

Blood Brothers

Friendships can be forged over many joyful years or in one horrible moment. I stood only a few feet away from friends I'd known for years as we realized that even though we had grown up together we'd be defined by this. I didn't dwell too much on this thought. I was mesmerized by the blood that dried on my arm. It wasn't drenched or gory by any means but there were noticeable flecks and a small smudge on my wrist. If the blood had been mine, I would be panicking.

Ross hadn't stopped staring at me for what seemed like a minute. He needed to act before the man at my feet was dead. Everything had gone smoothly until Ross complicated things. Now though, behind his eyes I could tell there were hasty decisions being made; those that lend themselves to regrettable efforts. I didn't want him getting in my way this time but I couldn't let him walk away either.

Months before this, at the beginning of the summer, we would take to a valley so thick with trees that we referred to it as the forest. Living in downtown Toronto, there weren't many chances to escape into the wilderness and this was as close as we could get. Of course, if you really squinted through the branches you would see bedroom lights glowing from condos whose developers used the view as a selling point but never consulted us on how it would detract from the provincial semblance below. If you walked deep enough into the forest though, you would find a fire pit beside a creek and that's where we spent our time.

It was an uneventful Saturday night so Kieran, Ankush, Ross and I admitted defeat, bought some cigarettes, beer and vodka and headed in. At midnight the last of our wood was put on to burn. We sat as we always did -- myself across from Ankush, Ross to my right and Kieran to my left.

I looked over Ankush's shoulder into the darkness made richer by the dying flame and focused on it. I then willed the blood from my face and, I expect convincingly, projected a sense of dread, "Ankush, what the hell is that?"

He looked back, genuinely and frantically searching the nothingness, "What, what?"

Ankush's parents moved here from India when he was very young and I had met him in the ninth grade. Back then he was meek and twerpish but in his twenties, he had decided to follow a fighter's path. Usually, the frustration left behind from his teen years would rush out of him during a brawl like whiskey from a bottle which overflowed the shot glass he'd set for himself minutes before. The fights had been riotous but new disciplines and training had calmed him and we were grateful.

"Fuck off," he finally told me, realizing what I was doing.

"What if the fire roared up and there was someone, a man, just crouched in the bushes?" I asked.

Kieran started laughing; as one would if they had caught themselves threatened by a thought. "Don't even say that," he said.

Kieran was four years younger than I was but we had been friends in high school. He was easy going and kind-hearted but I could see why people were intimidated by him as he was six-foot three and hulking. But he held no grudges, was honest and enjoyed himself most when

telling jokes over a beer. I had often considered that we were the worst thing to happen to him. When he was young he looked up to us and I felt that even now at twenty two he still took cues from our actions; and our actions weren't guiltless.

"What would you do?" I tried to pry an answer out of someone but Ankush asked the same of me.

"I don't know," I said without thinking about it, "but what if he didn't run away? He walked right down here by the fire -- just stood here. And didn't say what he wanted -- not a fucking word." I hoped that was enough to get a rise out of Kieran, but the tension shattered along with Ross' empty beer bottle when he tossed it into the surrounding blackness.

"God, shut the hell up," Ross said as he twisted the cap off another bottle.

Always a sneering cynic when he caught me rambling, Ross and I had known each other for what had to be fifteen years now, which was long enough that when I tried to have some fun he would put a quick end to it. I'd do the same to him when a party we were at got too enjoyable. That is to say, I would be the level-headed wet blanket. Still, growing up with someone is bound to put your thoughts somewhat in sync.

Where we truly differed was our outlook. For Ross, bad was bad and good was good, and although he would never claim to be a good person, he knew the difference. For me though, rulings were made on a case by case basis. A conversation we would have one month would change for me three months later due to new circumstances or viewpoints. This had never come between us but it did drive us to do cruel and stupid things to each other and those around us. Luckily, we were the type to forgive overnight.

"We'd probably just beat the shit out of him," Ross said.

Kieran shook his head, disapproving of Ross' violent honesty. I caught Ankush smirking as he stared at the flames. I imagine he was envisioning pushing an enemy into the fire.

"What would we do with the body?" Ankush asked. I'm sure he had given no more consideration to this question than any other but, in hindsight, it may have been the most significant thing I've ever been asked.

