

The Wagon

by Dan Kennard



He felt a violent clunk from behind, then there was a short fall, and he felt wet and couldn't see. He touched his face with his hands and realized by the smell in his nose that it was mud. He had fallen into mud. He shook his head like a dog coming in from the rain in order to get as much shitty mud from his face as possible. He shook the mud from his hands fiercely, and then, with his hands, he carefully dragged away the mud residue from around his eyes with his fingertips and cautiously opened them. A wooden grinding sound slowly moved away from him, but only his subconscious was aware of it; the rest of him was concerned with the absolute darkness that surrounded him.

A strange feeling of déjà vu caused him to say, "Here we are, in the slop again." His voice was rough, like someone had just unclenched his throat. "Goddamn," he snorted.

He stood from the muck and gained his footing. His head swirled, so he grabbed it with both hands. A long sigh oozed from his chest, and he made a mental note-to-self to get his shit together. He staggered a few steps forward and found himself standing on firm ground. He stopped on the firm ground. The mud, it seemed, was like a river, meandering through wherever he was, but limited on its sides, and with only a few wobbly steps, he was out of it and standing in ankle high grass, but his legs were flimsy underneath him. He knelt down and, with his downturned hands, felt the short grass all around him, then, without his permission, his body tipped over from its knees onto its side, and he helplessly fell asleep.

He woke up under a hot sun; a film of sweat glistened on his

forehead; his limbs splayed out around him, like he had fallen back first from the sky. His body felt the heat and could sleep no more, and as his eyes fluttered open, he instinctually wiped the sweat away with the back of his grimy hand. Most of the mud had dried out in the morning sun and fallen off of his clothing, but he was still covered in a fine, brown dust that covered everything about him.

He sat up and looked around. A few feet away was the muddy trail he had crawled out of, about ten feet wide, meandering through the low grass until it disappeared over the horizon in both directions. On both sides of the river was low grass that gradually gained in height the further it was from the trail, until eventually becoming a dense forest of trees in the distance the same way a large stadium surrounds a field. Lying next to him, caked with mud, and unnoticed at first, was a single crutch. He leaned over to grab it and pulled it closer. It was an ordinary crutch.

For several minutes, nothing moved but the wind, and the sun advanced position by a few degrees. His shadow twisted around him just a bit. Time pressed forward in complete insignificance. He looked down at himself, his legs lying out in front of him, his arms holding his weight behind him, his head heavy and loose on his neck, and said, "Goddamn this mess." Then, clarifying, said, "The whole damn thing."

He thought he might need a weapon, so he searched his pockets for some, but there were none; he didn't typically carry weapons. All he found was a lone pack of cigarettes, nearly full, and a tiny lighter. He was almost surprised to find the pack of cigarettes. Even though he knew he smoked, they were a nice thing to remember he had. He pulled out one of his cigarettes and lit it.

Letting the cigarette dangle from his lips, he leaned forward to tie his shoes, but the laces and surrounding shoe parts were caked in dry mud. He chipped the mud away with his fingers as he pulled the laces tight around his feet. A loop and a tug later, he felt more secure than he had in hours. With shoes tight, he got to his feet. He always felt more capable when his shoes were tied firmly on his feet. Standing now and holding his cigarette tight between his lips, he slapped at his clothing, sending clouds of brown dust into the air until his arms were tired. He tossed the cigarette to the ground and stomped it with his shoe, then he thought about what to do next.

That was three days ago.

Three days later, he would find himself standing in nearly the same spot as he started, except now he was more frustrated and confused

than when he had first woken up in the mud. “Goddamn,” he snorted to himself. He pulled out his pack and checked inside. Just under half-empty. Nine left, he thought. Standing there in the same place he had started, deciding how to ration his cigarettes, he felt as if there was nothing else to think about. He wanted to think, desperately, but every effort to have a new thought was like lighting matches in the wind or the sound a car makes when its battery is nearly dead. He had tried to walk away from the spot, but at the end of the day, he always found himself back where he started.

Some time later, he became tired and took a nap in the low grass, which now felt as personal and comfortable to him as his bed used to. The low, green blades of grass were smashed down in all different directions under his weight, creating a green grassy body-print. Waking up later, he stood on his feet again, refreshed, ready to make moves, but first he decided to have a cigarette. He pulled out only the second one in over six hours and was proud, so far, that he hadn’t smoked more, which meant he would have more for later. The nap had put him ahead, but that short moment of happiness as he stood there, looking around, smoking the first few drags of only his second cigarette that day, disappeared with the smoke as his attention was drawn to a rustling in the grass.

