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She buried him under the black willow tree – the one with the gnarled limb. It had wrapped itself around a neighboring birch when it was younger and grown that way; holding tightly to its soul mate, its captive. The birch had passed away last winter, leaving the willow in a twisted but hollow embrace; indelible proof of something it had lost.

Lucy felt sorry for the willow. In truth, the birch had never seemed worthy of its undying affection, choosing to lean away from its possessor, seeking other company, its own space. But the willow had hung on, strong in her conviction, as Lucy had always been, and she harbored a kinship to the lonely tree who lingered here with her. Two solitary souls in a world made up of others.

Her fingers had started to resemble those gnarled and twisted limbs sometime after she had moved here. But that was many years ago now, and as the time had passed, she had learned to accept the changes in her aging body, as she'd accepted everything else she'd lived through. Life was a rite of passage; nothing more, nothing less.

“God,” she said aloud, matter-of-factly, “please accept my Bo into his just reward. I suppose you know he deserves it.” She knelt stiffly, gingerly, placing a hand on the freshly turned soil. “All right, you bastard. Be seein’ you – most likely in the next few years or so, depending.”

The dirt was cool beneath her palm. She pictured him lying peacefully under it; asleep, just as she'd found him. With an effort, and favoring her bad knee, she got to her feet again, wiping her face with the back of her hand. “That’s it, then,” she said. “That’s all there ever will be to any of us one day; just dust and bones and teeth.” She spat. “The worms can have the rest.”

She turned, heading back home, back to the cabin. It felt wrong

to be doing so alone. Something was missing – a presence beside her – and now it always would be. A familiarity, a comfort, a companionable soul now flown to the sky. She would be lonely here without him, watching the seasons change, the days glide past. Winter would come and the snow would cover the cabin in the woods, cover his grave like a cold, white blanket. But he would feel no chill.

Then spring would come and melt the snow and the whole thing would start all over again, as it always had, as it always would. Not caring about the old things left behind, the ones who passed so gently into their never-ending sleep. But there had to be rebirth. She would plant something there in the spring. Something that would flourish and thrive and flower by the summer. It would drop its petals all around him, its roots reaching down to encircle him, to hold him like she never would again.

There was the pain, the little stab that always came with bitter thoughts, lonely tears. She had thought – had hoped – long ago when she was young, that grief, like youth, would fade away with time. She wanted to believe that with each great loss, every aching sorrow, the callous on her heart would harden until one day the next new wave of pain would slip right off her back and leave her standing, safe and sound. Alas, the human heart is not that stalwart.

Leafy shadows played beneath her feet. The dappled light of afternoon forgave them their wanton ways, pretending not to notice the old woman, barefoot and irreverent, who chose to live among them.

Better get dinner started, she thought. They'd have the beef stew tonight. Bo would like that – she stopped mid-stride, forcing the pain back down again. She'd get used to it. She always did. It just took time, time and time again, day after day until she shriveled up and died.

“Don't cry, Lucy.” It was her grandmother's voice in her head again. “He'll always be with us.” Lucy had looked into the coffin, the *death box* she'd called it, not knowing at the time what it was really

called. Her grandfather lay inside it, dead and silent, cold and still. She remembered thinking he would never move again. They would put him in the ground, leave him there and walk away. Back to their lives. Back to the living. But Gee-pa would stay here, forever and ever.

“No, that isn’t so!” Her own grown-up little girl voice this time, telling herself she was mistaken. “Gee-pa isn’t here, Lucy. Don’t you remember what he told you? About Heaven and God and what happens when you die?”

“Yes,” Lucy answered herself, but only in her thoughts. Gran-gran didn’t like it when she thought out loud. “Gee-pa’s up in Heaven now, with God and all the angels. He isn’t sad, he isn’t lonely and he doesn’t have to hurt anymore. He can be a little boy again and nobody can tell him what to do.” That’s when she’d started crying. Not because she missed him, not because, like Gran-gran assumed, she’d thought of how she’d never see him again, never hear him tell her stories while she sat on his knee. No, it wasn’t for any of those things. The tears she cried were selfish ones, true, but for other selfish reasons.

“It isn’t fair,” she thought. “Gee-pa’s having fun right now and I have to stay here and behave!”

She laughed out loud now at the thought of her childish self, so properly put together on the outside, in pleated skirt and braided hair, while inside dwelt a maelstrom of unholy thoughts no one else would ever hear.

She’d lived the rest of her life up to this point feeling much as she had at that moment, never fearing death, prepared to welcome it as a solace at the end of a hard day, a hard life. It would come when it pleased. She’d given up rushing it years ago and learned to be content – the one still left behind.

Now Bo had left her, too. Her final comrade, she was sure. Alone, surrounded by the trees, the birds, all Nature. It was everything she’d ever wanted. He’d been a surprise in the first place, showing up in

her life well past the age of yearning, so unannounced, so unexpected. He'd melted her heart in his own way, though she'd tried hard not to let him know. But he'd had a way about him, a sense of knowing when she needed him. He would simply sit and listen, taking all the words, and thoughts, and what he knew to be her lies, and never judging. And though she never told him, he knew how she appreciated it – his understanding silence.

He'd known when to leave her be, too. Sometimes he would go off on his own and it would be days before she'd see him again. They had grown accustomed to their habits, their individual patterns of free will and the acceptance of it.

She entered the cabin slowly, half expecting to see him sitting in his usual spot beside the window. Of course, he wasn't there, but her mind would see him in that place every so often for a while, she was certain of that. He had lived and died there. She'd found him in his chair that morning, as she had most every morning since he'd taken up with her. He was never one to tarry in bed, preferring to rise early, then nap when the mood struck him. He'd move silently from the bed to the chair, never waking her as he went, but leaving his warmth behind to keep her company. When she would finally arise, they'd have breakfast together, listening to the wind and soaking up the quiet, peace-filled days.

They'd been so alike, so perfect for one another. She would miss him, she thought, as she sank into his chair. She could see his grave from the window. She would sit here every morning, she decided, just as he used to do. And every morning she might wonder if she hadn't slept so late, maybe she would have been able to wake him, at least to say goodbye. But she had lingered in bed today, not knowing that in the other room he was slipping far away from her. No warning. No reprieve. No second chance.

Fresh tears welled up and she cursed them – cursed herself for her weakness. "It's just 'cause he's the last of them," she told herself. She would learn to forget the pain, as she'd done with all the others.

Soon it would be her turn to go, and she would welcome it when it came. Although she didn't want to spend her final years watching, waiting, expectantly anticipating her own foreseen demise. But she'd be ready. She'd be prepared to go. Slip off weightlessly into the air. Then she'd join them all somewhere, if she felt like it. And he'd be there to meet her whenever she was ready, just like always. But in the meantime, she *would* miss him, her Bo.

Best damn cat she'd ever had.