

Woodland Revival by David Bus

Clinging on to the last homages of the Army, Darren Wallis finally departed his single-story rambler located on the outskirts of a small community in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The new homeowners were to assume their residence shortly. He sold it to one of the most chipper Captains he had ever met and was sure the place was in good hands. Adverse to leaving, the house seemed to stand out as one of the few positives during his extended stay in Fort Bragg. Upon his arrival, the place reeked of cigarette smoke and rat poop. It was dirt cheap, so he had to take the risk. The place is now in pristine condition as it stands in a neighborhood full of dilapidated houses. He thought of all the endless nights he spent replumbing the bathrooms and now he pinched himself for leaving. It was time to go.

Arriving at the Charlotte International Airport, he finds himself constrained by the crowds. Airport anxiety is an ass-kicker. Scouring around, he finally locates the Alaska Airlines terminal and immediately situates himself at the bag drop. His beat-up duffel bags came out to a hefty 121 lbs. Bag tags scurried out of the machine labeled FAI, for Fairbanks, Alaska. He expedited his way through TSA Precheck and anxiously awaited boarding for his first leg to Seattle. Most people in search of Alaska end up taking numerous legs thus validating its presence as a faraway land.

Ten hours later, Darren finds himself searching for the bush pilot who'll fly him to his next destination of Deadman Lake. On the outskirts of the Fairbanks Airport, there are a plethora of young Alaskans revitalizing the bush plane industry. He finally settles in and locates his friend of a friend, Aaron Wilson. Aaron is no stranger to those seeking refuge deep in the Alaskan woods. Most of those who come through are white men going through some sort of early mid-life crisis. Aaron loads the floatplane and off they go. Westbound, the mountains strike a serious chord into Darren. The immediate onslaught of beauty puts him into a place of ease. Staggering trees line the cascading waterfalls and raging rivers feed into glassy lakes. Not a soul in sight.

With an abrupt landing on a gravel strip, Darren has finally made it. He bids farewell to Aaron and makes his way to the little outpost fifty feet to the west. Home to Patch Sanders, the Alaskan native has kept in touch with Darren to give him a realistic run-down of his move. Patch also serves as a part-time realtor if you can call it that. Boasting a bushy beard, Patch resembles a less-glorified version of Santa Claus. His reddish suspenders are stretched out to the max while jagged teeth resemble the nearby mountain range. Situating himself in the cozy log cabin, Darren sits down in the cushy recliner, surrounded by bear heads. Patch fixes him up a tall glass of tea with a bit of milk. After a few lengthy sips, Patch and Darren make their way to the tiny cabin at the end of the forest road. Darren is quickly reminded of his early days renovating his Fort Bragg house. He doesn't concern himself with the mounting structural issues or the prominent mold. He is simply relieved.

Lying in bed, Darren whips out an edible brownie that he snuck through TSA. It has been years since he has divulged so he figures one bite is more than plenty. His whole body feels uneasy, and he hopes the THC can relieve that. He ponders how he is supposed to relax in this dump, but the sounds of nature yet again put him at ease. The weed kicks in rather quickly and he knocks out. Awakening hours later, the reality hits Darren hard. He is stuck in the Alaskan wilderness with little supplies. Patch was kind enough to stuff his pantry with a variety of dried fruits, nuts, and frozen vegetables. Dried mangoes quench his stomach rumblings. Before he gets too involved, Darren simply desires a week of pure, uninterrupted relaxation. He takes another bite of the brownie and falls back asleep.

The weed can only garner so much relief before anxiety and depression reels in. Darren slips on his Merrill boots and treks on over to the nearby lookout. A bush path littered with poisonous ivy and overgrown brush, Darren spends most of his time trying to relocate the trail. He emerges and finds himself on a grassy overlook of Deadman Lake. The views astound him as he sits in solace. Stretching for miles, the lake fills the horizon. Every worry seems to be gone and any thought of the Army is dismissed. For the first time in forever, he can think with the utmost clarity. Thoughts begin to spring up as he is

reminded of some childhood dreams he stowed away early on. He wonders what could have been if he didn't commit the prime years of his life devoted to a country that could care less about his wellbeing. He figured he would come out of this mess better but somehow, he is bruised, mentally scarred, and repressively angered.

Weeks go on and Darren finds a rhythm to his Alaskan living. He begins tackling an assortment of projects and starts stocking the house for winter. In the process, he meets some of the friendliest locals who in return usually offer some food as a welcome gift. Busyness has kept him going and the outlook is a relatively positive. His transition is going smoother than originally thought and his mind rarely lingers like it once did. The days off are few to none as his work ethic pushes him forward.

