

Alexis Graman

## David's Hike

That hill there, that all used to be trees. Thick, green, beautiful trees with long open branches. It changed the color of the sky. David and I, we would go and hike there with sticks that we would find at the bottom. Long tan sticks that were once important parts of trees, but had been removed. When we got to the top he would throw his stick as far as he could into the trees. I would always keep mine to make getting down easier. I didn't know why he always threw that walking stick and then ran down the mountain so fast I could never catch up.

He was the kind of person you wanted to share hats with. If I followed him into his room I would always find a hat sitting somewhere, and I would put it on, and he would put one on, and we would go hike the hill. Lots of the time they would be big, floppy hats with bills that covered your face. I would always take my hat off about halfway up the hill because they were wool, and I would get hot. But Dave, he'd always keep his hat on while he hiked up, pulled low over his face. You couldn't see his eyes, they were masked by the shade made by his hat's bill. After he had thrown his walking stick though, he would tear off his hat and fly down the hill, swinging from trees, the wind rushing through his pretty hair and face.

He wasn't crazy like that all the time though. He could be shy sometimes. Would always act different around people he didn't know. He's act boxier; you know, more like cardboard, more like a coffin with the part that your shoulder blades are supposed to fit into being too narrow. He was always that way around guys, he seemed insecure. He wasn't that way with me though, and he seemed a lot less square around girls. When he

was comfortable he could expand on just about anything. He had these big hands that didn't match the size of his body. He would wave them around while he talked, spreading out his fingers, and then pull them back into his pockets real fast, and start laughing his head off. That's the way he talked.

The first day of high school we walked together, he had a backpack, but he held some of his books in front of his chest. We made our way down from our houses. I was excited to see friends, and meet girls. I don't think he was, and I think he knew it at the time, but decided not to tell me then.

There had been a drought for quite some time. Mean drought, didn't let up. Made you want to choke. I hated it. Nothing in the garden would grow. Everything just shriveled up so bad, like a dead frog that's been left out in the sun for a long time. There was a fire.

We were walking down through people's lawns. They were all yellow. We looked around at all the little blue and tan and red houses. They looked like lunch boxes. Everything was organized, like apples, sandwich, yogurt, carrots, and a couple of cookies.

Dave would ask funny questions. He'd ask me if I thought I could live inside those houses, with a dog, and kids, and a television, and beer, and a job in the morning stocking beer at bars or restaurants. He asked me if I could cut hair everyday of the rest of my life. I answered that I didn't think we should cut hair. That we should let everyone's hair grow, like trees. He laughed at this. He liked it when I didn't take his serious questions seriously because it meant that he was right, that it was all absurd, that we should laugh at it all.

That fire, we all know it was coming, had to come, coming straight for our mountains and our hill. It burnt the whole side into black distorted bodies. The trees

seemed to be thrashing their arms, trying to save themselves. If trees could have run, they would have been long gone. They couldn't though, so I watched them at night. The hill was lit up as if it were a birthday and someone had turned off all the lights and there was no one there to celebrate with except yourself. If you stared at it too long you would get the light stuck in your eyeballs. Always that glow; I couldn't sleep during the fire.

The first day of school was what I expected it to be. We had the same history teacher. He was a football coach, and Dave described him as being, "A real dickhead". When I thought about it, I had to agree, the man did look that way. His neck was thicker than his skull, which is saying a lot, because this man's head was about as thick as they came, and he would yell at Dave when Dave didn't want to answer his irrelevant questions:

"Think that's funny, David?" he'd say.

"You think this country's a joke?"

"Think you're better than me, David?"

"It's a question of values," he'd always say. "It's a question of morals, either you got um or you don't".

Justice came when Dave figured out that the man's biceps were so big that he couldn't reach the top of his head to itch it. This just tickled Dave. Laughing, red faced, eyes squinting, with one hand on the back of his head, and the other stretched out in the air, begging the sky to not let him choke on his glee, he told me, "The man has to use a freaking pencil to scratch his head!" He loved this idea. He wanted to organize a plan to sharpen all of the man's pencils so that they were all too short to reach his dandify scalp.

That winter I'd sit at the back of class, by a window. The snow was falling slowly, like the minutes of the day. The trees planted on the school grounds were spaced apart evenly. They looked cold, distant from each other, awkwardly divorced from each other. As if they wanted to huddle together for warmth but thought it inappropriate.

When school got out we hiked past the hill to where Marshal Lake slept. The dark green trees danced to and fro while the wind pushed the water. There were small ripples in the water where things fell from the trees. Though cold it had a current pushed by the songs of birds, changing directions with a chirp or a whistle. A rise in temperature or a change in wind knocked snow to the ground. Small pieces of ice disturbed the surface throwing ducks into the sky like a handful of stones, squawking obscenities, their reflection dark and narrow on the pond's surface. The sounds in everything were filled with random love unusherred or choreographed. The reflections in the water went deeper than any vision of the sky.

