**Exile**

Christopher Hadin

Thunder growled over the lake. I should have gotten off the dock, but I stood there watching the blue water darken to gray and then to a shade of black. There was no one down there which is why I dared to go out on the dock, otherwise someone would see me and maybe call my parents or the police. To them I’ve been missing, but to me, I know exactly where I am.

I could see the rain coming over the hills, but that didn’t make me leave the dock. When I finally did, it was because I was hungry, and I walked away from the lake, through the woods, and crawled into an open window of the cabin where I’m staying. Then I lit a candle, opened a can of beans, and I started to cry. I couldn’t help it. I cried, praying to God to help me. I suppose he’s already helping me because the people who own this place left a lot of canned stuff that I’ve been eating for days. Lots of beans and corned beef hash. Pumpkin pie filling. Some I eat, and some I move to a place where I’m keeping food in case I need it. They have liquor too, but I can’t touch it. It smells like my mom and dad screaming at each other.

Mostly, I eat out of the cans and keep the lights off. I can’t risk having anyone notice that their cottage’s electricity bill has gone up. They’d make a phone call and send some retired busybody over to inspect. Maybe that’s who the man in the blue car is.

One night, last weekend, I saw the car drive up and sit for a long time with the lights shining on the cabin where I was sleeping. I’ve been careful to leave no trace, so I was out the back in an instant and circled around through the woods. I could see someone sitting in it. It was a man, just sitting there, but the dashboard lights were too dim to see anything else. He’s come before, to places where I’ve been staying, and sat in the same old blue car. He never gets out, just smokes away on a cigar. Sometimes I think I smell it before he comes, and I know to be on guard, because it’s not like any cigar I have ever smelled.

If I cross a road, I’ll wait and make sure no one is coming so I’m not seen. A lot of times, when I do see a car coming, it’s that blue one, driving real slow past me, but the windows are always up, and I can’t ever see inside it. One time I thought the windows were tinted, but another time they seemed so full of smoke that nobody could see in or see out—a pale yellow smoke that reminded me of stink bomb and matches, burning all at once.

After a while he left, but I didn’t want to return to the cabin in case he came back. I sat in the woods with my backpack and cans of food all night. It wasn’t raining then like it is now. But right now I’m safe inside, and maybe I’ll have another can of soup.

One time, my mom and dad arrived when I was behind their cabin, looking at their big new addition. My grandfather would have hated what they did––cut down a bunch of trees and built a whole other house behind the little cottage. And they almost saw me. I ran through the woods a ways until threw myself down in the scrubby red oak leaves and cried for every goddamn thing that has happened––everything that has put me here. I cried for every stolen can of food, and for having to wash my pants in the lake. I never go near our cabin now, in case the same thing happens again. Or the blue car shows up.

Sometimes it seems like there are fewer and fewer places I can go, so I guess the Outward Bound trip they sent me on came in handy because we learned how to build shelters. I have a good one. It’s small so when I’m in it for an hour or two it’s warmer than a cabin, unless you build a fire, and I can’t risk that. Only to dry my clothes late at night and away from where I sleep.

I met a girl out here once, and I thought she was an angel. She was older than me and said she came out into these woods to be away from her sisters who always fight. She shared a joint, and we talked. I told her why I was out here, and she told me to go home. She looked sad when I said I couldn't. Then she told me to come back with her to her folks’ place, to eat and wash up, but I couldn’t do that either. This is where I want to be, I told her. Ever since I was a kid, I thought about living in these woods, but couldn’t have imagined how I would end up here.

I don’t know how long I’ll stay. If I keep away from the blue car, I’ll be okay. I figured out how to stay warm. I have more places I can go if I have to.

I got food stored up.