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James R. Silvestri

A Bridge and a Rope

The rabbit carcass roasted over the little flame, and the savory smells of its cooking flesh made her mouth water. The violence of the hunt had been so primal, yet so simple: a stealthy crawl and a well-thrown rock was all it took to fell the adorable little meal-to-be. To justify the killing, she had to hearken back to a simpler time in her life, those early years of living in the town. This meant the recall of Lahti Darby's pet, unoriginally named Thumper, who devoured her own babies a few days after their birth, causing much trauma to the neighborhood children of the time. Rabbits were not all just hoppity cuteness. In truth, they were merely a link in the chain, and a low link at that.

The fatty juices dripped into the small clay bowl on the flame beneath it, where the mushrooms simmered in boiling water from the creek. During her first few nights in the wild, Joan had felt ashamed of the meager tools she brought—brutal reminders of her humanity, and major cheats. But it didn't really take too long for her to accept them. Accepting them meant accepting her own limitation of species, acknowledging that she had to rely on them to survive out there. Animals had their claws and hides and gnashing teeth; Joan had her bowl, and her knife, and her fire, and the clothes on her back. That was really all she needed.

In truth, the clothes were beginning to rot and wither; she had been running in the sun and climbing on the rocks and diving into the creek for the better part of three months now, and the remaining strips of garment clung to her like gossamer. She knew she could patch some modest new thing together with some of the hides she'd been collecting, and on warmer days could go without them altogether, but some stupid little instinct was stalling her. It certainly wasn't modesty, *per se*. It was just a little part of her old life, that learned behavior which tied her to material things, calling out to her with dying breath. A new wardrobe made from the things she'd killed would be the ultimate symbolic gesture of acceptance. There'd be no turning back after that. She wanted to get to that place, but she had to admit she wasn't there yet. Three months, and she still wasn't there yet.

Dusk gave way to the awesome tapestry of night. "Awesome" was the only word, and Joan hoped she would never grow too accustomed to it all. To lie on one's back and stare up into those heavens, that oozing sea of starlight and flailing space rock, made one feel ever-so-small, in the best of ways. Joan's consciousness propelled upward into that endless black and silver sea and lost itself in the tide. When she returned to earth, exhausted and cold and gasping for air, ready to scramble back to her puny makeshift shelter of sticks and hide, she felt she had gotten a little bit closer to the ultimate truth. A little bit closer each night. But she still wasn't there yet.

The next morning, her mind led her in search of breakfast. Her body rarely felt hunger anymore, as it seemed the raw air out there was now enough to keep her energized and able. But she learned the hard way some time ago that this could be deceitful. All living things needed nourishment, and Joan was just another living thing out there in the world. She decided to climb to the canyon and try her luck in the creek with her

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spear. Catching the stray bass in that confined space was not as difficult as river fishing, and Joan hated admitting that her fish-spearing skills had not much improved much since day one, so the easier the better. It didn't help that the spear she whittled was curvy and clunky, but this was what it was. Popular culture dictated that handmade spears were supposed to be perfectly symmetrical staffs, but in reality branches did not grow this way, and the thing got some surprising mileage despite its imperfection. Like most of her recent creations, she couldn't scapegoat its design for her failure to use it properly. It merely required more time for practice. And Joan certainly had no shortage of time.

To get down to the creek, one first had to climb up over a rocky cliff. This took a certain care, but unlike most of the rest of this hard stretch of land, Joan had an advantage here. As a child she climbed this over and over again, day after day, and despite decades away from it, she found upon her return that she remembered nearly every nook and pebble of the cliff. So little had changed.

She passed an errant fox on the way, slinking out from behind a bush onto the rocky path before her. The animal gave her a bored glance before calmly strolling off, which convinced Joan that this was the same fox she had seen countless times within the vicinity. She was quickly reminded that in this reality, one organism was only interesting to the other if eating or mating was involved. Since Joan did not fit into either of these categories (How could she ever bring herself to eat a fox?), she was as interesting to the creature as the rocks she stood on. Like getting lost in the night sky, it was an oddly comforting feeling to be so disregarded by another species.