In the distance, not quite so far as the trees, but well away, another human figure was moving clumsily through the waist-high grass, not toward him or away from him, but rather parallel to him so that as the figure moved, it never became more or less distanced from him. He watched the figure stumble, and he noticed it was a rhythmic stumbling, a patterned movement, consistent in its clumsiness. For a moment, he thought that maybe it was some sort of strange new animal, but other than the organized chaos that was its movement, it looked human. He decided to shout at it, to see if it knew anything.

Holding his cigarette between his fingers, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Hello!”

The figure froze and stood alert for a moment, then toppled over gently into the grass, like a table with three legs might. Then a voice drifted back cautiously. “Hello?”

“Yes, yes, over here!” he shouted, waving his hands above his head.

The figure righted itself somehow, and before it could topple over again, immediately began stumbling toward him with grim determination, like a zombie trudging its way through the grass, and suddenly he wasn’t so sure he should have shouted at all. He hadn’t seen another living creature

since he woke up, yet he felt compelled to shout to this figure, whatever it may be. He backed up a few steps as he watched it approach, and a pang of fear shuddered downward from the back of his neck into his stomach.

He stood resolute, though, and if this creature meant death, then so be it. He was doing his best to project a calm outer fearlessness as it approached him, striking the casual tough-guy pose he had learned from watching movies. Standing there, his cigarette hanging from his lips and one hand pushed half into a pocket, he watched the figure alternate between walking upright and nearly toppling over, but as the figure approached and the grass became shorter, he could see more and more of what was coming at him, and he realized what it was. It was a man, but it was hard to say whether he was tall or short, or even how old he was. One of his legs was much longer than the other, which, as he came closer, he realized was what accounted for his stumbling around.

Then the man, from a mere twenty feet away, pointed at the space behind him and shouted, “My crutch!”

“Jesus!” he shouted back. “Your damn legs are as out of whack as my shoelaces.”

“Do you mind giving me my crutch?” said the man, sounding frustrated.

He handed it to the man and watched as he awkwardly shoved the crutch under his armpit and tried to right himself. He looked the man over as he struggled. An odd fellow, to say the least, disproportionate and dirty. The man was struggling to maintain his balance long enough to get the crutch under his armpit.

“I must be putting on a hell of a show,” said the man as he tried to prop himself up with one arm and leverage the crutch under his armpit with the other, like some kind of complicated, one-armed pushup. “Mind helping me?” he gurgled as the strength in his arms finally gave out, and the man collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily into the dirt.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, tossing his cigarette to the ground.

“Can you stand me up?” asked the man. Standing over him, he grabbed under the man’s arm and lifted him to his foot. “Forgot the crutch,” said the man, gesturing at the crutch still lying on the ground.

“Think you can hop while I bend down and get it?” he asked.

“I think so,” said the man. Standing close to him now, he noticed the man smelled like grass.

“Steady now, I’m gonna let go real quick,” he said. He released his grip; then, bending down, he quickly picked up the crutch just as the man began to topple into him. “I gotcha,” he said, catching the man and holding him upright again. “You’re like putting up a Christmas tree,” he said, smiling at him. Holding him up with one hand, he gave him the crutch, and the man stuck it under his arm and then stood, balanced nicely.

“I haven’t had that crutch for over a day,” said the man.

“You know, for a moment, I was scared of you. You’re a helluva sight to watch get around. Say, do you know where we are?” he asked.

“Been trying to figure that out for three days,” said the man.

“Goddamn,” he said back. “Me, too. Surprised we just found each other now.”

He offered the man a cigarette, and they stood together smoking silently. He stood with his right hand on his hip, smoking with his left, his hair still smeared with mud, the few wrinkles on his face faint brown lines highlighting all of his features. He squinted as he looked around and looked at the man with the crutch. Occasionally he took his hand from his hip and brushed it through his brown hair, using his hand like a comb. The back of his head ached from behind his ears down through the back of his neck, a steady, determined ache. He bent over and sighed. The man held his balance next to him.

“You all right over there?” the man asked.

“My head is killing me,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand. “This damn sun isn’t helping either—fuckin’ hot out.”

“Damn hot. Hey, thanks for the cigarette,” said the man with the crutch, steadying his balance and smoking.

“Sure,” he said, standing upright again. “How long did you say you’ve been here?”

“This is my sixth day. Woke up face down in the mud. Next day, I lost my crutch. Thank God you showed up,” said the man, exhaling a burst of smoke from his mouth that swept up over his face and dissolved into the blue sky.

“Have you seen anyone else?” he asked.

“No,” said the man, shaking his head.