"You're gonna kill the guy?" Ross said out of the side of his mouth while he drank.

"Anything could happen. He would be a crazy guy," Ankush replied.

And he was right. Anyone fitting the role of our stalker was bound to be unstable at the least. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed things would escalate too quickly to monitor; the dark, the fire, the fear and the adrenaline were all very primitive.

The fire was dying out and the darkness crept closer around us. I decided to take the scenario a step further.

"And what if he had a knife?"

"We'd have to," Ankush said quickly.

"Stop it, Ankush," said Kieran.

"What?" he replied.

"Give it a rest. It's not funny"

"Thank you. Finally," Ross added.

"I'm going home if you're talking about this shit." Kieran said.

"So go home. Get the hell out of here. You'd be crying under a bush anyway," Ankush said and watched Kieran as he chewed on these words, "I'm not being funny. I'm telling you the truth. Tell him we're not joking around. This is how it is." Ankush pointed at me for approval.

“Are you serious?” Kieran looked at me.

Ankush was also waiting for my response which would allow him to speak his mind. Ross, on the other hand, was already sick of this nonsense and was occupying himself by lighting a cigarette.

“I just think it would be fun,” I blurted. I hadn’t meant to say fun, I had meant to say insane – or fucking nuts – or mad shit – but as it lingered in the awkward silence, I became comfortable with it and dismissed the idea or retracting it.

“Yeah, like, it would be an experience, you have to admit. And ...”

“You’re so full of shit,” said Ross, interrupting me, “You could never do it.”

“I hope not. You’re just being dumb,” said Kieran, glad to have Ross on his side.

“It would be exciting to have a secret,” I said, “especially one like that.”

“It would be a fuckin’ murder. You think we wanna kill someone?” Ross said.

“But it would be different,” I told him. He could tell I was being serious and he just shook his head.

“Okay,” Ross said in the same tone you would use if you were to follow with ‘*That’s enough*’. But he couldn’t stop our violent fantasy when we were so immersed.

“We’d get caught anyway,” said Ankush.

“Not if we killed someone who wouldn’t be missed,” I replied.

“Like a crackhead?” said Ankush.

“You guys are gonna kill drug addicts now? I can’t wait,” Ross said sarcastically.

With those words Kieran began to gather his two remaining beers, slipping one into his pants pocket and throwing his backpack over his shoulder.

“Where are you going?” I said.

“Away from you psychos.” he said.

“Sit the fuck down,” Ankush demanded but Kieran kept walking.

“Yeah, sit down,” I followed.

“I think he’s got the right idea,” Ross said as he stood and stomped out his cigarette before stretching his back, “Let’s get out of here.”

“Come on, Ross,” I pleaded, “You know we’re fucking around.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said.

Ankush shot out of his seat and yelled loud enough that it disturbed the natural quiet of the forest, “Kieran, get over here and sit your fat ass down.”

I stared up at Ross and rolled my eyes and he rolled his back at me. A stranger would have put up a red flag but we knew better.

Kieran on the other hand turned slowly around.

“What, are you gonna do something?” he said and then he walked slowly over to Ankush.

“We’re still talking so just wait for us,” Ankush yelled back.

“You gonna kill me if I don’t?” Kieran mocked.

“Just relax.” Ankush said.

Ross sighed and then took a seat back on his log and fished out another smoke.

“Kieran, we’re just talking. Don’t worry.” I said.

Kieran looked to Ross for guidance on this one but Ross was a blank slate. Instead Ross took an extra butt from his pack and tossed it to him.

“One of us would crack. Rat us out to the cops or their mom or some shit,” Kieran said as he dropped down on his log grudgingly.

“We’d all be in on it,” I said, “We’d all have to be guilty.”

“Right, right, right,” Ross had heard enough, “If you want to do this so bad we can break into a house tonight, tie them up and fucking cut their heads off – the whole family. At least we’d make enough money stealing from them we could enjoy our Sunday.”

It sounded so childish when he was talking about it. What I was imagining wasn’t a carnival of mayhem or a wanton bloodbath. When I thought about it – when I talked about it – it sounded controlled, mature and enlightening even. It was something that would bring our friendships closer; something that we could all share and reminisce about forever. The fact that it was criminal and unethical made it even more exclusive. Stories of parties or loose women never tire completely but they are juvenile and meant to be bragged about constantly. That’s the role they play in adolescence. Instead, like a light bulb that glows brightest at first but inevitably dims and self-destructs, worn stories become replaceable.

