

Peter Pays Tribute

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Acknowledgements

*Dedicated to my first four readers: Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Wood, Naomi Burnside,
and my little sister Rochelle.*

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Chapter 1

I am master of the silent scream. It took years of practice to get it just right. Sometimes a growl or whimper would slip from my mouth and my vocal chords would twang against my will. That doesn't happen any more. I can scream silently without the outside world knowing. And I can do it for hours on end.

"...despite his huge contributions to the realm of literature, all the personal facts of Shakespeare's life can be condensed onto an index card," drones Timothy Brown.

I've been silently screaming since I woke up this morning. It's the kind of day where my worries are like the Big Bad Wolf, testing the architectural integrity of my mind. Today, I'm worried the sky might fall on top of me. Even before I looked out my window, I knew it was overcast. I could feel the sky breathing moist, clammy air across my neck. The clouds are weighing it down, and any minute it could slip out of place and crash to earth.

To most people, it's just a cloudy day. To me, it's an impending apocalypse.

Timothy finishes his paragraph. Without missing a beat, Amber Clain picks up where he left off, skipping over me. By now, no one even looks up when it's my turn.

At first there had been that painful silence. Stern looks from the teacher. Trips to the office. Hushed rumors. Why can't Matt Burton talk?

Yes, I don't talk. I can, I just choose not to. Every time I open my mouth, bad things happen. A wisp of my stupid drifts out for the world to see, and a tendril of the world snakes through my lips and down my throat. Thinking of all the germs, all the skin cells from other people, all the bad that's floating out there, it's enough to make a person want to stop breathing. But that's not the reason I stopped talking. Okay, that's not the *only* reason I stopped talking.

See, I was tired of being compartmentalized. Matt is a quiet kid. Matt doesn't make trouble. Matt is a wuss. I was the stock character in everyone else's personal drama. You know, the shy, brainy kid who won't get a date to prom but after graduation will make millions doing something intellectual and bland. That's what people see when they look at me.

I wanted to surprise people and make them revise their opinions. In order to do that, though, I had to make radical changes, like wearing leather or disrupting class. But that's so against my nature, I just couldn't do it.

I gave up talking instead. It was a silent, orderly way of saying, *You don't know everything there is to know about me, and you can't predict my life*. The idea was everyone would be so shocked, that they'd pay attention to me.

I went three days before anyone noticed. That's when it stopped being a trial run and became permanent. There were problems at first. When teachers called on me and I refused to answer, there was detention and calls home. The school counselor recommended a therapist to Dad. I overheard (okay, I was listening in on the other line) that conversation. It went like this:

"May I speak to Mr. Burton?"

"This is he."

"Mr. Burton, I'm calling about your son Matt's disorder. We at the school feel it would be best if he sought psychiatric help. You see, it's become a disruption—"

“We’ve already been through therapy. The psychiatrist said that Matt had made enough progress to stop seeing him and start functioning on his own.”

“Really? We weren’t aware of the problem until two weeks ago.”

“Really? He’s had it since birth.”

“...But he’s talked before.”

“...What?” asked Dad, and I could *hear* his eyebrows furrowing.

“I said he was talking fine up until a few weeks ago.”

“Are we talking about the same problem?”

“Mr. Burton, I’m talking about your son’s *muteness*. Is there perhaps a medical reason he can’t talk?”

Silence for a while, until Dad’s storm-cloud-thick voice responded, “Excuse me a second. Matt! Come here.”

That’s when I had to put the phone back, so I don’t know how the rest of the conversation went.

Mute for two weeks, and Dad didn’t notice until the school counselor called.

Finally, the school washed their hands of me, saying they had done all they could. It was up to Matt’s family now, to pull him through these troubled times.

That was a year ago. I’m still not speaking. However, text-based communication isn’t against my self-imposed vow of silence. Now that I’m not using my throat, I talk with a pencil.

I’ve written forever. Just ramblings in the margins of assignments and on the back of unused paper. Things like an up-to-date description of the weather, my latest symptoms, and poetry only a mother could love. But ever since the silence, I’ve started to write longer things. Still mostly ramblings, but occasionally something coherent slips out, like a short story. All my words from this past year are on paper, in a file on my desk. I saved them up and wrote them down, instead of tossing them into the atmosphere to be misheard and twisted and echoed into oblivion.