She paused for a moment at the base of cliff for a sit-down. This wasn't due to exhaustion; Joan was just beginning her day and was full of life. She merely decided quite randomly to take the moment to appreciate the man that she knew was buried not too deep beneath her.

The rural town of Herefoot, South Dakota rested several dozen miles from this stretch of land, south of the Black Hills. "Rural" was an understatement, and "town" was an exaggeration. Nonetheless, it was still the nearest inkling of human settlement, and the place Joan was born and raised through early childhood by her father. Jonas tried his best in those years to put aside his differences with his own species and raise his daughter right, but as time went by he found himself retreating deeper and deeper into the wilderness, leading little Joanie along with him. He wasn't an angry or bitter man, but things like traffic lights and boom boxes deeply saddened him in ways he could never truly express. Joan was more than okay with these excursions. She had a few friends in town and she enjoyed her toys and pillows and little transistor radio, but she clearly inherited that strange dissatisfaction from her father. Comfort and friends and toys never did seem to quell that quiet, tightening need for something more... vast. And open.

Jonas taught her how to live off the land. Everything she did now was the direct result of what he had taught her so long ago. Perhaps he didn't know why he was teaching her these things, since he often told her he wanted the best that society had to offer her: career, marriage, children, stability. It was likely that he had no choice. Parents had to teach their

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children something, and this was all he knew.

Joanie was eleven when, in preparation for the thousandth climb up that cliff to wade in the creek beyond it, Jonas clutched his chest and erratically crumbled to the stones beneath him. He had parting words that were sweet and wise, but Joan could not recall them for the life of her. Too much emotion ruled her that day. Obeying his whispered wish, uttered to her with honey-laced sincerity years earlier when such a moment seemed an impossibility, Joanie began to dig a grave in that patchy earth for her father's lifeless body. That was what he would've wanted. She regretted for years to come that her own two hands were not enough for such an excavation, and that she had to retrieve the shovel from the back of his car to finish the job.

And then she had to drive herself all the way back into town, alone and full of every emotion known to Young Woman. She was still tiny for eleven years-old, and her toes could barely brush the petals and her little arms hardly strong enough to steer the wheel, but she made it back just fine. She never drove again, but knew that she always could if she had to.

Nobody back in Herefoot reacted the way she wanted them to. They regarded her with a sad admiration and were flummoxed as to what should happen next, but nobody really had the right words to say. Perhaps there weren't any. At any rate, to her knowledge, none of them bothered to corroborate her story or try to find the body. Herefoot was a simple place, Jonas had a simple reputation, and the idea that he died and was buried in the middle of nowhere by his daughter probably seemed an apt way to end the chapter of his existence in their lives.

Eventually, Joan was spirited away to live with her mother in a much different sort of place. The woman washed her hands of her husband's and child's oddness years prior, but was quick to reclaim her role when she learned she had a fighting chance to do things the proper way. The ensuing years offered much distraction, and soon the lands south of the Black Hills became little more than the backdrop of bittersweet and surreal dreams for Joan the young woman.

Upon returning three months ago, however, the wilderness immediately grabbed hold of her like a long-neglected parent, and it was that middle stretch of social living that now seemed the strange, confusing dream. This was where Joan was meant to be. She alone understood this, and that was just fine. Really, it was.

Fishing at the creek proved unproductive as usual, and Joan could not hide her frustration. Her spear hand seemed so steady, and her patient will a thing of iron, but the sharpened tip just couldn't pierce the fish. It seemed aerodynamically impossible, as the few times she was able to make the connection, the spear tip only dipped the shadowy targets deeper into the water without penetration. The fish would then merely twist with irritated alarm and torpedo off. It was the kind of frustration that took a lot of wind out of Joan, and after a few hours she found herself lying on the shady banks staring up at the cliffs above her.

She spied the flimsy bridge she tried to build the prior month, across the crevice where two high cliff edges nearly met on their own. She never bothered attempting to cross it, but left it there, as a reminder of... something. She wasn't sure what. Certainly not her failure—there were

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enough reminders of that all around her, especially today.

She knew that above that stupid little bridge hung a thick rope from a low branch of an old oak tree. She and her father tied that rope there years ago, and she'd watch him swing over that crevice like a wild spider monkey, back and forth. It terrified her, much to his amusement, and she refused to try it herself. He never pushed her to swing, and told her the time would come one day when she was ready. That day never came.