This experience would be unique in that it’s meant to be untold. We wouldn’t gloat at work or talk about it over a beer. It’s likely that between the four of us, after something like this, we may never speak of it again. It would be frozen in our memories, not to escape from the tip of our tongue no matter how temptation would play with us. It was more than just an event; it was what makes you more of a person. You’d be a person with a past; someone with something to hide.

“So, yeah, why don’t we go kill some kids and their parents?” Ross yelled.

We all couldn’t help but laugh at this and afterwards the conversation shifted back to our usual fare. But I hadn’t been laughing because it was funny really. I was laughing because this was out of my hands now. The idea was alive -- just as plausible and entertaining as any other when you have no plans and too much time.

Looking back now, Ross and Kieran should have walked away when they had the chance.

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday came and went in their usual fashion; a mundane blur. I sat in a bustling food court on Thursday eating my salted Chinese food when a text came through from Ankush.

“Plans 4 the weekend?” it said.

“Nothing” I wrote back.

“Fire pit?” he wrote.

“Fine”

“I was @ Kierans last nite and he’ll come he said”

I stared at this a second and considered it. During the week none of us saw each other or talked much and for Ankush to go to Kieran’s was strange all together.

“Nice” I replied.

“I’ll call you” he wrote.

I didn’t think much of it until later that night as I fried a single chicken breast in the center of the pan for my dinner and my phone began to buzz on the kitchen table. It was Ankush and I asked him what he wanted.

“Do you remember Dave?”

I didn’t.

“The bum, Dave, from the forest?” Ankush continued.

‘Oh,’ I thought, ‘I know this story.’

I’d heard it a few times; Ankush, Ross and another friend of ours are drinking at the fire pit last year and boredom overtakes them. They pick up their bottles and start on a nature walk at 2 in the morning only to stumble upon a clearing. How they get there, I don’t know but I always imagine it to be dramatic – swinging over caverns and shuffling, backs against a rock face, across a steep and crumbling ledge.

In the glade they notice a plastic chair and a shanty – or hut – or shack – depending on who was telling the story. Either way, it was someone’s home. A man steps out of the bush and introduces himself as Dave. He offers himself a cigarette from Ross’ pack and they begin to chat. My friends tease him slightly but end up being friendly and leaving him two beers as a gift before heading home without incident.

As unremarkable as it was, it always played in my mind with tension and uncertainty. After all, they didn’t know each other, my friends were drunk and Dave had nothing to lose. If there was a misstep or a joke taken the wrong way things could have escalated. And that’s when I realized why Ankush had brought this up.

“Yeah, I know him.” I said.

“We can do that thing.” he said, not wanting the conversation to become too involved, “That...that thing. The thing we were saying about last time. You know?” his nerves had overwhelmed him to the point where he couldn’t put a sentence together.

“What about Kieran?” I asked

“I talked to him. He’s down,” he said, “But...but what about Ross? He’s not going to like it. He’s not going to want to hear --”

“I’ll talk to him,” I interrupted, “It’ll be fine.”

The weekend came and I made arrangements to meet Ross before we headed to the forest. A twelve pack of beer clanged in his hands as we walked down.

“So I went out to lunch with her and, of course, she’s engaged,” he said, finishing up his story about the new girl at work, “And she’s only twenty two. Younger than us.”

“Damn,” I managed to say. My chest felt tight and my breathing was shallow.

“What did you say?” Ross asked.

I cleared my throat and answered him, “I said damn. That sucks. Whatever happened to the one before?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you?” Ross dove into a tale about a girl and I envied him. He wasn’t thinking about the same thing I was. He was fine. I, on the other hand was a mess of shattered nerves.

I could only assume that Ankush was by the fire mulling over the same thing I was – we would find Dave tonight and kill him.

