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Fiction

“Fiction gives us a second
chance that life denies us.”

— Paul Theroux

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Manhood By: Tim Combes

My father rips me from my mother's arms and drops me into the wild. He says I am ten now and it's time for me to get away from her. She'll make a woman out of me if he lets her.

"A boy needs adventure, a boy needs danger, a boy needs to feel the wind in his hair," he tells me as he loads the last bin into the truck, "your mom loves you but those are things she just can't give you. You can't get nothing masculine outta what's feminine, you'd be good to remember that."

We drive north. Adventure is always north. Dad judges a man on how far north he lives; he says us being in Michigan ain't too bad compared to the rest of the states but that the true men lived even further north, in the Upper Peninsula and Canada.

"Now that you're double-digits and all it's time we see what kind of man you are." He smiles and reaches across the truck bed to pat my back. I will fall asleep beside him in the tent tonight wishing I had never blown out those candles.

I wake to crackling fire. Its music finds me from the pit just outside and brings with it hints of bacon, quarter notes of sizzle; my father is awake. He's left the door a bit unzipped and I can see him there, working; the morning air brings a redness to his cheeks, a sluggishness to his fingers. Inside the tent, hugged by my sleeping bag and buried in a heap of blankets, I am perfectly warm. I could stay wrapped in this den of dreams all day, and my groggy brain intends to. In a few minutes my father will unzip the door and gently shake me awake, his strong hands around my shoulders. I pray for just five more minutes of sleep, and for those five minutes last a lifetime.

We eat in silence. My dad forks his eggs onto his toast, lays two strips of bacon across them and swallows it all in a single bite, bits of egg lingering in the whiskers of his beard. He is the beast, the lion, the man I must become. I try to eat my breakfast like him but I fail, I take too long with it and the eggs sog up the bread; it all breaks apart. My father laughs and pats me on the back. I can't tell if he's laughing at me or with me; he knows that I'm no strong man like him. There's no place for the wind in me, no danger in my heart. I am no stranger to fear and even now it finds me. I long for my mother.

The crickets are at full roar by the time we load up the canoe. Their chirps mix with the whistles of waking birds filling, on orchestra to these silent lands. The sun peaks through the trees now, casting diagonal rays onto the river and reflecting off the mist floating above. I break down the tentpoles as my father bags the tent and rolls up our sleeping bags. We return our pots and pans to their bins and load them into the center of the canoe.

"Don't ever try to stand up," my father warns me as we set off onto the river, "if we flip we lose everything." I wonder what would happen if we flipped. Would my father grab me and swim me to the bank or would he leave me to fend for myself? He'd leave me to prove my manhood.

I'm the navigator; I sit in the front and my paddle decides which direction we go. Dad is the power, from the back his paddle propels us forward. In reality he's both. He calls to me from the back which side to row on; I constantly mess up because it's opposite of the direction you want to go. A couple times I almost run us aground but my father just sticks his oar into the shallows and pushes us back out.

"Keep your eye on the prize, Tiger," he calls to me, "we don't want to get beached." He laughs his deep laugh for a moment and then goes silent. After a moment I turn back to him but he doesn't see me, he is staring at the sky.

The wind gusts and I almost lose my footing. We planned to stop for lunch at the first sight of a rope swing and now I stand ten feet above the river on a thick oak branch.

"You've got this, Tiger," my dad calls from the water below. He had boosted me up into the tree and is now wading out in the depths, ready to spring into action should anything go wrong. From my place among the branches I can see how far the river really goes; it snakes endlessly before me, past the end of the world.

"It goes all the way to the Huron," he yells up to me. He knows what I'm thinking. My quiet water meet the blue of the sky, watch them shake hands.

"I'm ready when you are, Tiger," he calls to me and I remember the rope in my hand. I remember where I am and my muscles freeze. My father wants me to jump but I won't; I don't have it in me.

"I can't!" I call back to him.

"Yes you can! I know you can!"

I try to believe this. I imagine myself jumping off; the swing catching my weight and swinging me into the water, into my father's arms. I climb back down the tree.

We sit on a log and eat our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in silence. The day is darkening now even though it's only noon, dark clouds are closing in on us.

"I'm not mad at you for not going off the swing," he finally says to me, "I know you think I am but I'm not. It means nothing to me if you go off a rope swing; it's meaningless. It's a matter of confidence. I need you to believe me when I tell you that you have it in you. I'm not lying to you when I say that."

