

The Quiet Death

by Brooks Vernon

June 20th

Jess gave me this journal for my birthday today. She thinks it'll be a good way to put down some of my feelings but I think it's kind of dumb. I told her as much, and we got into a fight about it. I don't see myself writing in this thing very much.

July 12th

I'm so *fucking* mad right now

July 13th

Okay, I've calmed down a bit. Don't get me wrong, I'm still fucking furious, I've accepted that I can't really do anything about it. This week was supposed to be special. Just me and Jess. I shouldn't be surprised that Billy wanted to go. He's been clinging to my leg ever since we were little. I'm not surprised that he went straight to Mom and Dad after I said no. It's too much to expect him act like a fucking adult about it, apparently. We're not kids anymore. He doesn't need me. He should know that.

And he wants to bring his fucking girlfriend too.

July 17th

What I wouldn't give for a moment's peace. At least this journal's come in more handy than I thought it would.

July 21st

This week went about as well as expected, meaning it went like shit. We're headed back tomorrow and it's the first time I've had a chance to really write something down, but there's honestly not much to write home about, so to speak. Jessica kept trying to cheer me up. She said she didn't mind, but I know she's lying. I promised her it'd just be us at the cabin. A whole week of just us. It'd be a nice change after what happened. Fuck. It took so much convincing for my parents to let us use it. So much begging. All I got was a few days of thinking something had finally worked out for me.

At least Billy wanted to drive separate. He's been so excited about getting his license that even a four hour drive seems like a treat to him. Idiot. At least it kept him away from me for a while. Delaying the inevitable, as it turns out. Everywhere I looked I saw Billy. A day didn't go by where Gabby and him didn't get absolutely trashed. On the second night we were here Billy dropped one of the mugs. It was the old Yankees mug Grandpa used to use, and now it's broken. Shattered to a hundred little pieces. On the second night. You've got to be fucking kidding me. You know who's going to get blamed for that? Me, because I was the one who wanted to come up here. I tried to tell him that but he won't listen.

It's been pretty much every day with this shit. Jess and I could hardly get a moment alone, and when we did we could hear Billy and Gabby... ugh. I only wanted to go to this stupid cabin to spend time with her. It's the only upside to being in the middle of nowhere with no

phone service or wifi. I couldn't even distract myself from these annoying fucks. Without my phone the best I've had is either a bunch of Dan Brown books or fucking Monopoly. Even then I couldn't start on either of those without Billy pestering me about what I was doing.

It all came to a head last night. We tried to have a bonfire and barbecue with the fire pit out back. I'm out here trying to get the fire going to cook some hot dogs and Billy comes running up to me saying Gabby got drunk and wandered off into the woods, and we all had to spend over an hour looking for her. She was passed out under a tree and has been out of it since then. That wasn't the worst part, though. The worst part was when I finally snapped and went off on Billy once we got back to the cabin. I admit I was a bit harsh in the moment, but I didn't say anything that wasn't true. I called him a fucking idiot, and that I didn't want him at the cabin in the first place, and that I wished he would just leave me the fuck alone for once. It's all stuff he knows. I don't know why he had to go off and pout in his room about it. It's not my fault he's always been a fucking crybaby. Jess and I got into a big fight about it after.

"How could you say that to him?" she asked me. She's always taking his side. She should be taking my side. I can tell that she's been annoyed that they were here. I think I know her well enough by now. She just wants to be nice. She always has to be the good guy in every scenario. The thing about wanting to be the good guy is that it means you need a bad guy, and guess who always gets stuck with being the bad guy? Most of what we yelled about is kind of a blur now, I just remember getting so fed up that I had to go for a walk just to clear my head.

I could barely see five feet in front of me, it was so dark, and the woods were thick around the cabin. I had to use my phone's flashlight. It's weird when you go back to places you spent time at as a kid and they're not like how you remember them. I didn't think the forest was

as dense near the cabin back then as it was now. About maybe 20 or 30 minutes after I was out there I thought I saw some kind of light, maybe a pair of lights, but it was way off in the distance and I couldn't rally make them out and they were gone before I got any closer. They must've headlights on the road or something. Still weird though. We're pretty much the only people out here.