My mind raced as I imagined how the night may play out and fumbled to take the cap off of a small bottle of whiskey I’d stashed in my pocket. I suppose it’s well enough that I couldn’t compare it to anything I’d ever felt before. It’s reductive to compare my sweaty palms tonight to the same sweat on the same palms when I’m interviewing for a new job. Clearly, this knot in my stomach wasn’t the same as the one I get on first dates. Naturally, these feelings stemmed from fear and excitement but the root of it all was the overwhelming uncertainty.

Nothing I had ever done had an equal chance to be so effortlessly empowering or horrifyingly villainous. It could never be both because, right now, I had no excuse to be an empowered villain – my intentions weren't jaded, only the means. It was my wavering fate that snatched the breath from my lungs and enveloped me to a point where I forgot to breathe.

Ross finished up his story as we caught sight of the fire pit.

I gasped, "Exactly."

Ankush and Kieran were standing there, the fire already started and a cigarette smoking from Kieran's hand. "What took you so long?" Ankush asked, not expecting a reply.

We made small talk until we took our usual seats on each side of the flame. Our complaints about work and money went the same as they ever had – under-appreciated and overworked -- while Ankush sat quietly. It was unsettling to see him like that.

Finally, Ross rolled a joint and offered it around but Ankush and I waved it away. Kieran and Ross decided they would smoke while they collected more wood and wandered into the black beyond the trees. Once they had gone, Ankush shifted over to sit beside me and dug his hand into his jacket pocket. He brought out a sheathed knife and held it out to me, presumably to take, but I didn't.

He took it out of the covering and held it loosely in his palm. I knew little to nothing about knives aside from anything I could find in a kitchen, but this looked big and sharp, different than you would find sitting in a drawer beside a ladle. Both the wrapping and the handle were black. One side of the knife was sharp and curved while the other was serrated with thirteen sharp teeth. The blade itself was about the size of my hand. To this day, I've never asked him where he got something like that or even how it fit unnoticed into his pocket. Without a word he sheathed it, put it away and moved back to his seat.

"They're giving us next Friday off," he mumbled.

"Huh?"

"At my work, we've been doing overtime so they're giving us Friday."

I nodded to him and we both went silent, each taking a slug from our respective bottles.

Ross and Kieran returned and the night went on with nothing significant transpiring until just after midnight when Kieran leaned over and whispered to Ankush.

Acting like he had just been reminded of a tedious chore, Ankush turned to Ross, "Right, Kieran wants to go see Dave. You coming?"

"What? Now? Why do you wanna do that? It's far." Ross said, surprised by such a random request.

"Uhh, I don't know, he's bored." Ankush fumbled.

"I wouldn't even know how to get there, would you?" Ross asked, still unsure.

"I think so, yeah."

Kieran piped up, "Come on, Ross, I've got four more beers in my bag."

"I dunno," Ross yawned, "I was going to go home soon." He turned to me while he was making his decision, "What about you? Are you gonna go?"

I tried to gauge his look. If he was wary of this trip it would be me that would confirm his suspicions. If he was looking for it, Ross would know just by the words I chose or my demeanor if I was trying to force a path and there was nothing I could do about it -- so I shrugged, "What the fuck, sure."

He looked at me for a second. I was expecting his eyes to light up and an argument to explode but instead they drifted drunkenly and he wiped his dry lips with his sleeve. Ross sighed in agreement and pocketed two of the four Budweisers before we set off.

The treacherous pitfalls that peppered this adventure in my daydreams seemed puerile now. Our trek amounted to little more than dragging ourselves up and down dirt hills and crossing a small, shallow river where, even if I had slipped on a rock and fallen in it, would have soaked only my shoe. The funny thing is that no one asked any questions. *Why are we going? When are coming back?* These would have been fair inquiries but apart from Ross and Ankush bumping heads over direction, I heard nothing. The only way I can account for those twenty minutes of silence is that each of us was busy wrenching against the restraints that held us back from doing exactly what we came to do. There are thoughts imprisoned in the minds of men and I don't expect that only one is set free when we commit ourselves to do wrong. Some chains of inhibitions must corrode. Each thought you empower to break these chains weakens the links that hold the next in its cell. During the walk, things had come loose.

We came to the clearing where I soaked it all in and compared it, like the journey, to the way I had pictured it in my mind. It didn't measure up. In the pitch black things tended to blend together anyway but these surroundings were muddy and Dave's home was only sticks and logs stacked or leaned against each other to make a roof and two walls. The only thing that stood out was the chair; it was blue, something you'd find behind the desk of a fourth grade student. The four of us stood there waiting, as if we were early.

