INVISIBLE FIRES

Remy Barnes

We were clear out of town and Grandpa was at the wheel. He had his sunglasses on and what was left of his bone white hair was slicked back; loose strands flew around his face like a living, tentacled thing. I was thirteen with scars on my arm, always clad in black with a nation of budding young women all set to ignore me. I looked at the speedometer, its thin red finger hovering around 90, and Grandpa was yelling over the radio, "So you got a death wish do you?" He gave me a cigarette that I couldn't light for all the wind. I let the filter soak up my spit and sucked on the dry butt.

When Grandpa moved down to Florida, we all went with him. Mama said something about keeping an eye on him, and Lon—known to everyone but me as my stepfather—was just along for the ride. He was just happy to be near the beach I think, saying things like "I can work from anywhere," but he didn't work at all.

Grandpa pulled the Plymouth over, and we idled for a bit while he rummaged around the center console, then the glove compartment, and then under his seat where he found the pad and pen he'd been hunting for. He turned the engine off and suddenly it was all silence in the swamps. He lit a skinny cigar and offered to light my cigarette. I could only smoke maybe half at a time before my stomach grew sick and my head spun. Grandpa always said it was good to get a little weird before we went out looking for Thin places.

I took a couple drags and then committed the cigarette to swamp grass. Grandpa took a long, metal device—his detector—from the trunk and turned it on. It sort of whined and howled mournfully as it woke up. The pad and pen he gave to me. The detector clicked and whistled.

The mud made sucking sounds engulfing the bottoms of my rain boots. Grandpa wore a pair of old, dirt-caked sneakers. He somehow always seemed to remain on the top of the ground, never succumbing to the give of the wet earth. He put his hand on my chest and pointed. I followed his arm to a fat alligator, eyes closed and soaking up a lone patch of sunlight. A few yards away from him, a slithering figure cut through the water, a single water moccasin. Sweat began to work its way from my armpits and forehead, the cigarette had me feeling drunken.

The detector made a shrill buzz, and we followed the growing noise to a small mound in the middle of a tangled cypress grove.

Grandpa waved his hand over the mound where the detector buzzed at its loudest and then quickly jerked it back, shaking the appendage like he'd just been bitten. He ran his fingers around some invisible object and motioned for me to join him.

"Do you feel that, Jim?" he asked.

"It's hot here."

"Damn hot."

Grandpa smiled wide. It'd been weeks since we had found any Thin places and finally, on the last excursion of the weekend, we had one. The detector was reliable in that regard but occasionally did give false readings. The only true way to know if you had found a Thin was a hot spot, which felt like a campfire without any flame.

"Write this down, Jim," he said and I put the pen to the pad. "To whomever may find this, my name is Archibald—Archie—Morgan of Taciturn, Florida, United States of America. It is the year of our Lord nineteen-and-ninety-nine. I am looking for my wife, Helena Morgan, aged sixty-five last I saw her. I have reason to believe she is possibly somewhere in your world. Please place another message here if you indeed find my correspondence. I will follow up within the week. Sincerely, Archibald Morgan, Esquire."

"Do you think you need to mention your name again?" I said.

"Come on, kid. This is an official correspondence. Not some

love letter to your girly crush. Now put a couple of rocks on it to keep it in place."

I did as he said. "How long does it take for someone to find it?"

"Who knows? We don't even know if there are sentient beings on the other side of this spot. Might just be a bunch of, I don't know, dinosaurs or winged, squawking things or something."

"So we don't even know if we have the right one?"

For a moment, he was quiet. His hands on his knees, squatting in the mud and strands of tape grass. He rolled the dormant cigar around in his mouth. He stood up, a collection of duckweed clinging to his jeans now darkened with swamp water, and motioned for me to follow.

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The drive back to Mama's house was quiet, but after a while he turned the radio up and drew a finger beneath his nose and the lens of his sunglasses. He pulled up to the curb, not daring to go all the way into the driveway, and gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, promised he'd see me in a week or two and would let me know if he received a letter from the other side.