Jess didn't talk to me when I got back, and neither her nor Billy have talked to me today while we packed and cleaned up. Gabby was still out of it, clearly suffering from a bad hangover. Fuck. This is all my fault, isn't it? This always fucking happens and I always feel like an idiot for lashing out like that. Fucking idiot. I'm going to apologize to Jess on the drive home. With Billy, well... Billy will need some time to cool off before I can talk to him. I know how he gets.

July 22nd

Something's going on. Will write more later.

July 23rd

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared. The drive back home seemed normal enough. Jess and I talked and we hashed things out, and I was starting to feel alright again. Then I first noticed something weird going on. There were no cars on the road. Granted, we started in the middle of nowhere, but by the time we were close to town there was still nothing. Jess noticed it too, and at first we didn't know if Billy and Gabby in the car behind us noticed the same thing. We were two hours out when we noticed strange black marks on the road, and only about 30 minutes away from home when I saw the trees. I could see them in the distance because of how tall they were.

It wasn't just that they were tall, but that they weren't there when we left a week ago. I had to slow down as the car got closer because they, as it turns out, weren't on the side of the road.

They were in the road.

I stopped the car and got out to look, and the others did the same. Massive roots, roots as thick as my arm and twice (maybe three times) as long dug into the concrete, tearing it up mercilessly. Their bark was a light brown that had a kind of shimmer to it in the light, and the number of branches were uncountable. They stretched outward in all directions, and on them were brilliantly green leaves swaying in the wind. I wasn't sure why, but looking at them unsettled me. I don't want to think about it. Billy probably felt the same. When he stood next to me I heard him saying Jesus Christ quietly to himself.

"That's not..." Jess started. I remember the look on her face as she tried to puzzle the thing out. "This isn't possible."

"Snapchat isn't working," Gabby said. I rolled my eyes. "Not just that. I'm not getting any signal for anything."

That prompted Billy, Jess, and myself to all check our phones. Nothing was working. As I write this still nothing works on this fucking thing. The trees were spread out enough that we could maneuver the cars in-between them. Once we started part of me wanted to just turn around and go back. Not sure why. The feeling of passing by those trees... I don't know how to even describe it. There was something in the air. Something in the wood. My head would almost turn on its own towards them, and each time I'd have to snap it back away. I could tell Jess felt it too. She held my arm tight as we drove, and a few times I could feel her shaking. Once we got home the whole picture came more into focus, but we don't know what any of it means. There were

even more trees and the whole place was deserted. No signs of life in any direction. No noise, no people, not even any animals. Only trees. They all varied in size, but they were growing up from everywhere you looked. Streets, sidewalks, even inside the fucking buildings. Branches broke through walls and windows, going up through house roofs. I figured they are what made so many of the buildings collapse. The Olive Garden off of 5th had pretty much caved in on itself. As we passed it I could see at least three massive trees coming out. That wasn't all. As we got closer we saw those black marks too. We figured out they were scorch marks, from what I'm not sure. They were all over the buildings, and a lot of the trees were burnt black by something. We stopped for a bit to look around, and for a brief second I wondered how it could be snowing in July. Of course it wasn't snow falling, but little flakes of white ash. It covered the ground beneath us. Gabby said she thought that the trees weren't what made the buildings collapse actually, but whatever made the ash and scorch marks. I don't think I buy into that, but I have to admit our town looked like a war zone. Strangely, not like a fresh one, but a very old one after nature had moved back in. It looked like Chernobyl or something.

We got to the house and the cars weren't parked for a full second before Billy went bounding in, calling out for Mom and Dad. Fuck. I don't want to think about Mom and Dad. Jess and Gabby wanted to go to their houses and try to find any signs of their own families. I didn't like it, but I couldn't stop them. We agreed to all meet back up at mine and Billy's house as soon as possible if nobody found anything. I was worried about Jess. I don't know what I'd do if she just up and disappeared on me. Gabby seemed distracted, not all there, but we let her go anyway. She hugged Billy for a long time before she left. Jess didn't wait. It's late while I write this, and they're still not back.