Why did she try and build that dumb bridge? To avoid the rope. Not like there was anything on the other cliff of any interest to her. It was just another little patch of rocks. But she built it to avoid the rope. And now both were left unattended. Perhaps it symbolized failure after all.

The shelter she built for herself of twigs and beaver hide was not much sturdier than the bridge, but it did the trick. It kept her out of the rain, and it more or less hid her from predators. It was a tiny flap perched against a boulder and covered little more than her reclined body, but she was proud of it. Sleeping there reminded her that she was capable of conquering things, and this was a reminder she needed to end this day.

However, that night her sleep was restless. Joan did not take well to failure, and little let-downs like that day's fishing trip often reverberated immensely within her.

Of course, there were other things: other failures, abandonments, sins... but these she buried so very deep. The fresh night air pressed down on the dark thoughts and kept them from bubbling up. Yet sometimes the thoughts slipped past and trickled upward, haunting her piece-meal. Often she could deal with them, but this time it was a grim struggle.

Feeling unrested and uncharacteristically slothful the next morning, Joan took her time to seek food. It required a deep stomach grumble to get her to her feet, and she braved the cold morning clutching her spear and knife, completely unsure of what she should be pursuing at that moment.

It was now three months and seven days since her return. She supposed once that keeping track of time there would prove difficult, but in fact it was quite easy to do. There was much space freed up in her mind for such calculations, and her internal calendar was aided by her biological one.

Here was further explanation of that morning's lethargy. Menstrual blood trickled down her inner thigh, through and over the rags of her leggings. During the first month she used an edge of rabbit hide as a crude tampon out of instinctive need for modesty, but this proved so messy and uncomfortable that she eventually just "bled it out." Her clothes had undergone so many shifts of color that the monthly stains were indistinguishable from the rest of the muck. Still, a mutter of instinct cautioned her to lay low today. Something didn't seem right in the air.

And yet, that morning, a hungry and irritated Joan found herself wandering westward. It was a direction she rarely ventured towards, given the thorny brambles which hid snakes and rabbit holes that dominated the area. But today, she found herself needing a change.

She treaded as carefully as she could, but hunger was beginning to wear her down, and she caught herself wobbling a bit. With every footfall

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she paused to steel herself, and honed for sounds and smells. Once upon a time, not too long ago, Joan was a smoker and a drinker, and her senses were long-dulled by toxins. But now she was free of all of that, and her senses had tightened with such acuteness that—

There was a rustle in the low shrubs, a very brief but audible shiver of motion. Immediately, she knew this was the misstep of another creature. Predators rarely made mistakes like that during the stalking stage, and Joan thought for a fleeting moment that there had to have been a God after all, but then why would God single out Joan for a fighting chance, Joan was no better than any other—

Never mind that. She hardened into a bronze statue, brandishing her spear in one hand and clutching her knife at her waist with the other. The sound came about twelve yards from her north, so she slowly found herself backtracking east. Adrenaline aided her stealth, and her once-wobbly steps gingerly tiptoed around the brambles and holes beneath her. This was a stalking hunter, not a brazen charger like a grizzly, so “no sudden movements” was the game she would play until her feet were on sturdier ground. She heard no more sounds, but felt something drawing closer to her from the north, matching her slow backtrack pace by pace. Perhaps it was all in her mind, but there was no reason to bank on that. Her instincts had proven correct many times before.

She had not wandered too deep into the brush before the interruption, so after a devastating passage of minutes, she was back on the rocks. She finally allotted herself a good moment to scan the brush for her pursuer, but found nothing. She could only smell blood, and realized it was her own. She was not safe yet.

Instinctively, she headed back for the cliffs. This hunter could probably climb those rocks a lot more deftly than she if it came down to a high speed chase, but she felt more in control up there than she did in her little shelter. Suddenly, after all this time, the shelter now seemed utterly idiotic and useless. Joan couldn't believe how lucky she was to have not been rolled up in it and devoured by some nocturnal hunter like a sandwich. Again, the sense of failure and folly consumed her as she began her climb.

