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David's Creek

David stood, arms crossed, staring out his living room's large bay windows. Stray leaves hid the path, now muddy from a hard rain only a few days before, leading from his home down to the wide creek. It was autumn, late autumn and the backyard pines were silent, nestled in miles of unscathed forest. David had lived in his home quietly and alone for the past four years. The creek was the thing that had attracted him to the location. It was shallow, but deep enough for a strong current. It had been perfect for fishing, but now the body blocked the best part of the creek. The perfect combination of debris from the changing trees plugged the plump, saturated corpse in the stream, the water now damming up slightly behind it. David stood, rubbing his thumb against his lower lip, watching his stream flow around what once had been Christopher.

He hadn't meant to kill him. An inopportune succession of events had led to the unintended outcome that David had regretted, almost immediately. Soon the water would pile up behind Christopher causing him to flush down the river into the large pond where it would stay and decompose before emptying into the lake, much larger, only a few miles away. Or an animal would become curious and sniff the corpse, maybe take a taste. Christopher would flow down the creek soon, David was sure of it. Once the body was gone things would be easier.

He sat at his kitchen table, oak, made by hand two summers ago when Darlene had spent a month at his home. His feet felt numb against the wood floor as he sipped his tea and reread the newspaper he had picked up the last time he visited town. The gross crop product for the town's corn yield was still lower than most had projected in the beginning of the season. He worked on the word search. Christopher had not moved much from the night before. David's living room bay window had framed the scene perfectly, but even in his kitchen he could still see the corpse although only through the slits of trees that lined the creek. His legs had shifted slightly and now one was trailing down the river. It wouldn't be long now, David thought.

That was the second time David had ever seen him. The first time was with Darlene. They had all had dinner, all three, a year or so prior. Her hair had been long, longer than David had ever remembered it being since she was a small girl. She had worn a sun dress since the season was late spring and carried a sun hat with fringe to match the dress pattern. She never wore the hat, but carried it with her throughout the afternoon. He didn't remember Christopher much from that day. He hadn't shaved or he had a quick growing beard as Darlene

had explained. She had been nervous to introduce them. She often complained during her teen years that he was too intimidating towards her suitors. She had dated one boy for a number of years during high school. Even after they broke up, his lack of knowledge about the boy remained a point of contention between him and his daughter. Even now, the boy's name remained foreign. She had blamed him for making the boy feel unwelcome. She hadn't brought anyone to see him since. Christopher had to have been serious.

David remembered Darlene smiling often and looking intently at him as she listened. He had remembered liking Christopher by association. That was why this recent incident had been so tragic. He couldn't remember any reason he disliked him.

He couldn't remember anything about him, in fact. When Christopher knocked on his door it took David a few minutes to realize who he was. Without Darlene by his side, Christopher seemed anonymous, non-descript, and although David was sure he had spent a great amount of time listening to stories about Christopher's life, he could not now remember one detail about who he was. There had been some type of struggle, David was sure of it, but the reason for the location had escaped him. Why had they gone to the creek? It was late, David remembered guessing the steps to the path as he walked back towards his home. The creek seemed so illogical.

She would be calling, he thought, and soon. A day without any word from a lover would make anyone curious, or worried. She'd call him daddy the same way she had always called him that, since she had been young. The tone and rhythm of her speech had changed, naturally, with age, but the way she called him daddy remained soft, airy, as if the words were flowing from where her two front teeth had once been gone.

He attempted combining words into phrases that would explain to his daughter her boyfriend was now dead. Nothing seemed appropriate. Christopher was now beginning to collect leaves. The creek was especially shallow and David could see a sand pile supporting Christopher's back. He was plump, doughy, but riga-mortis had set in and with each small wave Christopher's arms would flail upwards as his body rocked. All hints of life in Christopher's body were gone and it had only been one night.

David had no marks on him, except for a deep splinter in his right palm. There was a stick, a log. He remembered being surprised at how light it felt and how easy. Or maybe Christopher had simply died of some freak accident or by natural means. David felt nauseous. The phone rang.

"Hi Daddy."

"Hi sweetheart."

"You surprised?"

"Surprised?"

"Yeah, I hope you and Chris are getting some good male bonding time in." Her voice squeaked. She must have been smiling. "Where is he?"

"Out."

She paused, sighed and became innocently serious. "You're not mad, are you daddy? I mean, yeah, it's not exactly traditional, but we're making it right."

David held his breath. "No, I'm not mad." Darlene talked of work and her aunt whom she had been living with for the past few months. David paced, staring at the creek, silent. He listened to his daughter's voice, waning in and out of listening. He promised he'd have Christopher ring her and hung up the phone. Soon, he thought, the body will be gone.