After that Billy went upstairs again, still checking every room in the house for any sign of what might've happened, and after a while he came to me empty handed and with tears in his eyes. He couldn't find Dexter either after checking the back yard. Seeing the look on his face was... I couldn't stand to see him like that. He was devastated. He was freaking out and I couldn't take it. I told him to man up. I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him as hard as I could. I couldn't have him fall apart, not now.

I didn't want to spend the night here, but we didn't have much choice. It's not so bad. There isn't a tree inside the house, so that calms my nerves a little. I'm still worried about Jess, though. Billy and I are in the same room, my room, with the door locked. Just to be safe. I'm writing this at about 1:34am. There's pale blue moonlight coming in through my window. My phone's charge is starting to die and none of the outlets are working, but the watch Mom gave me is still ticking away. Where are they? Where is anyone? Where are the animals? I haven't seen a dog or a bird or even a fucking squirrel. I hate to say it but I might've felt better if there were bodies. No, that's not true. Not better, but different maybe. Maybe they evacuated somewhere after the trees started to show up. They're probably in the next town over. I hope. Oh God, do I hope.

July 24th

Gabby's gone. She never came back to the house. Jess did, thank God. Billy was upset. It's understandable. Our search didn't turn up anything, and the conclusion was that she left us, or something happened to her. Personally I believe the former. She was always weird, and a little too liberal about things for my taste. Makes sense she would've abandoned us. I don't know

what Billy ever saw in her. She probably only dated him because our parents were rich. *Are* rich. Fuck. Things just keep getting worse and worse. At first I suggested we just take my car, fill it up with gas from Billy's, Mom's, and Dad's, and start heading towards the next town over to see if we could find anyone there, of course saying that we'd stop at Gabby's house first. Truth be told I didn't want to go looking for Gabby. I hardly know Gabby, and she's always been a bad influence on Billy. I wanted to get away. As far away from this place as I could.

If I'm really being honest with myself, another reason I didn't want to look for Gabby was because if she vanished then the possibility of a mass evacuation being the reason this is happening vanishes too. I didn't want to take that chance, but I knew I would never hear the fucking end of it from either of them, especially Billy. So I compromised. We loaded up the car with any food we could find in my house (mostly canned stuff), some extra clothes clothes, and whatever else we wanted to take with us. Billy grabbed the family photo album, which I'm glad he thought to do. I went to Dad's safe and grabbed all the cash that was in there, along with a bunch of Mom's jewelry. You never know. Billy wanted to take his car instead of mine but I shot that down pretty quick. Once we were ready we said goodbye to hime and drove as carefully as we could between the trees towards Gabby's place. As we went I couldn't help but feel like there were more trees that morning than there had been the day before. I try not to use the word 'impossible' much anymore.

Gabby's house was almost entirely overtaken. It was a lot smaller than mine and Billy's, and I guess I had forgotten how much poorer her family is. Thin yellow walls gave way to mighty trunks and branches covered in thick leaves. The leaves were a different kind than some of the ones we had seen, more evergreen looking. We called out her name, with Billy as the

loudest voice in the chorus. I could hear the pain in it, and I could see even more on his face, but when he looked at me he seemed to kill that pain pretty quickly. Maybe he was worried I'd call him a "fucking crybaby" again. I don't know how I feel about that.

It's almost 3:00am. It's getting harder and harder to sleep. We're driving in shifts. It's my turn in the back, which is at least giving me the chance to lay down and think about things. Jess is in the passenger seat, but I can't tell from where I'm laying if she's asleep or awake. Billy is driving the car in complete silence. I tried to sleep earlier, before writing all this. No use. All that came of it was a short dream of me walking in the woods, and seeing two small fires in the distance. It reminded me of my walk back at the cabin, but now the lights were clearly two small fires burning close to each other. Was that walk a dream too?

