

Liberty Pursuer

Toby Canino

It was a red flag for Svoboda Presledovatel, especially when no one noticed. The president had been reelected for a third term after changing the election laws. It reminded Svoboda of Russia. He had run away from Russia and now he found himself deep in the northern United States wilderness running once again. As he walked through the forest enjoying the mix of rain and red leaves, he waited for George to ruin the scenery.

"If we have to be out here, do we have to get wet? Wouldn't it be a good idea to find shelter?" asked George.

"Trees are shelter from rain." Svoboda responded, "Staying put would be bad. They might catch us."

"You know what else can provide shelter from the rain? A house!"

Svoboda's shoulders sagged, he stopped walking, and turned to face George.

"If you want to go back I will let you, but like I have said the U.S. is becoming exactly what I ran away from back home," responded Svoboda.

With narrowed eyes George responded, "Stop comparing the United States to Russia. Unlike your mess of a country, we have freedom of speech here and if we go back, I'll use that to fix our government just like I always have. We have hiccups in America, but unlike you, we don't decide to run away! We fix our problems."

Svoboda ignored this and continued making his way along the ravine, taking care not to step on the crimson patches of slippery leaves ready to pull him to his death. George continued to kick up the leaves making unnecessary noise. The Canadian geese approaching overhead were an

encouraging sight for Svoboda. They had their name for a reason. Svoboda hoped he would soon see the geese make their return to their homeland in a few months.

"Do you not have anything to say?" asked George with his hands on his hips.

Svoboda said nothing and George let out a great sigh. Hiking for days on end was something Svoboda did during his time in the Russian military, but for George it was not so easy. Svoboda continued to glance over his shoulder and past the scowl on George's face to see if anyone was approaching from behind. The patter of the rain on the wet, moldy leaves was the perfect cover for footsteps. There had yet to be any incident with their pursuers, but Svoboda knew they were coming. His past was the perfect way for the government to justify his and George's being a traitor, and he knew it would do no good attempting to persuade the government otherwise. He only wished George would see it the same way.

The night brought with it more rain, soaking the travelers, and causing George to contribute in his usual way.

"If we went back, we wouldn't have to deal with the weather. We wouldn't have to freeze!"

“Where I come from this-”

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m speaking!” George interrupted, “I would put in a good word for you and make sure nothing bad happens. I know how they think in D.C.”

Svoboda sighed and responded, “We cannot go back. I’m sorry you got tangled up in this with me, but there is no point in reasoning with them. They will make up the story they want

people to hear. If you want to go back, I will let you do what you want, but please don’t tell them where I am.

“Let me! I don’t need your permission. I can do whatever I want! I am the boss of me, and I’ll prove it!” George turned and began to storm away, making as much noise as he possibly could.

“Shhh” said Svoboda, “you can go back but do not tell them where I am.”

“I won’t be bossed around!” Shouted George, arms flailing freely, “I won’t be silent!”

“Soon you will be silent!” said Svoboda while trying to hold back angry tears, “you have no choice because if they catch us, they will make us be silent with fear!”

His face reddening with anger, George shouted louder than ever before, “No! I will make my voice heard!”

“Shhh! If we find shelter will you be quiet?”

“yes” said a suddenly calm George.

It didn’t take Svoboda long to find the largest tree in the forest. It now lay on its side slowly decaying, covered in moss and fungi, but there was plenty of room underneath to provide the shelter they needed to hide from the increasingly violent storm. The tree had protected a small amount of kindling which Svoboda used to start a fire and nearby he was able to find some buffaloberries. Then he scraped a small amount of maple sap of a nearby tree and soon the ingredients were unwillingly melting together in George’s once great pot, now damaged and worn down by the many uses it had acquired during their travels. The result was a sticky mess

that was extremely bitter, which made George a more bitter human. Svoboda was simply glad to have food that wouldn’t kill him.

As they ate, Svoboda turned his green card in his hands. On it was a picture of the Statue of Liberty, which looked the same as it did when Svoboda finally managed to secure the card. Looking at the card had become a habit, but now it didn’t make him feel the same as it did when he first received it.

“What’s that?” asked George.

Svoboda held it closer to the fire so George could see it. At first, Svoboda couldn’t read George’s face then the congressman leaned back and asked, “why do you want to leave so badly? You worked hard to

get in; I know that. I don't know your specific story, but those cards aren't easy to get. It must have taken a lot."

