

Saplings

In a small, wooden boat with Andy, James, and Chris, he navigates through an estuary. The boat approaches a heavy, wooden gate—a gate rife with timbers of the hardest lot and craftsmanship that can only tell outsiders to stay away: two moveable walls of wood situated above smoothly moving water. The left, not unlike the right, serving a master unknown and forbidding entrance to those unwanted. A group of saplings — he doesn't know why the orbs are called saplings, only that they are — hover around the boat; thousands of ethereal little orbs with luminescent cores of reds, purples, and blues that leave tiny tails behind them as they flutter to and fro. Jake can't understand how he came here. The gateway demands awe; wood contoured on the top to sweep from a peak at the meeting point between both arms of the gate, intricately carved with figures that seem aesthetically pleasing yet random, patternless, while a ringing and distant familiarity echoes in Jake's mind like a shepherd sounding his horn to collect strays from the flock.

“Can we enter?” asks Jake.

“We certainly can, it just depends on how,” replies James.

“Do we really want to?” says Chris, but by no means rhetorically.

It's been almost two and a half hours and still nothing. Chad begins to lose hope. He hates hospitals. The sounds alone are enough to drive anyone crazy. He thought he could come inside to escape his sister-in-law's hysteria. She's been outside chain smoking cigarettes and crying with her sister since he arrived. An accident was as much information as Sarah could coherently speak over two hours ago when Chad woke up and groggily answered his phone. She screamed, cursed and babbled incoherently. Chad wasn't sure if she was laughing drunk and calling him on a whim to make a joke, but he sensed something more serious. He managed to get her calm enough to pass the phone to her sister Kate who explained that Jake, Andy, Chris and James had been in an accident and Jake was at the trauma center.

“He's hurt pretty bad,” she said.

“How're the other guys?” Chad wondered aloud.

“They’re barely scratched. How fucked up is that?” Kate said a little too loudly with what sounded to Chad like a laugh. *Would it be better if they were hurt too?* He wondered silently.

The saplings grow agitated and become wearisome of their decision to allow the preceding to occur. “Is it your decision to enter and pass through these gates?” one of the saplings seems to ask as it flitters around the boat. Jake wants to say something, but before he can allow his mouth to open and his breath to follow, the saplings determine that this was not a proper decision; the saplings should not be considering opening the gate to anyone or anything that may be accused of possessing wisdom. They had made that mistake before and were now suffering because of it.

The saplings speak in concert: “You wish to cross this threshold. Do you not see that it can never be crossed more than once?”

One step forward can never be recreated by stepping backward, thinks Jake, but the saplings do not enjoy or understand his thoughts.

“Who is it you come here with?” query the saplings.

“I’m here with my friends,” Jake replies.

“You seem to be alone,” remarks one sapling above the gate’s intersection. Jake now wonders how this can be and looking close to his heart, discovers that only Andy remains, but he too withers like a sun setting behind a foggy mountain.

Now alone, Jake thinks about the gate: the intricately carved images evoke happiness, yet the reasoning behind the emotion fails presentation. In fact, Jake suffers sadness from the unexpected departure of his friends and he suddenly thinks about his wife Sarah and their two boys, Sam and Kip. Where are they? Shouldn’t they be here? Wherever *here* is? The saplings offer no sympathy to his pining or his absence of friends and family.

“Where’s my wife?” Jake asks, then adds “and my boys?”

The saplings speak in concert: “They are where they have to be.”

Jake feels angered and saddened by this conversation and decides to focus on the gate. “What is this gate?”

The saplings respond in voices out of concert, assaulting Jake’s mind with myriad explanations concerning

the gate and many other things, but he can't make sense out of any of it with the saplings rambling in thousands of voices. He can't explain to himself how these thousands of little saplings, no bigger than softballs, darting through the crisp air around him, can help. He doesn't even know why, or if, he needs help.

"Realm. You can pass," says a voice that may come from one sapling or all of them.

"My name's Jake."

"You are Realm. Not like Ursa, you will pass through the gate as we wish it."

Sarah's call came at 11:42 p.m. It was now going on 2:30 a.m. and he had yet to hear from any of the doctors. It was bad. Sitting inside the waiting area, he thought he would be able to gather his thoughts—thoughts on what? His brother Jake was somewhere in the building, seriously injured. His sister-in-law was outside, hysterical, and he was in the waiting room. Waiting for what? *Hospitals are the worst places on Earth*. He hates the waiting room. The sounds, the smells, he hates hospitals. To his right, Chad hears the quiet sobs of an older woman and man in the corner. It's as though they don't want to burden anyone else with their suffering or make a public offering of it (pride is a strange thing). But they cannot avoid the whimpering he now hears. The constant beeps of unknown equipment, the incessant buzzing of doors only those with the right can pass through, phones constantly sounding off in that talk-radio tone. It's almost enough to push Chad out the doors and back into the company of his sister-in-law's hysterical musings. He hates hospitals. The smell is something else. Disinfected, deodorized, clean to the effect that most people get suspicious. The hospital smells so clean that Chad thinks something rotten must lie beneath. It's kind of like his grandma's attic full of moth balls. The smell of ether drowning out death and decaying memories. *They can only last so long*, he thinks.