I don't know why but I'd rather have him be mad at me. Now I feel as if I've hurt his feelings and I didn't know I had the power to do that.

"I didn't take you out here to see if you're a man or not," he continues, "you were born a man, nobody can change that. I brought you out here so that you can know that you're a man. My father did that with me, and my father's father with him, and maybe even further back than that."

The air grows colder now that the dark storm clouds have reached us. They hang dark and heavy and it seems that they'll burst at any moment. My father mutters to himself and digs through our bags searching for warmer clothes. He doesn't blink as he does this; when he's focused he loses all sense of what's around him, puts all of what he has into his task. The forecast had not mentioned rain. We are not prepared for this. He puts on a hoodie and hands me my sweatshirt and sweatpants.

"We better get a move on," he tells me, "we can't stay here, we'll have to set out and hope to find a bridge to get under." We climb into the canoe and he hands me an umbrella. "It's the only one I packed," he says, "when it starts raining open it and let me worry about rowing."

We make it about two hundred yards down the river before the clouds erupt. I set my paddle down and open up the umbrella. The rain pounds on it and soon my arms ache from holding it above my head. It seems to stretch on without end in all directions and falls in dense clusters, making it hard to see where we are going. I cannot even see twenty yards ahead and my mind finds images of low branches emerging and knocking me into the water. I'm in front so I still have to navigate Dad but I doubt I can see much more than he can. I'm glad I can be of at least some help though, he's rowing for both of us now and I can tell that he's growing tired. He tries hard to mask his exhaustion but we move slower by the minute and every so often he lets out a low grunt. I need to help him.

"Dad, I want to row," I call back to him.

"What?" he calls back to me through the deafening rain. I turn back to him so he can hear.

"I want to help you row. Let me row," I yell again.

"No, just sit tight. We'll find cover soon enough."

"I can do it, dad. I'm a man, remember?" I can feel it inside of me. Something separate from the part of me that wouldn't go off of the swing is starting to rise from inside of me. The swing was fake danger; this is real. I feel something inside me tell me to help, tell me to fight.

My dad smiles but sticks to his guns. "That's the only sweatshirt I packed for you," he calls up to me, "if it gets wet you'll be without a sweatshirt the whole night. I can't risk that."

"I thought a man takes risks," I yell back to him, my anger rising.

"Yes. A man risks himself for his family, Tiger. He doesn't risk his family for himself." He's breathing hard now, he doesn't have the energy for this conversation right now. That's why I want to help. I want to shut up and help.

"Then let me risk myself for you!"

"Tiger, that's not how it works" he yells with a tone that says that this conversation is over.

I turn back to face forward and soon the tears come. They're uncontrollable; they roll down my cheeks in powerful waves. I'm grateful for the rain now because it blocks the sound of my choked sobs from my dad. I had come so close to manhood and yet it was denied me, and by the man who so desperately wants me to achieve it. I'll never be the man he is, he won't let me.

Another half hour passes before we finally come across a graffiti covered roadway bridge stretching high above the water. We pull the canoe onto the shore and take cover. My dad undresses from his soaking clothes and tosses them off to the side, too tired to dig through the bins for a garbage bag. He puts on dry clothes, leans against the wall of the bridge and slowly slides down it until he hits the ground. He grabs me and he pulls me onto his lap. I resist for a second but soon give into his bear hug; I have no fight left in me. He pats my chest with an open hand.

"You did well today, Tiger," he whispers, "you're more of a man than you know". I'm drifting to sleep now and his words echo in void of my brain as the dreams start come.

"No I'm not," I whisper with my eyes still closed, "you wouldn't even let me row."

"That's because there's too much man in you for your little body to handle," he yawns. It's the last thing I hear before I fall asleep.

He shakes me awake when the rain finally stops. I have no idea how long I've been out but the sun is setting now so it must have been a while. The storm cut our daylight hours short and we still have miles to go before we hit our next campsite. It's gonna be a long night but I can't seem to care. I'm ready to see what we find out there, ready for what adventures hide in the darkness. My dad hands me my paddle; it is time to go.

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In the Duffel By the Door By: Joshua Lepard

He sat up and wiped himself while she stood and stared at herself in the mirror. She did a turn and looked at her thighs and the redness of her ass. She caught him looking and they both smiled. He stood and passed her the towel. She wiped and he tried to near toward the mirror but couldn't bring himself to see the bare reflection. So he pulled the covers up to his belly button and looked around the room waiting for her to do something. She zipped her duffel and placed it near the door.