Darlene, he had dreamt about Darlene last night. There was a summer when she was twelve, at his sister's cottage. She was wearing a jean jacket and a hat her mother had knitted her before she died. She was playing in the leaf pile she had spent an hour raking. A bear came out of the woods behind her. It sprang on its two hind legs, tall and growled. Darlene tripped backwards in the leaves. David grabbed his hunting rifle. It stepped on her stomach and sniffed her face. Then it stood up as it did before and growled more angry. He shot it. He shot the bear in the chest. It ran back in the woods. He didn't go look for it.

He started to a knock at his door. He didn't remember resting his head on the table or dozing off. The newspaper ink had left word partials on his cheek and forehead. Curtains drawn, he answered the door.

"Hey Dave. Hope you don't mind me stopping by? Tried to call, line was busy." Kelly stood surveying the room. It hadn't changed since he had moved in, a point Kelly was relentless at pointing out during her infrequent visits. "Was hoping you could come by tomorrow and help me with the roof. Jeff went back up to school and Rich's back is still out from falling off the damn thing. Doctor Proctor said he'd be out for at least a week. I could really use the help if you don't mind."

"Sure." He stood stiff, arms behind him blocking her as best he could from sitting down.

"Hilary Posion had her baby last night. Nine pounds, four ounces, twenty one inches long," she side stepped him and sat down on his couch. "She was in labor for almost sixteen hours." David's foot began to twitch. He stared at the front door. Hilary's baby was early, he thought, very early.

"Hilary's mom is thrilled. She's finally a grandma. She's been waiting so long, you know her boys weren't going to give her any..." Kelly looked towards the curtains covering the bay windows. David's breathing changed, he wanted her to leave. "Those curtains new? Nice, what are they? Linen?" She stood up and draped the fabric in between her fingers.

"Just found them." His voice cracked. He could no longer hide his breathing. He focused on the dark silhouette of the creek barely visible through the muddy cloth. Kelly studied the stitching.

"Bout time you did something with the place." She looked to him and dropped the curtain. "Dave, you feeling alright? You look pale." David's sweat

left a dark stain against his chalky white skin. His arm shook as he raised his hand to his brow. Kelly sat, curious and for the first time stared attentively at David. "When's the last time Darlene visited?"

"I'm just feeling a bit ill." She left, promising to check in on him the following day despite his insistent pleas for undisturbed rest. David tried to take a nap. He laid perfectly still, eyes wide looking at the leaves falling from the trees outlining the creek. Christopher was still there. He wasn't leaving, David thought. His thoughts drifted to Hilary and her baby. Darlene was ten pounds, six ounces, one of the biggest babies the hospital had ever seen. Her mother lay there exhausted, smiling. David held her first. Darlene's eyes had squinted in the light. He wondered if Hilary's baby had done the same. Darlene and Hilary had played soccer together when the family used to live in town. They had been close, he assumed, although he had no idea for sure. When Kelly first told him about Hilary being pregnant he remembered thinking she was too young, twenty-three, and how Darlene was twenty-two and not ready to have a child. His wife had been young, twenty-two when they had Darlene. He blamed the young age for the problems they had later. Eleven years later, she was gone. He didn't know her during the last few years. They lived independently together. He tried. She gave up. David felt nauseous. He got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. He was too late. His vomit splashed up against the bathroom door and made a puddle on the floor. He remembered a baby. Not Darlene, not Hilary's baby, there had been another child, another baby. He felt dizzy. He sat on the floor, his head in between his legs.

He awoke a few minutes later, the vomit dried to his chin. He stood, shaking from weakness and stumbled into the kitchen. He grabbed a towel and mopped up the vomit. He looked out his windows, Christopher had not moved. The water had risen an inch or so and the sand pile was not as easily seen, yet still Christopher did not move. The path was now completely covered with leaves. He hadn't meant to kill him, David was sure of that. He had wanted to show Christopher the creek, the fishing spot. It had been David's request to go there, he remembered. He hadn't meant to kill him. The phone rang.

"Hi Daddy."

"Hi sweetheart."

"Dad, are you alright? Did you run to get the phone?"

"How are you?"

"Fine Dad. Well- did you give Chris my message? He hasn't called me back. Are things ok?"

David stared at his newspaper resting on his table. The words blurred into black lines and the edge of the table became blurry. "Darlene, do you remember that summer when you were twelve? We went up to Aunt Loraine's cabin. You were playing in the leaves."