Oh, and here’s my secret shame. I want to write a novel. Kind of like how an anarchist wants to blow up the Capitol, a dream that gets so overcomplicated in your head until you talk yourself out of it. Seriously, just plant some bombs on the front steps and run. Just sit down and start writing. But every time I try, the details rear up at me. Where is this going? How can you possibly have enough words to fill a hundred pages? What would you do with a finished novel?

I’m not sure. But I’m tired of being scared of words that aren’t even written yet. So I’ve decided that today is the day. I’m going to start a novel, and I’m not going to think about any of the important questions.

Except that I need something to write about. Fantasy is my first choice. I read *The Hobbit* when I was seven, and I’ve been madly in love with fantasy ever since. But does she love me? I’ve racked my brain for a week, praying to Fantasy and laying offerings of half-dreamt plots at her feet, begging for the rest. I just need a little push in the right direction.

World History is next, so I should have plenty of time to think.

Reading aloud. Again. I used to be a firm believer in paying attention in class, but it’s too frightening now. I’m afraid that if I focus on a droning voice for too long, it’ll be burned into my head. That’s why there’s screensavers for computers and plasma TVs,

because if you leave one image up too long, the pixels get stuck, and that image will be ingrained forever. Screens need movement or they get stagnant. I can see the same thing happening to my brain.

A doctor would tell me I'm being irrational, but I'm not. Look at high school teachers. They focus on one subject so much, all the versatility and life is sucked out of them.

But I'm also scared to daydream. This is Mr. Gregory's class. He frightens me.

When the kid in front of me finishes reading, I huddle down in my seat. Behind me, Alesha Carberry picks up the next paragraph, but Mr. Gregory raises his hand, and her words wilt in her mouth.

"Wait, Alesha. It's not your turn."

An uncomfortable silence falls over the room. No one speaks, but no one dares look up. They're embarrassed for me. I'm embarrassed for myself. Concentrating very hard on the blue spot under my fingernail that I can't get rid of, I pretend not to notice Mr. Gregory's pointed stare. It sets my neck on fire. I think I'm melting.

"Come on, Matt. One paragraph."

I stare hard at the rims of my glasses. Don't make eye contact. That works for dogs.

"Just read the paragraph and I'll leave you alone."

Leave me alone now.

At least Mr. Gregory stopped sending me to the office. All they do is call Dad and then return me to class, like an unwanted present gets returned to Wal-Mart.

After some more soft threats that I ignore, Mr. Gregory sighs, and allows Alesha to continue. He doesn't stop glaring, though. He has heat vision, I know it, and my entire body is warming. By now, I have a dangerously high fever, and I could go to the nurse. Except, in order to do that, I'd have to ask to be excused. No, suffer in silence, that's my motto.

Trying to distract myself from my imminent doom, I get out a piece of scratch paper and brainstorm ideas for my novel. The hero will be unequalled in valor and courage and all those other knightly traits. There should be a big, sweeping quest. And maybe a dragon.

I'm writing about a dragon setting fire to the school, hoping it will lead somewhere, when Mr. Gregory snatches the paper off my desk. For a split second, our eyes meet, and I can feel my retinas burning. He's going to blind me with his laser vision! Thankfully, he looks down at my paper. With two simple movements, he crushes it and tosses it in the trashcan.

I sit still for the rest of class. As soon as the bell rings, I fly out the door, into the pulsating crowd. It's lunch, but I don't go down to the cafeteria. I have serious doubts about the cleanliness of the tables. There's no food allowed in the library, so usually I skip lunch altogether. Maybe that's why I'm so skinny.

Slipping through the dark wooden doors of the library, I make my way to Maggy and I's special spot. There's a dingy couch nestled in between the foreign language books and the science volumes. Sometimes we play cards there. We used to talk a lot; now we pass notes.

Maggy's not there. Since she has other friends, it's not a surprise, but it's still disappointing. Giving the couch a quick spritz of Febreze, I sit down and pull my notebook out of my backpack.

For the second time today, I brainstorm ideas for a novel. I get several, and by the time I have to leave for class, the paper is stuffed with half-formed plots and brief character descriptions. Except, when I read them over, they sound trite. That word describes me. My life is like Shakespeare's: all the important details fit onto an index card. What do I have to write about?

But Mr. Shakespeare was the best author ever. Well, that's what the teachers drill into you, that Shakespeare is the pinnacle of the English language. His plays have lasted centuries. And they're not even original. He stole all his plot ideas. So if originality isn't the key to writing, what is?