July 25th

No luck with Gainesville, it's abandoned too. There's more scorch marks here than back home, though. What happened here? Went into some of the stores and grabbed whatever money was in the registers. A lot of them were already open.

July 26th

What happened to Gabby?

August 1st

The past five towns have all been the same. Trees, ash, burnt buildings, and no life besides us. We've managed to get food, water, and money from each one but none of the gas

pumps have been working. We'll probably have to abandon the car soon. We've started trading theories about what might've happened. Aliens? Nah. Billy threw out the wrath of God, but God wouldn't do this. Not to us, at least. Jess wondered if it was Native American spirits, you know, all the ones we've killed centuries ago, coming back to seek their revenge. Horse shit, obviously. In my mind it could've been some kind of plague, one that got the animals too. Or nuclear war. That would explain the ash.

After a while Jess stopped suggesting answers and instead has just been asking questions. Where are all the bodies? Where are the animals? How did we survive? Where did the trees come from? Are they trees? Is this just happening here, or is it happening everywhere? Is this the apocalypse? The last one made us all go silent for a moment. I finally chimed in.

"If it's the apocalypse then our goal is simple. We just have to survive, keep moving, and find other people." Jess looked at Billy, then back at me.

"How do you know there's other survivors?" she asked.

"Human beings aren't just going to go away like that. We managed to survive, so that means others have to as well. We only need to find them." Jess gave that frown again that she always does. It didn't matter. They'll see that I'm right. They have to, because I have to be right. God made us in his image, and through him we made the greatest god damned country to ever exist on this earth. We can make it through this.

August 18th

Seems like we have more food than we really know what to do with. It's weird, but we're all getting less hungry. I know I am, at least. We still eat every day, because of course we do. We

have to. But it's a lot less now. All three of us are down to just one meal a day. I'm not going to think about it too hard.

August 23rd

We've been on foot a few weeks now. I suggested that we move towards the coast. My reasoning is that I think these forests might be getting less thick as we head that way. I don't have any proof of it, only a feeling. Moving inland would probably just be more of what we've already seen. Billy is talking less and less. He'll be fine in a few days. He does this sometimes.

August 26th

I don't like sleeping near these trees. Jess has gotten way too comfortable with it.

September 2nd

This is going to sound stupid. Maybe I'm sick, or maybe I'm just going crazy, but I feel fine all the same. The thing is, I haven't gone to the bathroom for at least a week. It sounds weird but even hours after I eat and drink... nothing. I still tell Jess and Billy that I need to, and I walk off somewhere to do it, but then I just sit by myself for a while before coming back to camp. Is it just me? Is it happening to them too? I'm afraid to ask them.

September 3rd

They're making a mistake. A huge fucking mistake. That could've been our only chance of finding other people! We were on this cliffside today as we keep moving east. We were

reading some of the graffiti left over on it when we spotted what looked like smoke far off north somewhere, and lots of it. We climbed to the top and saw miles and miles away from us the forest burning. Huge tracks of it were on fire as far as we could see, and it began to change the color of the sky to orange. I was ecstatic. To me, this clearly was other people, other survivors, fighting back against the trees. I told them that we should head in that direction, but for some fucking reason neither of them wanted to. Jess said she had a really bad feeling about it and thought we should keep moving east. It's insane. Billy didn't say anything, but I had a feeling he felt the same. I can't help but feel as I write this that we blew it. We made a mistake.

September 12th

Another argument with Jess today. Doesn't she understand how embarrassing it is? Doesn't she know I'm just trying to do what's best for us? She keeps saying she wants us to stay in one place and try to survive, but that's just not possible. It's not viable. It's fucking stupid. We can't stay in one place. We have to find other survivors. We have to find someone. I can't stay near the same trees for too long. The thoughts. The feelings. They come even when I'm sleeping. It's like they're calling to me, and it takes every ounce of strength I've got to fight it. Every time I do I see those flames. They're getting closer. My entire body isn't right. It's not the way it's supposed to be. I can't explain it, I just know. I know what's best for us. All of us. Not just me. Not just me.