We sat on a log and stared out over the glassy pond. Our hands shoved deep into our coat pockets, the steam rising from our mouths. The world was quiet, and I didn't want to say anything. But, we got cold as we sat there, and so we started to talk. David didn't look at me as he sat there. He kept his hands buried in his pockets as he finally told me about the nature of unhappiness, how it was like a king crab. He said that sometimes he felt like his neck was caught between its giant pincers. He needed to swim away or else he would drown there. He told me about a man he had been seeing. How they would kiss at night, when no one else was there, or knew, or suspected. He asked me what I wanted to know. I didn't. I asked him what was going to happen, what had happened with the man he was seeing. Dave told me it was over. The man was older than

him, and controlling. He said that the man was scared and he was scared and all he wanted to do was knock something over. He wanted to jump into the lake and freeze to death. He got emotional, started breathing heavily. Then he stopped and just stared out over the lake and the woods and everything.

I didn't say anything. I kept my hands in my coat and looked at the snow by my feet. It lay there motionless, cold, soft; I stepped on a mound and made an imprint of my shoe.

In the spring Dave started applying to private schools out of state, and I got a girl friend. Her name was Jane, and I would go to her house after school where we would fool around until her parent got off of work. I would usually leave shortly after they got home. Sometimes I would stay, for dinner or a movie or something.

That started to take up a lot of the time. David and I, we didn't talk about unhappiness ever again. It wasn't something either of us wanted to dwell on. We saw each other less for a while, though I did have Dave around sometimes to hike or play foosball. I introduced him to Jane. She was a year older, and we didn't share any classes with here. They got along well. After a while David was himself again. Jane loved him then. She would laugh so hard when he said things she didn't know people said. Oh god, he was so funny she would start crying she laughed so hard. I would laugh too. I would laugh knowing it was possible to laugh this much, as if I laughed this much all the time.

In May, Dave got into a prep school in New York. They promised him lots of money. This was something big, it was internationally known. Be would be in the middle of it all, he said. I could see the way he felt when he talked to me. His hands would go

rigid until he was done expanding, and then he would flex and shake his fingers and run his hands through his hair.

That day we walked out of town, to the edge of the hill. The walk was warm and quiet. We didn't see anyone with lawnmowers, or babies, or leaf blowers, or angry wives. We walked along a dirt road for about a mile until we came to the foot of our hill. The forest still gone, the hill stood in the open, vulnerable revealing to us its true character. The trees didn't cover it like a beard, or a mask, or a town. There were no trees to hide its face behind. We knew what the hill was, and we loved what the hill was. It was more beautiful, complicated, unique than we could have ever imagined. It stood there vulnerable, asking us to climb it.

There were tiny trees growing again. From a distance they looked like grass. Like tiny blades on a little hill. When we got closer the trees looked like bonsai, and it made the hill look huge, covered with the replicas of so many enormous trees. Among the tiny pine trees, the hill still had dead, burnt trees left from the fire, shooting up from the tiny forest. They looked like thin gray towers, or primitive power lines that had been abandoned. I felt like those burnt trees were looking down on us. They looked sinister and judgmental. They stood dark and haggard out of the new generation's green, misplaced in the newly born masses.

Up close we felt like giants. At least I did, Dave had a giant smile, a wild, giant smile. He crouched down and looked at the miniature pines. He touched them with his big hands. They fidgeted. His hands tickled the bottom of their branches. I watched him there, transfixed, both of us understanding that the fire hadn't killed anyone.

Then charging laughing, like a crazed barbarian soldier into war, he tore off his cap and started running up the mountain in bounds, clearing the tiny trees. He was an airplane, or a rollercoaster; something terrifying and exhilarating. I ran after him, and it was beautiful, and I was happy to be alive, happy to be running, dodging the trees like they were old men. We were playing tag with the universe. We couldn't be stopped we were running and the little trees were moving under our feet. Stones couldn't stop us, babies couldn't stop us paper, pencils, chains; nothing.

At the top we stood panting, looking at the green and the ash. Over the beautiful world we were so happy to be a part of and apart from. We breathed in the crisp wonderful air, and let our senses come back to us. Next to us stood one of those dead trees; thin, grey and weak. I put the sole of my shoe, and my momentum against it and pushed. It shook, whining and spitting ash. I took the bottom of my foot and drove it against the dead tree again, hard. I wanted to drop it, I wanted to be above it. Again, I took the bottom of my foot and drove it against the dead tree. I shook, and cracked vomiting its burnt body. I took several steps backward from the tree, and in a running, flying, kicking movement I undid the tree. It cracked, splintering at its weak foundation, and whined, crashing to the ground.