Sweeping everything into my backpack, I head for Biology. It's the one class I have with Maggy, and we're lab partners. We have a deal. She handles the filthy lab equipment, and I do the calculations and planning and thinking, and we both pass.

I'll worry about writing later, when I'm not worrying about unsterilized microscopes.

After a stressful day at school, I run home, trying not to look at the looming grey sky. It looks closer than it did this morning.

It's just the clouds. The sky is not falling. The sky is not falling. Don't think about the sky falling.

I think distracting thoughts until I'm safely inside. Once my roof is securely over my head, I start on homework. I cruise through Biology and World History in a matter of minutes, and then start in on Trigonometry. I could have taken Pre-Calculus, but I opted to take Trig.

I took all accelerated classes as a Freshman, and then I dropped down to normal-level. The easier homework is nice. The boring classes are not.

After working through all the pi symbols, I finish Trigonometry and start on English. We're reading *The Odyssey*. Of course, since it's a standard level class, we're reading only a few pages a day, but I can't stand reading books in bits and pieces. I think it's inconsiderate to leave the characters in limbo, trapped between pages, so I try to finish books as fast as possible. I read until precisely six minutes after six, when Dad breezes through the door. Dad's a perfect example of someone whose mind is stuck on one subject. He's an accountant for a nearby car dealership, and all he can think about is numbers. From the carefully calculated positioning of his tie and his exact steps, you can tell he's always doing math in his head.

Dressed in a slate-grey suit, his silvering hair slicked forward to hide his receding hairline and his briefcase swinging in time to his steps, he looked like a lawyer or a doctor or some high-class official. But he was only Mr. Burton the Accountant.

"Hello. How was your day?"

I flash him a thumbs up, one that he's too busy calculating to see.

"That's good," Dad rumbles on his way to the kitchen. He tosses his briefcase on the recliner without even looking. Quick and efficient as lightning, he starts making dinner.

I read some more, trying not to be distracted by the banging from the kitchen and the booming from outside. I'm glad I'm not in there, handling metal pots while thunder

bellows outdoors. All it would take is one quick flash, and then I'd be charcoal-dead on the floor.

"Dinner. Come and get it."

Dad is a pretty good cook. After all, recipes are just glorified instructions, and he's good at following those. Recently he's become obsessed with these alternative, all organic diets and vegan friendly casseroles. They all smell like fried gym socks to me, with the flavors ranging from well-done skunk to raw dirt. But hey, I'm too hungry to be picky.

Over dinner, Dad talks about his day, some amusing anecdote about a lady asking if steering wheels are optional. I don't pay attention. Even before I stopped talking, our conversations were one-sided. Except now, Dad just fills in responses for me, like this:

"What do you want for dinner?...Casserole it is."

Or:

"So what are your plans for today?...Sounds good."

I think he's lonely. I've never been good company, and he misses Mom. She died ten years ago, and he still makes her favorite French soup on their anniversary.

"You know, I was thinking we should do something fun together this weekend. We could go to the zoo, or maybe see a movie."

As long as I can bring my trusted bottle of Febreze, I can brave those places.

"It doesn't really matter what we do. I just...well, there's someone I want you to meet."

That means he has a new girlfriend. Dad dates prolifically, and occasionally things get "serious" enough for him to introduce me to the lucky lady. I've met seven of his girlfriends in the past two years, so I'm not surprised, just peeved.

"You don't have to if you don't want to. But I think we both know what decision would be best."

I grunt. Taking it for a reply, Dad pats me on the shoulder and heads for the television. I place his dishes in the washing machine and dash upstairs. All of a sudden, I feel like writing.

"Peter! You have displeased me once again!" thundered the Grey God.

Below Him, his acolyte shivered on the stone altar. Peter, through sheer chance, was the last remaining priest of the Grey God. He had been a mere altar boy when a horrible plague killed all the other acolytes, leaving him alone to serve the Grey God's will.

"No matter how simple the order, how easy the task, you are constantly failing."

The voice, deep and angry as a thunderclap, reverberated around him. That was all he knew of the Grey God: His powerful, disapproving voice. Only the High Priests were allowed to look upon the deity. Just because Peter was the last one alive didn't mean he was worthy of viewing the Grey God's magnificence. All he could do was stare at the granite and hope this was over quickly.

"There is only one option left. I need new acolytes. Anyone more competent than you."