"There we go, he's not here," Ross whipped around and snatched the lit cigarette from Kieran's mouth.

Kieran was too disappointed to resist.

Ross put it between his lips and as the cherry glowed its brightest a voice grumbled from the other side of the wood wall.

"Got another?"

Ross' face lit up when he saw Dave coming towards him. Ross was always happy to engage in a conversation with a virtual stranger. Fundamentally, I thought, because he could treat them like less of a person than his actual friends and, if the exchange went sour, he could tell them to go fuck themselves.

"Dave, buddy, how you been?" Ross beamed.

"All right," Dave hesitated, and then put his arm out, palm to the air.

Dave, at my best guess, was forty and about my height; six foot. He had a short beard growing but nothing scraggly and his hair was very short rather than tangled and long. He was, of course, filthy, both his clothes and his skin, but I expected much less of what he was wearing. In fact, when I looked at his jeans, beat up sneakers and hooded sweatshirt it reminded me of how I would dress some nights when I was going to the fire pit.

Ross had already fished him a Belmont from his pack and lit it for him when I saw Kieran pacing out of the corner of my eye.

Ross' questions of *'What's new?'* and *'Have a good weekend?'* seemed ludicrous or even insulting when he was talking to Dave. But, he answered them as well as he could. He wasn't a raving derelict or a simpleton, he was, well, normal enough and spoke correctly. As Ross

laughed up a storm with him I realized that there would be no formal introductions. It appeared Dave hadn't recognized Ross and he hadn't even acknowledged Kieran, Ankush or myself.

Kieran was in my vision again and was strolling behind Dave. I had lost focus and relaxed for a moment but some wheels were already in motion and I needed to catch up.

Dave was now trying to talk Ross into handing over some of his marijuana but Ross, even in his friendliest, wasn't about to. As Dave tried to persuade him, Ankush sidled close to me on my left. Our eyes didn't meet as he was watching Kieran directly whose hand was fidgeting in his back pocket now as he stepped closer to Dave, his eyes glazed but transfixed on the back of his neck.

"That shit is bad for your health, man." Ross chuckled and told him – a backhanded insult more than anything.

But Dave didn't flinch either way. I suppose he'd built up immunity to treatment far worse than that. A life with no expectations and no one to turn to. I easily assumed Dave was not a person of any ambition or purpose. Barely a working cog in society. A man but only in the most basic sense.

Unlike me; when I went home I had a future to contemplate. The religious call it faith and the faithless call it hope. This man standing before me was unlike me; less than me, certainly not responsible for creating any happiness for others or himself. These are all things I quickly told myself before putting my hand out to him.

Behind Dave I saw Kieran's arm steady as he swung it to his chest with purpose.

"Good to meet you, what did you say your name was?" I left my hand out in front of me and Dave put his smoke in his mouth to free up his hand before he grasped it.

"Yo, you want a smoke?" Kieran said as he held out what he had fished out of his pocket -- a crushed cigarette pack.

Dave's head turned away from me, over his shoulder, and he began to push a word past his lips. But with his hand out to me and his head turned, Ankush seized the opportunity. He was swinging his arm as forcefully and wide as he could with the blade set to strike right in Dave's side.

The poor man's hand squeezed mine tightly. After that, all I can recall is that things got very loud. A guttural roar came from Dave as he sank to his knees in front of me. At almost the same time there was a similar, but more triumphant, bellow from Ankush who was backing away slowly with the knife in his hand yet held far from his body. Kieran was holding his head and pleading with Ankush to stay quiet and calm down. But the loudest, by far, was Ross.

"Holy fucking God! Holy fuck! Are you fucking crazy? What the fuck, man?" he screamed at Ankush at the top of his lungs until he clued into what was happening and his pleas became more desperate, "What are you doing? What the hell, Ankush. What the fuck are we doing now?"

It was then that I realized that I was still holding on to Dave's hand so I let it go. It immediately dropped on top of his other hand which was holding the wound on his side.

