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Into the Woods

THE LAPHROAIG, POURED NEAT, is smoky, appropriately enough, because your memories of her contributions to the intellectual discussion you were having will wisp away, as they usually do. You'll remember the "wow" in response to your comment about the camera angles, and you'll remember the silence after your insightful monologue, the silence that was an obvious sign of how impressed she was. It matters what she thinks of you. This is the first time in nearly three months that you've had her to yourself.

She begins about her parents. You've been here before and it's a tough wood to navigate. They're fucked up and she knows it. What else is there to say? She probably just wants someone to listen, but the knight in shining armour you've been trying to kill yelps from the dark cage in your deepest recesses. You locked him there when you started sharing poetry with her, ten months ago now. You weren't going to fuck this one up. The lock held but you didn't expect what would follow.

Sophie finishes the Laphroaig before you. No other woman you know loves whisky like that. But then, she lived in Scotland for a year, studying, but also doing what she does best – connecting. You love Scots and their land. Best part of the island, you always say, and you mean it. Sometimes you think you should've studied there instead of Cardiff. But then, you now know that's "little you," searching for validation, bereft of the protection and guidance of the knight, the rescuer. You're just searching for something from which to fashion shining armour. Flawed choices are always an easy fallback, especially when they're blamed on things you could never have changed: the education system, the lack of guidance from your parents, or anyone else.

The night ends as any goodbye with her has of late. She gives you a one-armed hug with two light pats on your shoulder. You remember the time in her apartment when she pulled back but still had both hands on your arms and asked, "you said you need this?" The hug that followed made you drop your bag – a touch of purposeful dramatic flair, but nonetheless reflective of your appreciation of her spontaneous closeness. She was like that fine whisky – to be fully experienced rarely, in small, intentional sips.



Later that Fall, on a wooded path in the southern hills, you've fallen behind again. You tell yourself that you're taking time to appreciate this golden autumn. But you wonder. You want them to wait for you, don't you? The "little you" does. Wait for me! He echoes inside with a hint of playfulness masking desperation, just like your three-year-old son does on the weekends you have him. You want her to wait for you, because you're waiting for her, though you repeat your therapist's insights to rest assured that this distance is a good thing.

They're not going to wait, so you pick up the pace. You're breathing hard, but you blame the hangover, ignoring the weight you put on over the summer. It's only seven or eight pounds, but it's armour. Armour you

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wish you wouldn't carry, but you grew up as the knight and it worked all those times, until you got married and had kids. She asked for a divorce, and you're glad, because you're here now. And you know that's why Sophie is really so hot: she doesn't need saving. Actually, she's everything your ex isn't, but in particular, Sophie is especially kind and self-assured. The kindness she showed you as the dust of your marital separation settled was an armour per se. Sophie's still kind, but she's stopped walking beside you.

The woods are welcoming though finding your footing and establishing the right pace is a challenge. The mud is deep and sticky. It should be easier, all of it. But mud isn't always avoidable. Everybody goes through it in their own way, you think. Your parents, their parents, and probably on and on back in time, they had to walk their woods, sludge through the mud and enjoy the view when they could. But each generation failed the one below it. They could have at least been more aware that leaving you to deal on your own is tantamount to trauma. So you know they were all traumatized, it's intergenerational. The trauma stops with you, it has to, because otherwise Sophie won't want you. Sophie's got brains like you've never experienced. She knows herself more than you could dream of knowing yourself, and she intuitively understands the behaviour of others better than the best writers you know. She's way ahead of you, the ground is covered in leaves, but you bound forward up the slope.