“I wonder where we are,” he said, scanning the area again, although he didn’t really expect an answer. “Have you eaten?” he asked.

“No,” said the man, hopping to balance himself, his short leg dangling between his crutch and his longer leg, like a child between parents.

Together they looked at the distant green wall of trees that circled them. “Suppose anything is out there?” he asked, gesturing at the trees lining the horizon.

“I’ve been trying to get out to them trees since I woke up in the mud,” said the man. “They just keep retreating. I think we might have more luck sticking to this trail if we want to get out of here. Should we walk a little?”

“I’ve been walking two days and everything is exactly the same,” he said.

“At least you’ve got two legs to walk with. I got this damn crutch all jammed up in my arm,” said the man. “I also don’t know how I lost half of this leg or who gave me this crutch. Last I remember I was tip-top.”

“You mean you woke up in the mud, missing half a leg, and can’t account for it?” he asked. He was stunned and a little scared for himself the more he thought about it.

“Unless I’m forgetting a major event in the last five days, no, I can’t,” said the man.

The sun was sliding down the sky and turning everything the color of melted sherbet. They had been walking the trail together in silence for several hours before they finally stopped. He had managed to convince the man with the crutch to keep going several times, despite complaining about a pain in his crutch arm. Finally the man with the crutch stopped and refused another step.

“I won’t take another useless step,” said the man. “I’m exhausted and nothing’s different.”

He relented and said, “You’re right. Let’s stop,” and offered the man a cigarette again. They sat on the ground and smoked. The sun finally

slipped out of sight behind the wall of green trees while the two men watched.

It was a bright moon that night, and it illuminated the field so that when standing, you could see all the way to the dark wall of trees that surrounded them, a distant black wall under fluorescent moonlight. The air was warm, and neither of them knew how to make a fire, and neither tried, so they sat there. The man with the crutch asked for a cigarette, and so they each had one more. Sitting there, they watched the smoke of their cigarettes drift up into the night sky just long enough to see it disperse a few feet above them, swirling first and then going invisible into space. The man with the crutch fell asleep soon after.

Lying there that night, looking up at the stars and concentrating on the moon, feeling like it was closer at that moment than ever before, his focus was suddenly distracted by a distant wooden grinding that rumbled faintly through the air. He felt the sound before he heard it. A small vibration in the ground, nearly imperceptible. He sat up rigidly and focused his hearing on the distance. The man was fast asleep beside him, his silver crutch lying next to his short leg, his breath quiet, nearly nonexistent. Moving quietly to a kneeling position, he raised himself above the grass and looked both directions down the mud trail.

An orange light was bouncing in the distance, growing imperceptibly larger each moment that it moved closer. He scrambled to his feet to get a better look, squinting into the darkness, standing now alongside the trail. The man with the crutch continued to sleep, oblivious to the other man's rising excitement at the sight of the distant light, his scrambling feet in the grass, and the wooden grinding sound that was slowly gaining volume and clarity.

He decided to try and wake the man up. "Wake up!" he shouted at the man sleeping. When he didn't move, he bent down to shake the man awake, shaking him and shouting in his face, "Wake up, you fool! This is it!"

The sound grew louder, and the orange light bounced closer, until he finally saw what it was. A wagon being pulled in absolute silence by a team of mules being guided by a grisly looking man in dark blue coveralls, the orange lantern bolted down to the wooden bench upon which he sat. Standing along the trail, he heard the wooden wheels of the wagon grinding with the wooden axle, the whole thing being made of wood, while the wheels themselves squished through the mud in a slow, consistent turn until the wagon itself was passing before him in all its glory, and he could finally see it clearly. Then it came to a stop in front of him.

The man in the coveralls pulled back on the reins, and the mules stopped mechanically. No turning of their heads, no snorting of their noses, and even the mud went silent under their feet. For a moment, he wasn't sure they were live animals. The man in the coveralls looked down at him and said, "I'll be goddamned. Didn't think I'd see you again. Or him," he added, acknowledging the man sleeping.

"Again? Where are we?"

"You're in the middle of nowhere. You're dead center."

"How do I get out of here?" he asked.

"Ya gotta get on the wagon, and stay on."

"What about him?" he asked, looking back at his companion still fast asleep, clutching his crutch.

"Him? I passed him a few nights ago. It takes a few days to make a trip you know. He was sleeping then, too. He'll wake up there again tomorrow," said the man casually.

"Can't we take him with us?" he asked.

"Afraid not," said the man, gripping the reins. "The wagon is only for people who want to ride it." He snapped the reins, and the wagon started moving again. "He'll have to catch the next one," he said, "if he makes it that long. You only get so many chances."