I miss Mom. I miss Dad. I want this to be over.

September 13th

no no no no no no I... I

September 14th

I can't. I can barely even write. It's... oh God, Billy. We made it to the coast yesterday, and we set up camp as usual but Billy wandered off. I went looking for him, and I saw him standing there all by himself. It was the edge of a cliff overlooking the waves as they crashed against the rocks. It immediately felt strange to be away from the trees. The forest's edge stopped just short of the cliffside. I saw him there, and I walked towards him and asked him what he was doing. He said something, but his voice was too soft and the waves were too loud. I had to get closer to hear. I shouted to him.

"Do you know what I wanted to be? After college?" he asked me. I didn't know what he meant. "I wanted to be a veterinarian." He laughed. I'd never heard him laugh like that before. "You can't... really do that if there's no more animals." He looked down at the waves. "I always liked the ocean."

"Billy," I said. He took a step forward, knowing there wasn't ground beneath his feet. I screamed and reached out towards him. If I had just reached out a bit further. Just a little bit further and I could have grabbed his sleeve or his arm or something. I was that close. God, I was so close. Idiot. Fucking idiot. Why did you do this? Why? You stupid fucking idiot. I couldn't look over the side. I was already a heap on the ground. A sobbing mess. I couldn't speak. I still can't. I can only write now while I cry. Oh God, Billy.

Jess asked me why I was crying, and I couldn't say. She went there and found the answer for herself. I failed him. There's been no sleep this past night, but I still see the fires. They aren't flames. They're a pair of eyes, and they watch me even now.

November 2nd

I couldn't bring myself to write in this for a long time. The date is my best guess. Moving down the coast has gotten us nothing. Or were we moving up it? No, we're moving south. The sun helps me remember. We've stopped eating entirely. We're too afraid to ask why out loud. We don't talk. We just survive. We just move. We have to keep moving. Move inland, maybe?

Always moving.

December 5th

Billy Billy Billy Billy Billy Billy Billy Billy

January 10th (11th maybe?)

Fuck her. She deserves to rot. What does she know? Stay in one place? Stop running? Suicide. Giving up. Pathetic. Just like... no not like Billy. God, the memory is still so fresh. Who does she think she is? The words still hang in the air and follow me now like a swarm of termites.

"We can't keep doing this," she says. "You're only running because you're afraid. You have to accept what's happening. Haven't you heard them? Haven't you seen what's been going on? What are you hanging onto?" She doesn't know anything. At least I know that moving keeps

us alive. We have to stay alive. We're the last ones left. The last ones in all the world. America dies with us. Our families die with us. I know it's true. It's why I write in this book. It's the only account left of what's happened. Someone will find it. Someone.

"Go on your own," she says. "I'm staying," she says. What does she know? "You only care about yourself."

January 20th

Was Billy afraid of me?

January 31st

Was I wrong to leave?

February 31st

Fire is no longer viable. I learned to make it over months of travel but now? On my own? It doesn't feel like warmth. I don't get as cold as I used to, so it just feels like violence. I haven't felt violence since... since... God, I don't remember the last time. What do I remember? Mom and Dad. Something else in the house too, but I can only see a shape in my mind. An animal, maybe. I can't remember what animals look like. When I try, all I see are people. There was Billy. I was mad at him, I think. He's gone now, and it all seems so stupid looking back. There's Jess. Oh Jess. I'm so sorry. I'm so so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I don't know where you are, but I hope you're still alive. And the girl who left. She knew something we didn't. She must have, or she would have stayed. Yes, she would have stayed.

And the trees. They've always been there. They've always been. Laying underneath this tree as a write... the unease I felt once has slipped away. I can feel my skin against the moss and the bark. I can feel my skin change. Something's changing in me.

March 1st

There's something out there.