She's stopped to take a picture. "Rain/fall" she'll title it on Instagram – the wind sending golden leaves drifting down like the snowflakes we're anticipating in a few weeks. The wordplay is attractive because she's a Polish woman whose command of English is basically native, thanks to an early adulthood in the US. That dual identity is something you know only too well – "what's your background?" was the standard icebreaker growing up first-generation Canadian. Your knight knew he'd make your Polish parents proud if he could sweep a Polish woman off her feet. And he did. You dated one Polish girl before your ex-wife. Your knight chose well for himself – they both had Borderline Personality Disorder – there was lots of (ultimately impossible) saving to do. But that didn't make Polish women any less attractive. Besides, that you're Polish-Canadian still counts for a lot. Your love of the outdoors may have been born in and around Algonquin and Georgian Bay, and fostered in Sea-to-Sky country out west, but the Polish lakes and mountains are in your blood. You sail, but only in Polish. You hike, but mostly in the Tatras. Now you write nature poetry in Warsaw city parks or on countryside retreats like the one you're on. So does Sophie. And you remember the question that hooked her, "why do you appreciate nature so much?" That started many a late-night intellectual exchange. But she's tired of your "why's" now. So, you move on, onto a mud-stained log to avoid the puddle.

The three of them are long into conversation now. Something lighthearted. You remember when you overheard her at work telling a colleague she wanted someone lighthearted. You're lighthearted. And you're everything else she listed off that day. She doesn't know what she wants. But you don't really know what she does want. She won't say. She keeps to herself, and communication of feelings was an issue even when you were talking every morning and every evening. That was a red flag. It'd probably make a relationship fail. That's what you tell yourself now to

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stay sane. You keep to yourself now, too. You let them have their conversation because speaking scared her off. You go deep when you speak. Every time. Maybe you're not lighthearted after all. You know it was speaking your feelings that put the distance between you. You sought emotional fulfillment – someone to manage the emotions you never learned to manage yourself. You weren't allowed to have them as a kid. You had your mom to save from a loveless marriage. Before that you had to be a good boy for mommy to be happy. You were a good boy. You grew up and found that girls like bad boys. Even her. The girls that like good boys of your kind need saving from themselves.

You've fallen behind again. No point in trying to keep up when you're not going to join the conversation anyway. She set the tone in the car ride from the train station. "He doesn't say much, but when he does, it blows you away." You do say much, just not when they're speaking Polish. You don't want to make an ass of yourself in front of her more than you already have. You can speak the language fluently but not from an emotional or intellectually nuanced place. Your friends are both of those things and more. So, you fall behind. They wait for you at the bottom of a hill. You run down, Sophie extends her hand, says something about catching you, so you extend your own hand. To your surprise, she grabs your arm, and holds on. It's been a while since she's touched you with purpose, with conscious intention of doing so. She lets go after you've stopped. Though you're wearing a sweater, the warmth of her fingers wrapped around your forearm remains implanted on your skin for a few breathtaking seconds. That's when you know.

You know the way her voice warms you inside like her favourite whisky sliding down your throat, the way her hair bends in natural waves, the way she dances, that gentleness of her singing voice, the way she pauses to admire a colourful sunset, the way she jokes and her flamboyant joy when she's had a few, how she packs healthy snacks for a road trip, her secret photographic gifts, her love for Canada, the way she notices people and is ready to assist them before anyone else even knows there's someone nearby, the marginalia she's written into her books – especially those on philosophical subjects, the poets she's introduced you to, you know that these are the things that, by proxy, inspire you to be a better man. But you also know that this can't be why you love her or want to be with her.

Because now, as you come to a peak in the hilly woods and see the long path ahead, you also know that you've never been given the space or the time to love yourself as the hurting two-year-old boy who was locked in his room because he was crying. Love, you learned then, was not allowing yourself to feel. But for a nearly a year now, you can feel everything, and you don't know what to do with it. Now it's time to undo 35 years of pseudo-living, and learn to manage your emotions, on your own, so you can love yourself. Maybe then, you'll know intimacy again. And then you might get to share it with someone just as emotionally mature. The first thing you need to do is catch up to your friends heading back into the woods. You put one foot in front of the other – small, intentional steps because, like well-aged whisky, you know it'll take time.