A helicopter's pounding beat gets louder and louder as it gets lower and lower, drowning out the hospital sounds. The buzzes, beeps, yatterings, and quiet sobs all die in the wash of the approaching Med-Evac, but it can't kill the smell. *Must be bad*.

“Oliver. Sarah Oliver,” announces a voice. Chad startles from his stupor and takes a couple seconds to reacquaint himself with the living.

“She’s outside,” he says quickly rising and pointing to the doors at the trauma center entrance. “I’m her brother-in-law. I’ll be right back.”

In a small room that only those with the right can enter, the doctor talks constantly but only a few of her words register: *Coma, head trauma, one lung collapsed, one lung partially collapsed, life-support*. His sister-in-law’s sister has to take Sarah from the room. She remains hysterical, shouting at the doctor that it was her job to save Jake, that she knew how to save Jake; that she *better* save Jake. Chad tries to calm Sarah down, but he really doesn’t put too much effort into it; he wants her gone from the room as well.

Chad only remembers the doctor’s final words: “If this was my brother —” and she completed the ellipses floating in the empty space between them with a look that comes as close to compassion as a trauma center doctor can safely make. She left the room and patted Chad on the shoulder like a coach who had just given a pep-talk to the captain of a losing team.

The gate was no longer. Jake was now surrounded by the constant flashings of saplings. They came and went without announcing it. A little burst of color — greens, reds, blues and things like a welder sees. They came in and out with every second and left in a small burst of particles. There were thousands of them. The sky was nebulous, multi-colored foam with so many saplings coming in and out; it looked like a shaken, psychedelic soda.

He kept walking along the river and the saplings continuously assaulted him with their voices: *tell me a story, I’m scared of flying. I..who..reve..level...woeueleldlduscjnb*.

It all became gibberish and Jake noticed another being in the distance. The man was sitting and swatting at the saplings as if for sport. They burst into bright particles at his attacks and as Jake moved closer, he heard the saplings’ cries louder and louder. He tried to tune them out, and while he could hardly distinguish coherent words, one resounded in his head: *Ursa*.

The man noticed Jake approaching and jumped to his feet. He appeared to be in his forties, slim with thinning hair

and a tiny, upturned pug nose with empty, grey eyes. He stood somewhat defensively and Jake stopped a few yards from him. They stood facing each other in silence when Jake decided to speak. He didn't know where he was or why he was here, but he knew he wanted no trouble.

"You must be Ursa," he said in the friendliest tone he could manage.

"That's what these little bastards call me," the man replied, gesturing toward the closest saplings around them.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Jake, but these things keep calling me 'Realm.'"

"Well then, Realm, that's your name now. At least for as long as you're here." The man's posture lightened up and he appeared relieved to see Jake.

"Where exactly is here? I mean, what is this place and why am I here?"

"That's the 64,000 dollar question. Why am I here? Haven't we always been curious about that one?" Ursa said and began walking toward the river, apparently satisfied with the conversion where it stood.

"Wait. Hang on, you must know something," Jake pleaded and ran to catch up with him. "How long have you been here? How did you get here? You can't tell me anything?" Jake was becoming irate and desperate to get an answer from this man. As he walked along side of him, the saplings continued to buzz in and out and around him without coming too close. He could sense their fear of Ursa. The man trudged on, but suddenly stopped and turned to Jake.

"Listen Realm, I'm not sure of too much anymore. I don't know how long I've been here and I don't remember who I used to be. I only know that I was someone else once. See, time gets away from you here. You see those trees way back there," he said pointing toward a dense forest in the distance. "They don't get any closer. I've walked and walked and they don't get any closer than they are now. And the sky never changes. It's always this way — dusk. You begin to lose track."

"I remember," said Jake. "I have a wife, two boys and a brother back home and I need to find them."

"Good luck. I might've had some of those things too, but search me if I know it now." Ursa shrugged his shoulders and looked like he truly didn't know what Jake was talking

about. They continued walking and the saplings continued to avoid them. Jake decided to change the subject for the moment. Maybe he could get something useful from Ursa.

“Why are they scared of you?” he asked glancing around the sky filled with tiny orbs.

“Cause I know how to scare ‘em,” Ursa redundantly replied. “There’s not a lot to do here and after a while I learned to get into them. They’re just kids, so it don’t take much to scare the bejesus out of ‘em.”

“What do you mean they’re just kids?”

“Like the two boys you remember. These things — saplings, they’re just kids and when I feel like it, I scare ‘em for something to do.”