If Peter wasn't so terrified of his master, he would have risked rolling his eyes. Peter was plenty competent, the Grey God just expected too much of one

person. He wanted Peter to fulfill the duties that occupied a dozen High Priests, all by himself.

“I will recruit more, Omnipotence, just give me time to find –”

“We can not simply *recruit* more. This plague isn't mere chance or misfortune. It is Sick Wind's doing. She is angry, punishing me for a transgression I don't remember committing. You were spared, I suppose, because you are too lazy to catch a cold. The only way to get rid of the pestilence plaguing this temple is to seek Her out and settle the matter. So, either you find Her for me, or you can stay here and recruit more acolytes that will die within days. The choice is yours, but I think we both know what decision would be best.”

With a crackle and a sizzle, the air became lighter, all the gloom leaving with the god. Peter looked to the throne where the Grey God must have sat moments before. Only when he was sure it was empty, Peter risked showing his despair. Sick Wind was the goddess of disease. How was he supposed to track down a goddess? She was said to reside in the dying breaths of the sick and the festering wounds of the unwhole. But those were legends. Peter had witnessed his own parents die, taken by the bleeding cough, and he had never seen Sick Wind.

How could the Grey God do this? Leave him an impossible mission, with absolutely no direction or help? Peter wanted to give up, to run away from his finicky god and make a new life for himself. But you couldn't run away from someone who was omnipotent. If he deserted, the Grey God would seek him out and smite him.

There was only one choice. Peter must carry out his impossible mission, and appease his unappeasable god.

After an hour, I sit back and admire my handiwork. A page and a half of writing. Not a novel yet, but it's a start.

Where did that come from? That wasn't the story I had in mind at all.

But this felt right. This finally felt like my ideas reaching the page, instead of wilting in midair.

Outside, it's raining. Going to the window, I watch the raindrops dash themselves against the panes. The sky is deflating, letting out all the water and receding and leaving enough room to breathe. Now everything is okay, and tomorrow won't be a bad day.

It's still early, so I flop on my bed and open my book. I can't keep Odysseus in the clutches of Circe forever.

Chapter 2

The next morning, I hit my alarm on the sixth ring. Dad's made an omelet out of artificial eggs, and after fruitlessly searching the cupboards for something else, I scrape a tiny portion onto my plate. They taste like rubber bands. If the eggs aren't real, then what are they made out of? Is it FDA approved?

At seven thirty, I begin the long process of herding Dad into the car so he can drive me to school. Nagging's a lot harder when you're mute, and most days I have to literally hang onto his sleeve before he'll get ready.

"Okay, hold your horses, I'm getting there."

Sometimes I feel like Lassie, whining and scratching until people guess what I want. Except everyone always guessed what Lassie wanted, and some of the things I want can't even be explained with words.

Dad delivers me to school a record three minutes early, and I have enough time to run around to the back. I hate using the front entrance, because we have stone gargoyles (our overly publicized mascot) guarding the doors.

My first class of the day is Trigonometry, with Ms. Damma. She's the only female math teacher at our school, but she makes up for it by being as mediocre and masculine as possible. If she actually taught us something, I wouldn't hold it against her. But she doesn't.

For an hour and a half, I doodle in my notebook and try not to go insane from boredom. Then, when the bell rings, I have to go to PE. I hate PE. It's the one class where I have to interact with other people on a regular basis. If someone calls me "Mute Matt" one more time, my heart may implode.

Luckily, today we're running the mile. No physical contact, no choosing teams, just running. After the mile, when everyone stands around talking, I slip into the locker room and change back into my clean clothes.

When the bell pings, I walk slowly, very slowly, to my next class. World History. Why do I have that class every day? I want to skip, but I don't have the guts. Where would I go? What would I do? And what would I say to Dad when the school called him? Oh, that's right, nothing, because I don't talk.

I sneak into class, trying not to draw attention to myself. Mr. Gregory tosses me dirty looks, but he doesn't come over. He never has, but who's to say he never will? All I know is, I won't rest soundly until I'm out of this class for good. That's in early June, practically a lifetime away.

Kids fall into their seats as class starts, and Mr. Gregory makes a most delightful announcement: we're doing a group project. An oral presentation, to be exact. He doesn't look at me, but I can feel his malice poisoning the air and infecting my lungs. He's designed this assignment to punish me. I knew he was out to get me, but I thought he'd be more subtle. As kids left and right grapple each other, forming pairs worthy of Noah's Ark, I just dig deeper into my fingernails. Maybe the blue spot under my right ring finger is bad luck, and that's why this is happening.

