight. “You’re trying to get me in trouble,” he thought. Hoping that the actual words didn’t escape.

They didn’t.

“You are getting yourself in plenty of trouble all by yourself, dear.”

Theresa’s voice was still off. He couldn’t quite place it, why it sounded different in his head all of the sudden. He usually heard her voice in verification of something he already knew was a bad idea. Plus, he knew that it wasn’t really her voice in his head. He knew that. It was him. He was in charge of Theresa’s voice. He got to decide what it said and when it said it. He got to imagine her standing next to him. Arms folded, gently shaking her head. Only using half of her mouth to smile playfully as she scolded him. It was his memory. Of the way he wanted her to sound.

Now, not only was her voice initiating the conversations, it was saying things in a way he didn’t like. It wasn’t the comforting lilt of her teasing. It was the sound of something else. Someone else.

“Standing in the forest with a towel wrapped around yourself, Jack.” Theresa’s voice came again. “Scared of a candy wrapper. Hearing noises and seeing things that aren’t there. Oh Jacky, you are the last one.”

“You never call me Jacky...” he stopped himself, but it was too late. He had spoken aloud again. Alone in the forest. He bit his lower lip. He closed his eyes and tried to finish the sentence in his head. “...you hated it when my dad called my Jacky, you always thought it sounded like a girl’s name.”

A light laugh strolled through his head. He kept his eyes closed. This giggle was not the joyful sound she usually made. This giggle was false. It sounded like someone else trying to mimic her. Trying to convince him that it was still his wife's voice running through his head, not some unseen intruder that had found its way in.

In his head, Theresa's voice sounded like a ventriloquist.

"Which would make you the dummy." Theresa laughed. Loud and harsh.

Jack's eye's opened immediately and he wheeled, expecting to see someone else standing in the clearing near him. Someone speaking out loud.

"Why do you stay Jacky? Everyone is gone, there is nothing to prove, nothing to do." Her voice dripped with sinister melancholy.

He turned again, the trees blurring as he tried to catch sight of whoever was taunting him.

"Suppose something bad happens. Like another accident on one of those machines, or food poisoning, or maybe you choke on an old potato." She paused. "Who would be here to save you Jacky? Who would rescue you?"

Jack continued his circle scanning the forest, slowing, trying to regain focus and control. Not wanting to see to see a figure emerge from the woods. Walking toward him with chocolate and peanut butter still fresh on the lips.

"Can you imagine? Dying up here alone because of a silly accident. Because of your need to be alone and show everyone that you can do it? Jacky, do you really think you can make it?"

He spun one last time, then Theresa's voice was gone. Jack stood alone in the clearing near the bubbling springs. His towel hanging loosely on his bony hips. The warmth from the pools gone, replaced by gooseflesh and on-rushing shivers. Under the bench the peanut butter cup wrapper whispered in a non-existent breeze. Somewhere deep among the pines a scrub jay screeched an unanswered call.

Jack breathed in. And out.