The upward tread was her clumsiest in recent memory. She was afraid—the fear was taking over. Her father's voice tried to soothe her, reminding her that fear was biology's way of giving a creature a fighting chance. All living things felt fear, and the more complex the fear the more capable the species. But this offered little solace in the moment, as the fear was clouding her judgment and stripping her of choices. Every pebble she mounted as she rose reminded her of a thousand missed opportunities she should've grasped to escape this.

When she reached the top, the sun had fallen behind clouds, and the canvas of the wilderness below her seemed forebodingly drenched of color and life. Feeling a thousand hungry eyes piercing into her from below, Joan wandered towards the bridge.

It truly was a sorry, hackneyed thing, that damn bridge. Seven long branches, bound in cloth rope covered in tattered hide. It had been her first project, born out of early boredom and crazy nostalgia, and it had taken her days to construct. But when she slid it over the gap between the narrow cliffs, a lofty feat in and of itself, she knew immediately that it

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wouldn't hold the weight of an intrepid dormouse. So there it remained, unused and blaringly inefficient. Like so much other human filth in the world.

Over half the length of the bridge hung the low branches of the solitary oak, old and withering in its final years of life. It had chosen a solitary existence, away from the forests below it, and now spanned Biblically alone across its high perch. The thick rope coil remained, threaded across many of its low branches, dyed and roughened by the elements.

Joan was crying. The rope made her cry. The image of her father swinging from it, when the rope itself was healthy and strong, swinging like a mad fool in ecstasy without a care in the world, showing off and bel-lowing with glee, struck her like a bolt of lightning. Those were his happiest days.

She found herself reaching up and tugging at a low end of the rope, unthreading it, pulling it farther down. It did not give way easily, and ripped along some branch bark with it as it drew closer. It was finally a straight thing again, after so many years. It was a rope for swinging. Or for hanging.

With this thought, its rough texture suddenly burned her touch as if acid dripped down it. Joan backed far away from it, back to the edge from where she climbed. The thought of hanging had not occurred to her in a long time. That was why she had come back. This was the only place that would save her from that. Yet now, here it was again, all that sad business in her head.

The mountain lion did not announce her presence. She was simply there. She found her own way up the cliffs, some easier, more efficient way that Joan would never discover. The animal stood calmly, with deathly stillness. Only her famished, simmering eyes and low growl, from her throat or gut or both, betrayed her intentions.

Joan froze. A moment ago, she mulled hanging from a rope, and now she was about to be ripped into shreds and devoured by a hungry animal. The transition was jarring, but it yanked her back into reality. Yet reality itself was now failing her. The spear slipped from her loose, sweaty palm and clattered to the slate below. The knife hilt at her belt swung allusively away from her other hand's feeble grasp. Not like either item would be of any use here.

She surprised herself for a minute as she found herself trying to deflect that hungry gaze with her own defensive glare. She tried to pull her most intimidating energies from her core to her surface, but her innards were a hollow hole and there was nothing to grab hold of. So turned and ran, back up the cliff. Her feet were leaden at first, but as she ran the swift-ness found her, and pulled her up with speed she had not known she was capable of. The lion was not following her, was not pursuing her, for what seemed like an age. But this did not last. Joan subconsciously sensed the rustle of movement. Lions only ran when they were starving and had no choice—hunting was a crap shoot at best, and they had to preserve their energies preciousy. But starvation and the smell of menstrual blood pulled the lion forward, finally. There were not many ways this could end.

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The slate of the rock side dipped upward at a sharp incline; its surface was not designed for running across it, but still Joan ran. Every foot fall tore wind from her lungs and material from her junky shoes, but adrenaline drove her up and up. She could feel the lion closing ranks. She had given Joan a head start for reasons unknown, sport or logistics perhaps, but she was much faster than the human woman, and her goal was more precise. Joan was running for the bridge.

As she ran, Joan wanted to scream. She had not done that in a long time. She had not verbalized so much as a whimper in weeks. But her lungs were preoccupied, and no sound escaped. She thought she could feel the breath of the thing behind her wash warmly onto her calves.

The heavy rope slapped her in the face, and she grabbed it, and swung forward. It wasn't intentional, it was gravity, or inertia, or some other law of physics that involved ropes and lions. She ripped through time and space as she swung, and the blood rushed out of her body. She thought she wasn't holding onto the rope anymore. How could she be? There was no blood left in her.