I've never been good at getting in groups. I'm a natural-born odd-man-out. So my usual strategy is to sit still until everyone's paired off and I can see who's desperate enough to take me, or the teacher assigns me to a group, or better, decides I have to work

alone as punishment. But if Mr. Gregory makes me do the oral presentation all by myself, I'm screwed!

Panicking, I realize that this has been his plan all along. He's going to give me a choice: talk or fail. And he's going to put me up in front of the class, on display, and everyone is going to see me, and they'll probably sell tickets. Come see the silent boy speak on command. But even if I want to, I won't be able to talk, because aren't vocal chords muscles, and won't they atrophy since I haven't used them? I'll open my mouth and try to speak, and I'll hack and wheeze and my vocal chords will spill onto the floor. Will Mr. Gregory still fail me if I have my vocal chords lying in a heap at his feet? He will, because he's had it out for me since the day I walked in, I know it because –

“Hey, Matt, do you need a partner?”

Dane, the border-line nerd with a redeeming haircut (Maggy's description, not mine), is there. He looks casual, one hand propping himself on my desk. But I can see the pity in his eyes, and I want to say no. Except I don't talk.

“Cool,” He says, supplying me with an answer, just like Dad. From him, it doesn't sound presumptuous. Falling into the seat next to me, he takes out a notebook.

“So, like, I'll need your address and a time when we can get together and work on this. Whenever is fine with me. It's due on, let's see...” He scans the rubric, but I can tell he already knows the due date by the way his eyes slide right off it. I've pulled this trick before. Act like you haven't meticulously studied the requirements so you don't look like a nerd and know-it-all. I can also tell he's planning to do most of the project himself. I know, because I've been in his position before, working with someone who isn't reliable.

“Yup, the day before Halloween. That gives us more than a month to work on it. Should be a piece of cake. Do you have any preferences about the subject?”

Preferences. That's a nerd word.

I grab the rubric from his hand and circle my “preference:” the mystery religions. Not that I'm super into mythology, but it beats “women's roles in Athens.”

“Mystery religions? What's that about?”

It's a mystery.

I think if I said this, Dane would laugh. It could be the beginning of an actual friendship. Instead I shrug my shoulders. When Dane goes up to write our names on the sign-up-sheet, though, I get enough courage to scribble it on the rubric.

Dane comes back, looks at the sheet, and gives a punctuated snort. Not quite as powerful as if I'd said it out loud. But baby steps, right?

“Okay, well, we'll get together next Saturday. See you,” Dane says, shouldering his bag just as the bell rings.

I wave goodbye, until I realize that class is over for me, too. Like a dope, I scramble out, thinking that Mr. Gregory hasn't beaten me yet.

Due to a brainstorm during lunch, I scribble the next part of my story onto a piece of paper. Straight after I get home, I run upstairs to my computer. After transcribing what I wrote during lunch, I continue, straight into the good stuff.

“...trespassers are not welcome here!”

“But I wasn't trespassing. Please, I'm on a quest for the Grey God. If you could help me –”

“Ha! Not a trespasser? You enter my land uninvited. That is trespassing enough for me.”

Peter’s quest was not going well. After days in town, hopelessly asking for information about Sick Wind, he had decided that the only thing left to do was wander around until he either found Her or died in a horrible accident. When he had spotted a dank looking cave, he set out to explore it. After all, a goddess of sickness might live in a cave. But no, all he had found was an angry, short cave hermit who was unwilling to listen to reason.

“I am Briskel, lord of these caves and everything in them!” he cried, matted beard swinging in rhythm to his words, “Since you entered this cave, you are now under my command. Into the pit with you!”

“Okay, maybe if I just turn around and – wah!”

Something grabbed Peter from behind, something cold and scaly. It was too dark for Peter to see more than a hulking form, and even that quickly disappeared from sight as the thing tossed him into a pit. Peter landed with a very hard, very painful *oof*, but thankfully the pit wasn’t much deeper than he was tall. In fact, it would have been a simple matter to scramble up the edge and out, except that the thing hauled a heavy covering over the top. Peter was in complete darkness now.

“At least the old coot’s cackling isn’t as loud in here,” he mumbled, rubbing his sore back.