Ankush was quiet now but he wasn't listening to anything Ross was saying. His arm was above his head as he stared at Dave but then he murmured to himself and his arm shot down, the blade in his hand pointing decidedly at Kieran. "Here, do it," he yelled.

"I dunno." Kieran said. He hesitated, ran his fingers through his hair, and then looked away from the whole scene. He then looked at me, the only one who had been silent and inactive during the past thirty seconds.

His look was more of a question. He didn't want me to tell him if this was right or not, we all knew the answer to that, he wanted to know instead if we were all still together on this or had I changed my mind?

"Do it!" Ankush blasted.

I nodded.

With that Kieran snatched the knife from Ankush and stomped behind Dave. The poor man was doubled over in pain and cursing us with all he had. But Kieran wound his arm above his head and stabbed him deep in the back.

"Fuck," Kieran huffed and chuckled to himself, no longer nervous or apprehensive, but excited. He back peddled quickly, almost losing his footing and was in awe of what he'd done. He'd left the steel in Dave's back. The handle pointed towards the sky and bobbed with each of Dave's deep breaths. Even in the dark we could see blood start to stain his clothes.

I was hypnotized until Ross jumped in front of me and tackled Kieran to the ground. Kieran didn't fight back. Ross was furious and berated him but Kieran just laid there and took it.

Ross was falling apart. He begged for understanding, "What were you thinking? He's gonna die. He's gonna fucking die."

While they shifted in the dirt my feet led me to Dave's side where I put my hand on the knife's grip and slowly pulled it out. I could feel each edge catch on Dave's flesh and tear it on its way out until I held it in my hand and saw it was entirely covered in blood – as if it had been painted.

"We've got to get him to the hospital. Just help me fucking get his legs, Ankush. You take his arms," Ross urged us.

Ross was in a panic now; the time for hospitals, apologies and the like had passed. It was done. The moment existed. We were bound to one another. This would be talked about – or at least thought about – and scrutinized and regretted and romanticized over the course of our lifetimes. It was exactly what it was and how we would remember it. But I didn't want to walk away a sightseer in the prelude and that sentiment alone was enough to move my hand. My palm pressed against Dave's forehead and pulled his head up then I dragged the edge across his throat. Blood splattered across my arm and wrist before I jumped back.

Never did a thought of consequence cross my mind. I did not see myself behind prison bars or on a news report. We all had a role to play and were performing to perfection.

Dave clutched his neck and fell on his side as the blood seeped between his fingers. He rolled onto his back and was struggling to breath. He couldn't shout in pain, he just looked up into the air, his chest heaving and his face turning dark red.

Ankush jumped into the air, "Yes! Oh my God, fuck. Awesome."

Ross slowly got off Kieran and walked towards me. Before he could say anything I grabbed his hand with my free hand and tried to force the knife into it. Ross resisted for a few seconds but eventually took it.

"Go. Before he dies," I said then went back to looking at the blood spots on my arm.

Ross hadn't moved when I looked up.

"Fuck! Now!" I said

Ankush had done Kieran the courtesy of preparing him days ahead of what was in store for us and he expected that I had done that same for Ross. Of course I should have but if I had given him the option he would have opposed me like he always does. If he had been mentally prepared he would have changed the outcome. It was better this way, for all of us. But he must have felt betrayed. It all happened so fast for him. And now, the people he would usually turn to were the dangerous ones. We were unpredictable in his eyes. I don't know where you look for answers in a situation like that.

Ross bent at the waist over Dave's erratically expanding chest and jabbed the knife into it quickly once, then again.

We all stopped breathing, amazed at the lack of reluctance Ross showed us once it was his turn.

Ross stood straight and walked past me, pushing me out of his way with one arm "Are you happy?"

I was.

The night was messy and amateurish but we would pull together and dispose of the body as well as any evidence. Eleven months later we would finally talk about it for the first time.

It had all gone to plan and we were closer for it. What I didn't foresee is how revealing your ugly side – your intrinsic blackguard-- changes you. We had liked the feeling of those chains breaking. We would kill again – this time to push our limits – and it would become an addiction. In the end I was wrong about one thing: I thought we had to create a unique moment to keep our friendships unbreakable, but we had something all along. Ultimately, what brought us together was the night we sat around the fire and, without realizing it, admitted to each other that we were villains.

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