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EIGHT OF SWORDS

by Matthew Arnold Stern

CHAPTER ONE.

In the summer of 1986, I was 13 years old, and I hated Virginia.

I don't know why I hated it so much. Perhaps it was because the Space Shuttle blew up the day we moved there. Or perhaps it was the first few months when we stayed in the cheap two-bedroom apartment where the cold would blow in through the doors and windows while Mom and Dad argued in the corner of the room. Or perhaps it was how the kids at school made fun of me because I was a Californian. How they kept using those lines from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and that stupid "Valley Girl" song like, "Oh, my gosh! Like, totally! Like, du-u-de." Even though I was born in San Rafael and never lived in the San Fernando Valley.

We moved there because my Dad said he found a government job, one he told us would change our lives. And that summer, when we moved to the house by the woods, it did.

"Put it over there!" Dad gestured to the wall at the end of the living room.

"It would look better in that corner, don't you think?" Mom pointed to the opposite wall.

The workmen, carrying a new white sofa that was still covered in plastic, moved it to the wall my Mom requested.

“No, move it over there!” Dad still gestured at the wall at the end.

“It would look better against that window.”

Dad crossed his arms. “For someone who complained about the furniture, you’re sure really concerned about where it goes!”

“I’m only concerned about how much it cost! Saul, how are we going to afford this?”

The workmen set down the sofa. They stood up and turned to Mom to seek approval.

“A little to the right. Little more. Per--no, too far! A little left. Just a smidge. Now, a little to the right.”

Dad shook his head.

“A little more. Perfect!”

As the two men who carried in the sofa headed towards the door, another workman walked in clutching an end table.

“Put that to the left of the sofa.” Mom pointed.

“It would look better on the right.”

I left Mom and Dad to argue about the living room and headed upstairs. We had five bedrooms. We needed five because there were three of us: Mom, Dad, and myself. One bedroom was the master bedroom. Another was Dad's office, which doubled as a bedroom whenever he got into a fight with Mom. There was a bedroom for me. I didn't know about the other two. I didn't have any brothers or sisters. There was going to be one when I was about five or six, but he died. My parents never tried again.

My bedroom overlooked the backyard. There was a square patch of grass with wood fences on either side. When we moved there in June, there was grass. Had we moved there a few months earlier, there would have been snow. Beyond the grass at the end of the yard were trees. The trees thickened into a forest. Beyond those trees, I didn't know.

It had only taken me an hour or two to unpack the boxes in my room. I didn't have a lot of stuff. Clothes, mostly. Some books. A trophy from a season of T-ball. Pencils, papers, scissors, little odds and ends stuff. And rope, about six or seven feet of it. Dad bought for me it so I can practice tying knots for Boy Scouts. But, it was still curled up in its unopened plastic bag. By the time I was ready to show my knots to earn my Tenderfoot, we had to move. We moved whenever my Dad had to change jobs, so we moved around a lot.

We didn't have our TV set up yet, so I spent my free time staring out the window. Again, I thought about those trees and the forest and what was beyond it. I decided to find out.

As I went downstairs, my parents had moved to arguing around a coffee table that was set in the middle of the room. The workmen stared at the table as my parents raised their voices and pointed at different parts of the living room floor. Those workmen must have been patient, but I noticed a smirk on one of their faces.

"Mom? Dad?"

The workmen looked up, but not Mom and Dad. They kept focused on the table.

I spoke louder. "Mom, Dad, I'm going out!"

Again, my parents didn't look up. One of the workmen tapped Dad on the shoulder and pointed to me. But Dad was busy arguing for his location of the coffee table.

So, I walked from the living room, to the family room, to the large French doors that opened into the backyard.

The doors opened onto a concrete slab that was our patio. Beyond the patio was the grass, tall enough that my sneakers made noticeable footprints as I walked. Those footprints warned me that I would have to mow that grass, at least as soon as Mom and Dad buy a mower.

Sweat popped on my forehead. It was warm and muggy that day, not one of those horrible days when you just want to sit on the bed with the A/C cranked, but hot enough that I wished I wore my t-shirt and shorts instead of jeans and a polo shirt. It was a relief when I finally reached the trees and their cool shade.

As I ventured further into the forest, it seemed to spread out before me without end, perhaps the way it must have looked to John Smith when he first came here. I then turned behind me to look for my house. It seemed to have vanished behind the trees. I wished that I had thought to remember which way I entered the woods. I hoped Pocahontas would show up and tell me where to go.

I was unsure of where I was, so I just kept going forward into the woods. The trees thinned out after a while and the dirt sloped down into a dry creek bed, a strip of smooth stones lined with larger stones and the occasional boulder. Beyond that, more trees, which seemed to rise up into a hill.

I decided to walk along the creek bed, balancing from one smooth stone to another. Occasionally, I would step up on a boulder and follow along the creek's edge. The creek seemed to go off far into the distance. I imagined myself following this creek all the way to its source. Would it take me to the Potomac? To Chesapeake? To the Mississippi?

“Hmmp! Hmmp!”

The sound stopped me. I listened closely. Some birds chirped in the distance, and I though I heard some rustling in the trees on the hill. I stood quietly and took in the sounds. A teacher told me how peaceful the forest sounded. I began to understand why.

“Hmmp! Hmmp!”

There was the sound again! It certainly didn’t sound peaceful. I tuned my ears to that particular noise.

“Hmmp!”

It was in the trees, on the side I came from. I hopped from rock to rock across the creek bed. When my feet touched flat land, I ran towards the sound.

Even as my feet rushed me forward, my head tried to get me to stop. What was I doing? What if someone was in danger? What if I was putting myself in danger? I couldn’t make myself stop. I ran towards a cluster of smaller trees with thin trunks.

My run slowed to a careful walk as I entered the cluster. I slid the tips of my sneakers into the leaves on the forest floor, trying not to make a sound. I listened for the noise and looked around for its source. I found myself surrounded by dark brown trunks and deep green leaves.

“Hmmp! Hmmp!”

I saw white. Wrapped around a dark tree trunk. I inched closer. It looked like rope, white nylon rope wrapped around the trunk in two places, one at the bottom and the other about a few feet up from that. I moved closer. Something wriggled on the other side of the tree.

I dashed back behind the closest tree, but its thin trunk couldn’t conceal my own thin frame.

“Hmmp!”

Whatever was on the other side of the tree wriggled some more. I realized what it was.