In the house, Lon was watching television and drinking a beer. He regarded my entrance with a meek wave, asked how the weekend was, told me in a hushed voice to take off my boots so I didn't track mud in the house. But it was too late, Mama came out from the den, pointing at all the places I'd brought the swamp with me, losing it just a bit.

"Jesus," she said. "Where the hell did he take you?"

"Fly fishing," I said.

"Generally you get waders to go fly fishing," Lon said not taking his eyes off the television. "But the best fishing can still be done from a dock anyway."

"Thanks, Lon," I said and took off my shoes. "I'm going to shower."

"Dinner's in an hour," Mama said.

"I'll take it in my room."

I got the shower almost too hot to stand in and scalded myself. My flesh felt soft and raw, tender in the places where it was the most red. I washed the mud off, taking care to get the flecks of green-brown dirt from the fresh cuts on my thigh.

My grandma went missing when I was nine. There was an investigation. I remember that. The police came to our house, questioned everyone together and then separately. The detective was kind. He gave me a roll of sweet candy and asked me if I ever saw Grandpa do anything strange or cruel to my grandma and I told him no. Because it was the truth. The man loved his wife and made it known. The way my mother tells it, her mother went out for cigarettes one day and just never came back. My grandpa tells it similarly except on that fateful jaunt, as he put it, she "slipped through the concave of our corporeal world and fell into another one."

Since then, I'd been helping him look for Thin Places in the world where a neighboring universe, one in an infinite number, butts up against ours just so that an "interdimensional mailbox" opens up. We left letters for my grandmother letting her know that we were still out here, looking for her, hoping to get her back, fruitless as it seemed. Soon, Grandpa would say, maybe we'll find a window. One day, maybe even a door.

On our initial trips out, Grandpa gave me lengthy dissertations on String Theory, Feeney's analyses and Vilenkin's quantum vacuum. I'd been made to read *A Brief History of Time* three times over by the age of eleven and I am very comfortable in stating I understood some of it. I was a journeyman theoretical physicist by the age of twelve. Above all, I relished in spending time with my grandpa, traipsing through the woods with wild abandon, strange machines clutched in our hands. But at thirteen, my vision was beginning to clear. In my secret heart I knew that these things were, at the very worst, evidence of something much darker manifesting in my grandpa's brain and, at the very best, perhaps theoretically possible.

My mother knocked and affirmed I would not be dining in

my room.

At the table, Lon would not meet my eye. I took this as a bad sign. My mother not eating was another.

"Look," she said, hands clasped over a glass of red wine. "We're not going to make this a big deal, but you're about to be fourteen and high school is just around the corner. It's time to start thinking about college, your grades, cars—"

"Girls," Lon said and smiled.

"Yes. Girls. Thanks, Lon. The point is, we think it's time you stopped spending so many weekends with Grandpa. It's been… *formative*, to say the least. And it's good you got the lay of the land and all that, but absolute focus is necessary now."

"I think that's stupid," I said.

"Well, okay," she said. "That's one response. Let's try another."

"That's the only response."

"Lon, back me up here."

"It's in your best interest, Jimmy," Lon said with a forkful of sweating meat in his cheeks.

"Don't call me that."

"Sorry, Jim."

"Don't apologize to him."

"Sorry, Pam."

"Jesus, Lon."

"It's in your best interest, Jim. Grandpa's too. It's time to come down from the fantasy."

I stood, forcing my chair to the floor. It clattered to the ground with a satisfying racket, ending the conversation at the table. Lon was dumbstruck, his face slack and staring at me. Mama was livid.

"I'm not giving up my weekends with Grandpa and that's final."

"Nice try, kiddo," Mama said. "But you don't get the final say." She sipped from her wine, drawing a knuckle across her bottom lip to catch the dregs. "Now go to your room." She said it slowly, with total control, obviously enjoying the sound of the command.

I shook with anger. I couldn't continue to meet her gaze so I stared down Lon instead. He was more than happy to look away. If I could only win the one battle, I suppose I'd take it.