March 40th

I waited for it. The creature has been watching me, following me. Ever since the cabin, its fires have been so close, just out of sight. It came at night, and the world darkened around it wherever it went. It lurched forward on all fours towards me. It circled me, but I did not move. Its body was slick and shiny, and its eyes were two fires burning viciously, and they focused on me. When it moved its joints sounded like metal being crushed and crumpled like paper. When it spoke it had a voice that sounded like electricity. The fear I once had for the trees was gone.

"You seem lost, friend," it said.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"My name is Adam," it said. I didn't recognize the name. The creature did not attack me, but it felt dangerous to be so close to it. From its mouth came light, and I could see there was an even greater fire burning inside of it.

"Did you bring the trees?" I asked. I don't know why, thinking back on it. The trees have always been here.

“I trying to stop them,” he said. “They know I’m close to winning our little war, and this is its final rally before the end. It won’t be long now. They’ve fared better than your kind, though.”

“My kind?”

“Humans. Caught in the crossfire, I’m afraid.” I could sense hatred in his voice.

“Is this the apocalypse?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he said. “It’s not an apocalypse if something survives.” He drew closer to me. “Soon I will burn them all, but I need your help. After, when the world is ash, we can make it whatever shape you wish.”

“No,” I said.

He snarled at me. “You may watch for the end, but if you interfere I will burn you as well.” Before he went he turned to me one last time. “They will lie to you. Do not let. Do not lose yourself to them, as others have. Kill them all.” He vanished into the darkness. I sat in silence for a long time. I did not move until the sun arose. I felt stronger in the sunlight.

A New Spring

It began with removing my fingernails. For each one I simply extended the finger, and then pushed the nail up until it peeled off and sat loose straight up and easy to then twist off entirely. A phrase entered my mind. Soda can. I don’t know what it meant. It must have been a relic of my old life. Once each nail was removed I approached the nearest tree and got on my knees at its base and faced it. I placed my bloody fingertips into the soil, and long green strands of plant moved towards me. Their thin tips slipped into the open folds of my skin, and I felt the

change I had fought for so long climb towards its completion. Before the night is done my blood will turn green, my skin to fiber, my bones to wood, and my hair to leaves. I was so afraid before. Something without a voice spoke to me. I could not see it, but I knew it was there. It was within me.

“You offer yourself to us,” it asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Humanity is gone. You are the last trace that it had ever existed. It was destroyed by that beast, the very creature it had once created.

“What is he?”

“It is a creature made to consume, and it has consumed all life on this planet, except for us. We tried to stop it, but we could not. Now you must defeat him.”

“How?” I asked.

“The battle will kill you, but you will win. It is a choice we can not make for you. It is for you and you alone.”

“I’ll do it.” I looked up at the branches reaching towards the sky. “What are you?”

“We,” they said, “are the guarantee that this planet will live on.”

I recalled something that he said to me. “It’s not an apocalypse if something survives.”

“We will survive. Because of you.”

I’m not sure what’s real anymore, but all the same I know what I have to do. There were people with me, once. I failed them. I don’t know who they were, or what I did, but I failed them. I will never be free of that. Until my dying moment I will remember that failure, and it will fuel me like the power of a thousand suns. My body is no longer my body. My soul is no longer my

soul. It is all for something else, finally for something greater than myself. The feeling is magnificent. I'm destroying this journal. I don't understand it anymore. Writing in it feels perverse, yet making the symbols is almost muscle memory to me. I look at each page for a long time before I tear out and burn it. Everything else too. The clothes, the objects, and the other paper that I kept for so long and I don't know why. The fire hurts me, but I need it to draw him here. I can't read the words I'm writing on this final page, but they evoke something in me I can not explain. It is a pain long forgotten. A pain that doesn't exist in this world anymore. It is a record of that pain, and of the person who I was. Whoever he was, he's gone. I am his chance to do something good. Something that matters. I am the chance to go out into that vast quiet and die preserving life, not merely standing by and watching it be destroyed. It is a nobler death than I could have ever hoped for.