“You can say that again.”

Peter jolted into a sitting position.

“Who’s there?”

“Donis, wandering bard extraordinaire. For the price of a hot meal, I can recount the entire history of the world. For a hot meal and a lice-free bed, I can recount something interesting.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have a hot meal to offer you. Or a bed.”

“Yes, I thought as much. Say, where exactly are we?”

“Um, we’re in a pit, in a cave belonging to some crazy man,” Peter explained, feeling around him. Nothing but dirt walls and dirt floor.

“Where’s the exit?”

“I don’t think there is one.”

“Well, how’d we get in here, if there’s no exit?”

Peter sighed, standing and knocking on the heavy wood above them.

“Okay, there is an exit, but it’s blocked. Didn’t you see that... *thing* cover it after they threw me in here?”

“No.”

Silence fell, as Peter took inventory of his bones and tried to sort out the stranger’s comments.

“So,” piped up the stranger, “I told you my name and occupation. It’s courtesy for you to do the same.”

“Peter. I’m an acolyte of the Grey God.”

“Who?”

“The Grey God. Master of storms and vengeance.”

“Oh, I know who *He* is. I was asking about you. I thought all of the Grey God’s acolytes were killed. An earthquake or something.”

“Plague, actually. And yes, all but me died,” Peter said.

More silence, with Peter musing and the bard doing whatever bards do in the dark.

“So, Peter, what say we escape?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Peter murmured, sliding down against the walls, “Just lead the way.”

“Oh, no, I need you to lead the way.”

“I don’t know the way.”

“I’ll tell you how, but you have to promise to lead me out of the cave.”

There was no jest in Donis’ voice, and if Peter didn’t know better, he’d have thought the man had a rational plan.

“I’m going to start singing.”

Peter sighed and sank lower against the wall.

“Get up, lad. Once the covering is removed, you have to get both of us out of here.”

“Okay, yeah, I’m ready,” Peter said, stretching out on the hard floor. How long would the old man sing before he gave up? Peter hoped he had a nice voice, because the insane are known for their perseverance.

A light strumming echoed around the pit, and Peter recognized the sound of a kithara, his favorite instrument. What’s more, he recognized the tune. It was a hymn the priests sang, when they petitioned the Grey God on someone’s behalf. It was a call for vengeance.

After five minutes of singing, the covering peeled back.

“Stop that noise!” Briskel commanded.

Donis obeyed, slipping the kithara strap around his neck. Before the roof could slide back into place, he leapt towards Briskel, swinging a heavy walking stick over his head. A musical war-cry came from his throat, and the two landed in a heap.

“Come on, Peter, up and at ‘em!” he cried, flailing his stick back and forth. He didn’t hit his target.

Peter scrambled out of the pit, just as Briskel screamed, “Lout, don’t stand there, save me!”

The covering plunked back into place, nearly smashing Peter’s feet. Even after only half an hour in the dark, Peter found the cave light too harsh for his eyes. All he could see was a large figure rushing him.

Panicking, Peter turned to run, but then he remembered his promise to Donis. Should he stay and help the crazy bard?

He didn’t have time to think of an answer, because the creature was on him, grinding him into the ground.

“Not that one, you fool! This one, this one on me!” Briskel cried. He was grappling with Donis, and against the odds, Donis was winning.

The heavy weight on Peter vanished, and he sat up. With his returning sight, he could see something gigantic, with a curving tail, rip Donis away from Briskel and start shaking him.

“Peter! Help!”

Peter was tempted to sneak away, before that hulking shadow of mystery started shaking *him*. He was edging towards the entrance when he slipped. Falling to his knees, his hands brushed something wet. Guano. The floor was layered in guano. Spotting a dying fire, Peter scrambled forward. He remembered that the priests used fresh bat guano as fire-fuel.

With only a hint of a plan, Peter kicked some of the burning sticks out of the fire, onto the bat guano. He wanted a mild distraction, so he could have time to think. However, the guano was fresh, and it caught fire the second sparks touched it. Flames screamed across the floor, as fast as thunder. Peter’s eyes welled over with tears in the bright blaze, and he had been outside less than an hour ago. For the cave-dwellers, the light was unbearable. They clutched their eyes and shook their heads. Donis fell to the floor and scrambled forward.

“Over here!” Peter called, “Follow my voice!”