"No, that was after Mom died. We moved that summer. Dad, Kelly Richardson called-"

"You were playing in the leaves and a bear, a huge bear came out of the woods. You tried to get away, but you got caught in your leaf pile—"

"A bear? Dad, what's wrong? Mrs. Richardson said you looked—"

"You got caught and couldn't get away," he smeared the few tears rolling down across his cheek.

"Dad, we moved that summer. Where's Chris? I'm worried."

"Everything's fine," he said and hung up the phone. He stood at his bay windows. Christopher hadn't moved. He seemed more illuminated now than ever. The sun was bright. The corpse was grey. The trees swayed and tufts of leaves fell to the ground. David put on his boots.

He kicked the loose leaves from the path. Most were stuck, dried in the backyard mud. The trees outlining the creek looked bare. The branches stuck out like skeleton fingers reaching for other bones. David stood in the mud, watching the creek flow over the toes of his boots. Christopher's face looked like dried paper carefully folded over a human skull. The skin below the water was twice the size of the skin above. Christopher's legs were grey and had tufts of algae clinging to the sides of his thighs. One eye was open, two thin veins hung out of the opposite eye socket. Christopher's eye lid had caved and begun to shrivel towards his forehead. Behind his head was a large gash, the flaps of skin bobbing with the movement of the tide. Bits of bark rested next to Christopher's head, caught. He no longer resembled the man David had met. He found a stick.

David poked at Christopher's body, trying to push it off the sand hill it stuck to. Christopher rolled near him, his molars now exposed through a ripped hole in his cheek. David's breath quickened. He lied down on the bank. The sky was clear except for a few pregnant clouds carrying the rain David had been praying for.

He thought of Darlene's mother. She wasn't beautiful, but sometimes she'd smirk after his teasing and she'd look like a painting, one that if he stared long enough would always be beautiful. Darlene was eleven when her mother killed herself. David had come home from work and found her in the tub, lips listless, eyes open, dead. He sat next to the tub and cried until his nose bled. Darlene came home from soccer practice a half hour later. She stared at her mother and father, silent, still. Her eyes focused in on him. David could never shake that stare from her image. She was angry, not at him, not at her mother—at what her life would be like now that she was gone. Darlene walked over and handed him a tissue. They had spoken at length about her mother's death, but never had they brought up that moment.

That was the last day Darlene had been a child. After, when David would ask her questions, about school, her day, she gave him short, pat answers while cleaning the living room or cooking dinner. At night there were times David would cry, loudly. He would run to the bathroom, nauseated and beat the tub where his wife had been. Only then would he and Darlene speak at length.

She would clean him up, and together they would remember her mother. There were several occasions during her high school years he would wake up and find her asleep on his bedroom floor. She moved out the day after her high school graduation. And while both lived their lives independently of one another, David was waiting for the time when they would regain the closeness found during those years.

David watched two leaves slowly fall next to him. They fluttered and flipped in the wind until finally crashing into each other and falling to the ground. He was cold. The sun had almost finished setting and the mud surrounding him was becoming slightly more viscous in the impending evening.

He had had a lisp, David remembered. Christopher's voice swelled when he pronounced anything with an 's'. He had found it to be very distracting and often had to ask Christopher to repeat himself. David wondered if lisps were genetic or a learned trait. Either way, if Christopher and Darlene were to have a child there was a chance it would pronounce its s's like a tea kettle. Christopher had wanted to marry her, to begin a new life together. David's hands became clammy and his splintered palm began to sting. Christopher wasn't enough for her, he thought. His wife would have surely agreed. Christopher would not have taken care of Darlene the way she deserved, the way she was never taken care of. He wouldn't appreciate the nights she would spend taking care of his home, of him, listening to his days despite his speech impediment. Every time he would call her sweetheart she would have to listen to his sibilant s. She deserved more, he wasn't enough.

David jumped up and ran into the river. He kicked Christopher's corpse. The tip of his boot pushed into Christopher's flesh, now stiff. He kicked, his arms waving violently. After the fourth kick the corpse flowed freely down the creek. David's last kick hit Christopher's head, tearing part of his ear. David fell into the water. He watched while Christopher bobbed, face down, finally flowing with the debris. David crawled to shore, soaked and cold.

He stood and looked at the large bay windows overlooking his backyard and creek. There stood Darlene staring at her father with eyes frozen, one hand resting gently on her swelled stomach. She rubbed her thumb against her lower lip, watching the stream flow where once there had been Christopher. Now, there was only her father, crying and vomiting in the mud.