Something was happening behind her as she propelled forward. Her hunter had leapt after her, perhaps in a moment of desperate confusion—things that ran for several paces did not suddenly up and fly. Joan felt, for a second, the heat of the creature nearly upon her, ready to dive into her flanks. But in a moment, in a quarter of a second that was so very crucial, she was across, and there was a loud crackle and a low, fading roar.

Dumped onto the surface of the opposite cliff, catching herself before rolling backwards down into the gorge, and patting herself all over, trying to get the blood flowing again, Joan whipped around to meet her attacker for the last time, only to find herself quite alone. The old rope was still swinging across the crevice, but had begun to settle back by the tree on the other side, out of her grasp. The bridge had completely vanished. The lion took it with her on her way down into the gorge. It couldn't support her weight when she landed on it after the ill-timed leap.

That stupid bridge couldn't support the weight of a dormouse.

Joan collapsed on her back. Air re-seized her lungs, and she began to convulse as blood and nerve information started to repopulate her body. To her surprised, she found herself cackling with crazy laughter. Her first vocal utterance in weeks. It consumed her, and she couldn't stop it. She didn't want to stop it.

"Mrs. Borowitz?"

The voice lacked emotion, or tact. Perhaps this was from Joan's perspective. She couldn't remember the last time she heard speech. Or that name.

The husky woman in police attire had caught her by surprise in the swampy reeds far east of the cliffs. Joan found herself wandering there after coming down the other side of the canyon, in unfamiliar territory, not wanting to tread back around to her shelter, ever again. She planned to wander east until she dropped, and in the morning would build a new shelter and start over. She'd carve a new spear, find a new patch of mushrooms, sip water from a new creek—

"Mrs. Borowitz, is that you?"

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The other woman's face was a mask of "Been, there, done that" ennui. Joan hated it immediately.

She could not answer. She kidded herself into thinking she didn't remember how to speak. But it hadn't been that long. All she could do was draw the fresh fox pelt more tightly around her neck. A nervous tick, at best.

"My name's Sheila," the officer said. Now her mask sported a patient, thin smile. "There's a few people out east looking for a Mrs. Joan Borowitz. They've been looking for months. Her husband had a crazy idea that she might've made her way out here."

Joan felt her eyes well up. Oh God, Patrick. Fucking Patrick.

She realized, for the first time, that she had actually wandered pretty close to the road. She could see Sheila's garish squad car rested under a shady elm. It looked like it fell there from outer space.

"It seems Mrs. Borowitz had been behaving erratically," Sheila continued. Her voice seemed more present and emphatic now. "She had grown distant and unresponsive. She stopped going to work, stopped tending to her husband and kids, and locked herself in the bathroom for hours at a time. Her family was afraid that she might hurt herself. And then one day she just vanished."

One day she just up and vanished, Joan repeated to herself. Just like that.

Sheila outstretched a chubby arm, her once-thin grin now a Cheshire grimace.

"Maybe you'd like to come with me," she cooed. "You look like you could use a good meal, and some clean clothes. And maybe a little conversation?"

Joan turned and ran. She thought she'd never be able to run like that again, after the gorge, but now she ran with six times the speed, six thousand times and then some. She broke several laws of physics.

As she ran, the images came back to her. Microwaves; cubicles; company meetings; endlessly-crying children; patches of carpet smeared in tomato sauce; lunches with Phyllis and Fred; Phyllis's endless, mindless drivel; Patrick's golf clubs; PTA picnics; Hamburger Helper; twelve dollar packs of cigarettes; venetian blinds and their thin, swinging ropes. It all tried to weigh her down, but she kept running. The children crying for her, demanding her, keeping her awake, railing against her... *Selfish, so selfish. I'm sorry. I'll be sorry forever. But this is me. And I am not that. I never will be. I can't be.*

Let fat Sheila chase me. She won't catch me, not for miles, not for days. And when she finds me, there will be a bridge, and a rope. And I'll be waiting.

She felt her whole face smiling as she ran towards the distant woods, a wide swatch of deep red beneath the setting sun.