Black, smelly smoke filled the cave, and Peter choked on the taste of it. He grabbed Donis’ outstretched hand and hauled him towards the entrance. Behind, the two figures were howling and thrashing about, caught in a stupor. With a sick satisfaction, Peter predicted they’d probably die in the flames.

Bursting out of the cave, Peter disengaged himself from Donis’ grasp and took lungfuls of fresh air. Being outside felt good.

“Thank you for helping me back there,” Donis said, fingering his kithara for damage. The bard strummed it, producing a lush chord. “There, that sounds fine,” he said. He then fumbled for his stick, lying in the grass at his feet. Even so close, he fumbled a while before grabbing hold of it. When he stood back up, Peter noticed the milky color of his eyes.

“You’re blind?”

“How perceptive of you to notice,” Donis chuckled, running his hands over his pack, to make sure nothing was missing.

Peter looked the man up and down, noticing his disheveled and unshaven appearance. Of course, that could be the result of living in a pit for a few days. Anyways, under all that dirt was a man in his mid-twenties with a slender build. He’d have had a nice face, if his eyes weren’t so unsettling.

“What say we leave this place, just in case our friends decide to come after us?”

“I don’t think they will,” Peter said, checking his own pack and finding it singed, “but you’re right, we should get a move on.”

“It is all right if I travel with you?”

“As long as you want, but I’m not going anywhere nice. I’m on a quest to find Sick Wind.” *For a god that wouldn’t come to my aid even when I was in need.*

“Well, that sounds interesting. I’d love to come with you.”

Peter shook his head in disbelief, trying to decide if the man was joking.

“Well then, follow me. Or, um, do you need help?”

“I can follow you,” Donis said indignantly, “Just tell me if I stray too far off the path.”

“Fine by me. We’ll try to get to a town before dark.”

They left the smoke-spewing cave behind, setting their feet to the trail. Two traveling companions, heading for who knows where. It was going to be a long journey.

Chapter 3

After staying up so late typing, it's hard to get out of bed the next morning. But today is Friday. If I make it through today, then I can sleep in tomorrow.

For breakfast, I have all-organic granola. It tastes like regular granola, but without the sugar. So it tastes like dirt.

Dad decides to interrupt my breakfast with uncomfortable questions. Slipping into the seat next to me, he asks, "Matt, about this weekend? Well, there's a corn maze, out near the fairgrounds. I thought the three of us could go. You know, you, me and Amanda?"

So that's the name of his latest and greatest girlfriend. I stir my granola around, wishing I had the guts to say no.

"Sound good to you?... Great."

Dad leaves to get ready. This is his silent way of apologizing, getting ready without me having to nag him. I dawdle and make us late anyways. That's my silent way of rebelling.

School is unusually pleasant. I breeze all the way to lunch, where Maggy is in the library. She has her blonde hair in tight spirals down her face. It's amazing how girls do that. One day their hair's straight, the next it's curly, just like magic.

"Gooooood morning!" she cheers, even though it's past noon.

Pulling a deck of cards out of her pocket, she starts to deal for a game of Speed. I'm not really in the mood for cards, but they're already in front of me. I pick up my stack and proceed to lose.

We play five rounds before Maggy gets bored and starts talking. While she talks, I take out my Purell and douse my hands. I know girls don't *really* have cooties, but after Elementary School, the fear's ground into my subconscious. It's like how people know you can't get bad luck from a black cat, but the furry critters end up in the pound regardless.

"So, I get my driver's license next semester. Maybe, you know, I could start driving you to school."

Not unless you're a really good driver.

But I nod, because I know it's the kind of question you can't say no to. I'm glad Maggy's my friend, but she's super sensitive. Or maybe all girls are sensitive. I have no idea. All I know is that I have to be careful with what I agree to, what I write, the looks I give, and the attention I pay while she's talking. If I sigh when I shouldn't or look confused when I should look understanding, Maggy gets frustrated. And then *I* get frustrated, because half the time I don't know what I did wrong.

Then there's the fact that Maggy has plenty of friends, but she's *my* only friend. If I'm a crappy listener, she can go find someone else. In fact, I'm confused about why she even bothers hanging out with me, but I'm not about to question it.

"Cool. And I can drive you home and stuff too. I can drive you anywhere you want."

I never go anywhere, I write on a piece of paper, handing it to her.

"Yeah, but that's because you don't have a ride. You'd go places if you had someone to drive you."

I shake my head no. Maggy lets out an exasperated sigh.

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