

The Passage of Falling Dust

By Danny Cove

The sun was low as I set out for home, a fairly short journey, but long for anyone who was lost. I'd traveled this path before, but there was something strange about it this time, as if the wooded shade through which I was to pass had grown more cavernous, with branches twisting like broken limbs over the road, trying to hold back the power of the sun, which would soon it would be gone, leaving the trees to block nothing. With a cold breath, I crossed the threshold of fields and ventured into the gloom.

I'd scarcely walked more than a few feet when I heard the first sound. It was a scraping, like nails on a board warning me away. But my home lay just beyond this place, and so I had to keep moving; all that lay behind was harvested fields, but ahead was the warmth of a fire and a shelter to hold back the dark. I ignored the scratching and kept my feet moving through the dust.

Peering through places where the branches were weakest, I saw the last rays of the sun growing more distant. In a matter of seconds, these disappeared, leaving a cold absence in their wake. Soon a new light began to appear, the pale of the moon, a false sun illuminating the nocturne of the woods. But there was nothing to show: there was no sound in those woods, neither the light foot of a creature on the ground nor the hooting of an owl in the trees. The only sound was the gentle caress of the wind in the trees, shaking branches in a delicate skittering sound which reminded me of insects crawling in swarms. My skin crawled and I picked up my pace.

In the pale glow, I saw that there were fruits growing, small berries that a closer inspection revealed to be cherries. My head shook for a moment, trying to understand why it was I'd never noticed wild cherry trees on this path. There were a great many back the way I'd come,

but those were tamed in an orchard, carefully controlled so that not a single drop from the cherries was lost. But these were fat and red, gleaming like great drops of crimson and lining both sides of the road. The shadows beneath these trees stretched ever longer, despite the unnaturally rapid rising of the moon, and so I ignored the fruits and decided that I would return the next day and have my fill. For now, however, the road home was calling me.

My feet disappeared as I hit the ground with a dull thud. Dust kicked up off the road and I rolled over to see a root that had caught both of my feet. I frowned, never having noticed such a root there before. I shrugged and returned to my feet, dusted off my clothes and kept walking. But soon another root sprang up; luckily, I'd seen this one in advance, and so I moved around it. But after a dozen feet, I began to think to myself that the road had been clear on my earlier travels. I turned back and saw that my memory was correct: there were no roots, only the dusty passage winding below tree limbs that spanned like the arches of a cathedral. The ceiling of bark and limbs stretched far, over my head like a patchwork quilt of living plants. The wind, somehow penetrating this dreaded sea of trees, cut through my coat and I tensed, then turned and picked up speed, faster and faster along the road.

I heard a creak behind and turned to see a new root where I had just stepped. I went back and examined it up close, the moonlight falling directly on it like a spotlight. Dirt seemed to float in the air like an unsettled cloud. Standing to my feet, I reasoned that the cloud of dust had been kicked up by my own feet. There was another crack behind me and I spun around to see now two roots in the road. The rest of the road lay in shadow. More creaking sounds emanated from around and moonlight began to flood onto the road, as if the arch of trees had begun to clear. As the shadows shrank back, they revealed more roots, dozens of them littering the road, sitting among clouds of kicked up dust in places my boots had never touched. More cracks above and

beyond, and I turned to see a cemetery of roots now lay in my way, spanning the road like serpents breaking the surface of the sea.

I started to jog now, picking up speed as I leapt and jumped, looking for any spot of road which still remained as dead dirt. A snapping sound echoed behind me and I paused just long enough to see the archway closing again, as if the limbs which had cleared were again closing and cutting off the light. It was a deep, thunderous sound, followed by light skittering, the sound of trees moving in the wind, only there was no longer any wind. A series of thuds echoed along the sides of the road and I saw the cherries, now deep red and fat as apples, dropping from their perches and breaking in the dust. I ran past these but tripped on a root and tumbled into the grass beside the dirt. In what little light remained, I could see not only the broken cherries but small patches of strawberries, also red and fat, their juice bleeding into the ground where they mixed with the juice from the fallen cherries. I picked myself up and ran, leaping among the tombstones of wood, but I was jerked to a stop as something caught my jacket. There was a crack and I was freed, only to be stopped again, the branches from the trees now reaching down for me like clawed and broken hands, catching on my jacket, my pants, my arms, my face. I pushed them away and stumbled among the roots below and saw a light ahead, waiting at the end of the tunnel of trees. But the trees themselves were swaying now, their trunks moving closer and closer to the road. I had to move, to run, to sprint toward that light, the home at the end of the road, beyond the grasp of the trees and roots and juice which flowed like blood in the dirt.

I reached the light, the house in the woods, and I threw open the door, then braced myself behind it as a massive *whump* slammed against it. Then all went silent. There was no wind outside, no rustling of trees. A quick look out the window showed only the same path I had always followed, a dirt road clear of roots beneath an arch of branches overhead. Quietly, I

walked toward the center room and saw a fire in the fireplace. An old man stood stoking it, the fire shining in his eyes. My father looked at me and, with a quiet voice, told me “now it begins.”