Jake realized that Ursa remembered more than he claimed to and that this whole conversation was some kind of game. What he didn’t know was how to get the guy to square with him. He couldn’t understand why, but he felt something strange inside him; some kind of connection that grew weaker as they continued walking. He looked to the frothy sky filled with saplings constantly bursting into so many colors. *Kids?*

Sarah had calmed down enough to wait with Chad and Kate for visiting hours the next morning. They weren’t really hours, more like minutes, when the doctors would allow immediate family to visit Jake’s room when they weren’t doing something to him. His parents were flying in sometime today. Snow in Denver stranded them and they did not know when they could leave. He really wished they were here. They all agreed not to let the boys see their dad in this state, with strange tubes coming out of his body and unable to do anything but lie there; it would do nothing but injure them. Chad was scared as hell and confused, he couldn’t imagine how his nephews would feel. He was thankful Sarah’s folks were watching them while they visited Jake.

He was not improving. In fact, his condition had worsened during the few hours they were gone. A different doctor, this one a young black man, had made it very clear to Sarah that the situation was increasingly approaching when a decision would need to be made. Chad could see that she was beginning to realize that Jake might not be coming home, but the three of them maintained as much hope as they could.

Jake had to learn what Ursa knew and he had to do it fast. Something was changing and it wasn't good.

"If these things are kids, then what the hell is this place?" he asked, unable to shield his anger at being toyed with.

"Calm down, partner. You're the first company I've had besides these little bastards. Shouldn't we get to know each other better before I tell you my secrets?" Ursa was still playing with Jake. He understood why the saplings feared the man. He was cruel and got off on it, but Jake wasn't scared.

"Look," said Jake, "I don't know what's happening, but I can feel something slipping away. I know I don't have much more time and I need to find my wife and kids. I need you to help me."

"Well, since you put it like that, I suppose I can be your knight in shining armor. Just go on and toss down your hair princess," he said with a laugh.

Jake was furious. He wanted to smash Ursa into oblivion, but he also knew Ursa was his only chance. Ursa could see the fury in Jake's eyes. No way to hide it.

"Alright, alright partner," he said holding his hands up in a stop gesture. Jake could have sworn he saw a glimmer of fear in the man's face, which was reassuring — at least Ursa didn't have all the cards now.

"Let's have a seat right here and I'll tell you what I know, or what I think I know." The two men sat near the silent river and the saplings buzzed all around, always mindful of Ursa's proximity to them. Jake despised this man.

"First, you said you feel something slipping away, right? Well, I don't know for sure in your case, but I'd bet that it's your body."

Jake's anger rose. He was being toyed with again. "My body's right here. It's fine."

"This isn't your real body, Realm. I don't know what it is, but our real bodies aren't here. I've been back to my body twice since I came here, but only for a second both times, and it's lying in a hospital. I don't remember who I was, but as long as I can feel the tether, I know I might make it back for good. You feel yours letting go, huh?" Ursa paused and Jake, not believing what he was hearing, attempted to ask another question.

"Just listen," said Ursa calmly. "I'm not fooling with you. I don't know why I came here and I don't know why you

did either. I do know that this place is not where we're supposed to be. This place is for kids." Jake was horribly confused, but listened without interrupting. "You see all them saplings popping in and out around us?" Jake nodded. "Those are kids dreaming. That's why they come and go so fast. Some stay longer than others, but never too long. I get in and scare some of them from time to time and can see them — they're just kids sleeping. Crazy, huh?"

"The saplings are spirits?" Jake asked, dismayed.

"Call 'em what you want, they do us, but I don't really know what they are. Hell, they're not dead, just asleep so who knows?"

"Why do you give them nightmares?" Jake asked.

"I don't. They have their own nightmares, I just scare 'em a little, but I get all the blame: Ursa the boogeyman," he smiles as if he is proud of this.

"How do you get into their dreams?" Jake asks realizing this might be his only chance.

"You see that river in front of us? That's what brought you here, right? Well jump in and go for a swim. See what you can find. I'll be around when you get back."

Jake rushed to the edge of the river and looked down. It was smooth, with small wrinkles like old glass and silent. He cast no reflection. Jake turned to ask Ursa how to get back, but he was far off in the distance walking with his back turned. *Time is running out.* Jake leapt head first into the river and felt a warm surge through his body as everything went into an inconceivable darkness. He felt like he was spinning end over end at amazing speed through a black hole, when, suddenly, Jake emerged into light.

A burst of energy sent his mind, he no longer had a body, shooting through the infinite colored lights rushing around him. He could see Ursa's shape walking in the distance below—a dark entity on the plain. Jake knew he was with the saplings now. Thousands of images rushed through his mind, but they were in no way overwhelming. He saw children flying through cities, deserts, mountains, and trees; some frightened, some elated. Countless shapes filled his mind's eye and he nearly became lost in the sheer joy of it all, when he regained his focus: he had to find Sam. Kip was too young. *Please let him be here.* The tether was releasing.

Jeremy Beatson

That morning Sam awoke and felt a tremendous weight, like a stone on his chest. He knew his dad was never coming home. He had said goodbye after all, and Sam promised he would never let Kip forget.