Later, I took a thumbtack and put a small puncture wound in my thigh, just above my knee. A dollop of blood rose from the rupture and trickled down my leg. I felt better, like I'd hit a steam valve. I let the blood run and began my nightly ritual of kneeling down in places around my room, cupping my hands around an invisible fire and looking for heat.

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Weeks went by and I entered high school. Almost immediately I was singled out and bullied. I sought refuge among a small group of pimple-faced teenagers, also clad in black, also seeking other worlds through card games and Dungeon Masters' Guides. I joined a mages guild. I focused on my studies, both academic and arcane. Mama got off my back. Lon took me fishing. He let me have a beer. It was nice.

When the weather just began to turn, and the slash pines began to drop their needles in bales, Grandpa came around the house when he knew Mama and Lon wouldn't be there.

His hair was loose around his shoulders, eyes wild and red-rimmed like he'd been crying. His pants were damp around the cuffs and knees. I knew he'd been out in the mires.

"You've got to come with me, Jim," he said. "I've found something amazing."

"I've got a calc exam tomorrow," I said. "I should study."

"Please. I can't do it on my own."

I relented, granted he let me study on the ride.

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He took me out the same spot we'd traversed months before. The water had grown cold and the foliage withered. I waited, annoyed, but he did not retrieve his esoteric devices. And I was not issued my standard pen and paper.

I followed him out, shivering as I entered the water. The frigid liquid seeped into my jeans and duck boots. We charted

the same path we did before, the spot where we spied the sunning gator now vacant, until we arrived at the cypress grove with the mound in the middle.

He motioned with his head, and I saw it. On the mound lay a folded sheet of bright red paper, slightly damp and sandwiched between two large stones. I could just make out large, black symbols as if written in a strong hand with a permanent marker.

"I can't," he said. "Will you?" He was sobbing, his face wet with sweat and tears.

Boaters, I thought. Probably boaters playing a game with him. I reached for the paper, something moved on the surface of the water, and my hand felt as if it was drowning in flame. Hot bolts of pain shot from the tips of my fingers to my elbow, to my shoulder. I heard my grandpa call out to me. I had trouble standing and waves of sickness roiled in my gut. I felt the water reach the seat of my pants and arms around my chest. I remember only blackness and then I woke up in the hospital.

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The doctors kept saying I was lucky to be alive. Lucky my Grandpa reacted as fast as he did. Lucky the snake was only a baby, barely enough venom to kill a full-grown man. They said the swelling would go down soon but the pain would resonate for a while. The creature left two puncture wounds in the soft patch of skin between my thumb and forefinger the size of thumbtacks and I didn't want to feel that pain ever again. The blood throbbed in my hand, fat and wrapped in bandages.

Mama was furious, demanding to know the whereabouts of her father so I surmised he was not there. Lon was stroking my hair and saying how scared they were to lose me.

"What were you doing out there, Jim?" Lon said.

"Fly fishing," I said.

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Grandpa went missing soon after my snakebite. Eventually I gave up the true story of our trips to Mama and Lon, and the authorities assured us his disappearance was based on delusions

brought on by dementia or something like it. They were so sure he would turn up sooner or later. Not long after, though, they found the Plymouth parked near the swamps. They found the device, a malfunctioning metal detector they called it, and brandished it around our living room, showing us how it failed to detect any metals. They dragged the length of the river out to the Gulf but found no body.

Eventually, my mother's anger turned to concern, turned to sadness, turned to mourning, and we held a small service for him. Lon held her as she wept, but I knew better.

I don't go hunting for them now, but sometimes they find me. Pockets of inexplicable heat like small fires set and left to burn around the city. Sometimes I see pictures of faces gone missing or notes tacked up on the back of bus seats, folded and placed between bricks on the sides of tenement buildings. They act as trail markers, guiding me through an endless feedback loop of lives that have slipped through the cracks and concaves of our corporeal world and fallen into another.

I knew that all this time I was looking for a way out; he was looking for a way in.