With winter at the doorstep, Darren needs to wrap up his household projects. He finds a good stopping point for his extensive plumbing project and finally winterizes his pipes. Much of his time has been devoted to inputting a large septic tank deep into the ground. His freezer is full to the brim and the wood fireplace has enough logs to last till the next Ice Age. His days became increasingly boring as he starts rereading his small collection of books. He rewatches *Back to the Future* for the eighth time and begins to ruminate his next step. Out of boredom, he grabs the brownies from the bottom drawer. Taking massive bites, Darren simply hopes to wake up to summer. His extenuated nap is filled with nightmares from his time in Iraq. PTSD kicks in extra as he rolls off his bed, too uneasy to get up. He lets out a roaring scream knowing that no one can hear him. Reliving every moment, Darren cannot confront the memories anymore. He guzzles down some Jack Daniels in hopes that the liquor can diminish the horrors.

Darren wakes up scattered across the floor with a bottle in his right and the brownie in his left. The nightmares had never been this bad before. He left Fort Bragg for this exact reason and yet they decided to follow him up here. Like a punch to the face, his biggest fear came true. He couldn't escape himself. Getting up, Darren fixes himself up a cup of joe to alleviate his headache. He thinks to himself, I

cannot possibly live like this or else I will literally go insane. Darren begins to consider everything in his life, the good and the bad. With no clue how to proceed forward, Darren refers to his childhood bible. Not overly religious at this stage of his life, Darren tends to read the books of Daniel and Ecclesiastes to find refuge. Reconnecting with God felt like a Hail Mary at this point, but he was desperate.

Prayer became a ritual as he enjoyed the idea of talking to someone even if they weren't real. One night, amid a lengthy prayer, Darren felt a spiritual calling. It was so overwhelming that he couldn't afford not to listen to it. Delirious, Darren sat in silence as he listened. God's commands were simple: push the nearby boulder. It felt like a ridiculous task, so Darren ignored it. Days went by and the command from God grew stronger. He reflected on an old Greek mythology tale that seemed to be reminiscent. The story of Sisyphus would linger in his head for years after hearing it from his father. Sisyphus was a criminal and managed to evade death twice. As a punishment, he had to roll an enormous boulder up a steep hill for eternity. Each time the boulder rolled back down, Sisyphus had to push it back up. Of course, Darren's dad framed it in such way that made seem as if it was a lesson in working hard. He would continuously tell Darren to never become complacent and that you should never stop pushing the boulder. Darren hated the story because he felt like his dad was misinterpreting it. Yet, the message stung clear. He should push the boulder.

Darren made his way to the massive boulder situated about one mile away from his humble home. He gazed upon it for a few moments wondering if the rock had any special powers. Mossy as can be, the rock was home to all sorts of flora. It was certainly immovable but that didn't stop Darren. He pushed as hard as he could for hours on end. It reminded him of his days playing football under the hot August sun. At sunset, Darren called it a day. His hands were cut up and bloody. Everything was sore but he knew he would be back tomorrow. Darren continued his schedule of boulder pushing throughout winter with no progress. He grew tiresome but it kept him busy. The days usually lingered below freezing and snow was quite common. Accompanied by deer and the occasional bear, Darren always

had a friend nearby. He got well acquainted with the rock and discovered all its nooks and crannies. The pushing took a toll and Darren became quite weathered.

After a long winter pushing, Darren had finally come to his senses. He was doing an exercise in futility and destroying himself in the process. Blame came next as he cursed God and his wretched upbringing. On the verge of another breakdown, Darren got down on his knees demanding answers from God. In a deep awakening, God began to speak to Darren. God told Darren that he was no longer subjected to pushing. In response, Darren pondered the reasoning of such pointless labor. In return, God told him to look at his callused hands, muscular thighs, and shredded arms. Pointing out his newly found strength, God reveled in his transformation. Darren was stronger than before and had a greater tolerance to the freezing cold. God continued on saying that Darren was now equipped to rebuild his life in Alaska with a new outlook on toughness. The position of the boulder was insignificant. He accepted the message from God and carried on.

Darren accelerated his projects with ease as his newfound strength carried him along. His modest cabin became quite cozy with some updated furnishings. A newly built deck encompassed a magnificent view of the lake. Between all his carpentry undertakings, this one took the cake. With much of his savings depleted, Darren had to look elsewhere to establish a living. Patch recognized Darren's strengths and informed him of an upcoming position with a lumber company. The pay was well into six figures and the benefits were healthy. Darren applied immediately and got accepted a day later. From hoisting gargantuan trees to intense branch removal, Darren's fit within the company proved to be seamless. His callused hands could withstand everything while his tree trunks for thighs kept him upright. He finally saw the value of his endless work as he felt prepared to take on any challenges going forward. Darren continued to live a hard Alaskan life as he foraged his own path forward.