Looking at the card Svoboda responded, "It's not what it used to be. It's changing."

"You're not talking about the card, are you?" Svoboda nodded, "Well," began George, "it does that all the time." There was a distant tone of wisdom in his voice. "America changes, we go through ups and downs, but we always come out stronger. What do you say, let's go back and help make it stronger."

Svoboda said nothing so George continued, "You're not a bad guy, not everybody gets a job in the Capitol. Sure, you mop floors but you're living the American dream."

"I mop floors," Svoboda interrupted, "I was grateful for my job, but I feel like we're all living a dream. You work for the United States House of Representatives, but soon that will only be a title. I used to work for the Russian army. My job was to catch the people who ran away.

Now I have to run away from America, because I used my right of free speech. After the bill was passed to extend the president's term, I couldn't help but shout, 'America is dead!' It was not my fault that you wanted to know what I meant by that comment, and it was not our fault that the media made a false story about my explanation. If you had not pulled me aside, you would not be here, but you know as well as I do, that they will not take you back, because you're viewed as a traitor in their eyes. Until you see that, nothing will make sense to you. If they catch me, I will either do the same job I used to have or be killed. It is hard to hike in the forest all day, but I do it anyway hoping to get away, to get to Canada. You change your mind when it starts to get difficult. That's why we are here in the first place, because you would not fix hard problems. You would not stand up to the bad laws. America is a dream now, because what it stood for no longer exists!"

George's eyes were wide and red, there was a twitch below one, but he didn't say a word as he finished his meal. Svoboda put his green card away and through the trees realized the rain was no longer hammering down. It had been replaced by a red, sickle moon casually resting in the star-spangled sky. Quickly looking away from it he rose to his feet and said, "We must move on. There is a clearing ahead and we need the cover of darkness."

George did not say a word the entire time that Svoboda spent packing up, and George remained silent the entire way to the large clearing. When he saw it, he broke his silence.

"It's not that big," said George.

Svoboda knew the wilderness could play tricks on the eyes, but he didn't say anything.

George did not want to go any further, so he tried the diplomatic approach once again.

"If you come back with me, and we get arrested, there is a legal system in the United States that grants you and I rights. I can use my influence to help get you out of this predicament and all will be well."

Svoboda did not respond, so George pushed, "Are you ignoring me?"

Looking George in the eye Svoboda responded "America is dead, there are no more rights. We cannot go back, but I will let you do what you want."

"Come on Svoboda!" George shouted into the rainless sky, "It's not the end of the America!"

Silence accompanied the horror on Svoboda's face. Even George was surprised at how far the echo of his voice had traveled. Without the rain and wind in the trees it was completely silent, but the silence didn't last for long. Svoboda looked at the trees one hundred paces behind them and saw lights flashing through the leaves and heard voices coming from within the forest. They were caught in the open. Svoboda had many instincts that began to kick in. They needed cover and the closest cover was the ravine. He cringed at the thought of running for the low ground, but there wasn't enough time to decide what was better. Over his shoulder he shouted at George to follow. At first, George stood and gazed at his surroundings, but the former congressman quickly regained himself and was compliant for the first time in weeks. He began running after Svoboda shouting, "what should we do?"

They arrived at the ravine, but when Svoboda looked in it his eyes began to fill with tears. It had filled with water from the storm. "What should we do?" repeated George. Svoboda looked at George with tears running down his face, then he looked toward their pursuers who would soon be arresting them. The moon continued to rise with its red light glaring behind the

runners. Svoboda realized that he would soon be arrested by the very evil which he had run from for so long. However, before his captors arrived, he felt a breeze blowing up from the ravine whispering at him, begging him to turn around. He turned to look at his other option and saw a beautiful collage created by nature. Stripes of red ivy ran down along the white rock of the ravine into a pool of navy water reflecting the beautiful starry sky. Through his blurry eyes a gentle breeze made the image wave in unison. The beautiful symbol allowed Svoboda to make up his mind. Color returned to his face, and his fists became hands once again. His shoulders relaxed and with a deep breath he jumped.

Their pursuers got their iron fists on George seconds after Svoboda left the cliff. George tried to pry away from his captors, but they tied his arms behind his back and began pulling him away. His throat was dry, and when he heard the loud crack from the bottom of the ravine, he fell to his knees with his head bowed under the moon.