"I'm going to the bathroom," she said and left. She was gone for a while, but then he heard the toilet water slosh down the drain and she returned without the flush of freshness she carried out.

"I love you," he said as she closed the door.

"Don't."

"You know I do."

"Please. Don't," she said standing above him. She wouldn't look in the mirror this time.

"I try to tell you as often as possible," he said feeling proud because he did say it on a regular basis.

"Not now." She didn't put the lingerie back on, instead choosing sweatpants and a shirt with a singer's neon face licking an ice-cream cone. The shirt had stains of wine and paint from previous endeavors. "Something's not right."

"Well I'm right here, what is it?" He gestured for her to join him. She remained standing at the foot of the bed looking at him with dark eyes.

"There's nothing you can do now." She stood without knowing for herself what to do. She looked at him in her bed, his chest had red splotches and only a small tuft of hair between his nipples. Behind him hung two strands of clothespins securing polaroid photos of moments with her friends having good times. She looked at his smile and his eyes and saw that he was proud of himself. She assumed he thought he had all the answers. Both of them knew he didn't.

"Come lay with me, and let me hold you."

"I'm gonna go talk to my mom."

"It's past three."

"I'll wake her up."

"Can't this wait?"

"I'm going to talk to my mom."

"Why won't you talk to me? Tell me what's wrong."

"Hold on." She left the door open and walked up the stairs without regard to the rest of the sleeping house. He heard the pomeranian's small paws hit the floor when it jumped off of her mother's bed. Muffled voices worried him. Had he hurt her? He got out of bed and pulled on his pants and then sat back down listening to the indiscernible sounds above him. He waited for some time then put the rest of his clothes on. She came back down with heavy feet and closed the door.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," she removed her clothes and fell into bed next to him. "I'm tired, would you like to watch something?"

"Please talk to me." He stroked her hair and she pulled away.

"I don't want to talk, would you like to watch something?" He looked into her brown eyes and they revealed nothing but the brilliance of her irises. She didn't smile or frown. She kissed him and turned off the lamp on the nightstand before rolling over. He sat in the dark looking at the silhouette of her curved body.

They woke when her phone's alarm played her favorite song. She got up and changed and paced around the room the way anyone does before going away. She made sure to double check everything. His clothes were still on so he tied his shoes and watched her from the bed.

"Good morning!" She smiled to her duffel bag unzipping it and fingering the contents.

"Morning beautiful," he said. She looked up at him and left the room. He heard her in the bathroom and decided to put on his coat and follow her. Her hands were full of dry shampoo, a toothbrush, and makeup bags. He'd never seen her wear makeup before in the short time he had known her. It had been a full year, but he considered anything under lifelong as short lived.

"Hi."

"Hello."

She walked passed him and back into her room to pack the makeup. He followed her with his hands in his pockets.

"Would you like to talk?" he prodded.

"I can't wait to see Alabama Shakes! I know this isn't my first time, but it's different every time and I love Caroline and Marcy."

"You know what I mean."

"It'll be interesting with Tyler there since you and Jack won't be going, but Marcy says she loves him and he's hilarious so it'll be fun."

"Does it bother you that I'm not going?"

"Nope. I know you don't want to, and it's probably best if you don't. It's not good to have anyone on the fence there. Caroline and I will be in one tent, and Marcy and Tyler will be in theirs so it works out this way."

"You do know I love you, right?" He knelt beside her and her duffel and put his arm around her.

"To the moon and back, of course!" She smiled and jumped up and slung the duffel bag around her shoulder. Him and her mother helped her pack her car. They said nothing to each other, making separate conversation with the daughter while she focused on what she might have forgotten. It had been a while since he had seen a sunrise, but even now clouds muddled the color. He watched them morph and drift up into oblivion.

"Your car is blocking me," she said. She pecked his lips and got in her car. He followed her to the window.

"Is everything alright?" He said through the crack.

"My love." She blinked. "Everything is fine. I'm about to have the time of my life. We weren't trying. I'll be back soon enough, and we can talk then." Though, too much time would pass, almost a week before they saw each other again. Time enough for him to work his muscles to exhaustion, and time enough for her to enjoy forgetting home.