

## The Three Keepers

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The forest was damp. The trees shimmered with the drops of rain that had fallen all night. The rising sun cast its rays through each and every drop, a golden under glow in the green canopy of leaves. As I made my way through, I could feel my toes, stinging from the cold damp forest floor against the inside of my new hiking boots. The boots I had insisted on buying and wearing today, much at my husband's disapproval.

"You should really break them in first. Wear them around the house or go for a few walks just around the block with them at least. It's not once we are way up in the mountain that you want to realize they hurt your feet."

But, of course, I had to do what my stubborn self would always do; not listen.

So now my toes were cold, at least two blisters were forming, one on each heel, and I knew if I said anything that I would be mocked for not listening. I pressed on, wincing every few steps, following Tom from a distance. His red ball cap kept me on the right path, like a guiding beacon, I would spot it every few minutes as I looked up from the trail underfoot to make sure I was walking in the same direction.

The path, overgrown for years, could have been easily missed and once you went off track in this mountain trail, you had best hope someone knew you were there and would come looking for you. The local community at the foot of the mountain had maintained the trails some years ago. Old signage, decrepit benches and picnic tables littered the grounds if you knew to look for them. Moss and grass had grown over these wooden structures. "Nature taking over again," I thought to myself as I passed a small sign post, the sign itself so faded it was illegible.

Looking up, I saw several trees in front of me. It seemed as though the trail was vanishing slowly. Every inch of incline towards the summit of the mountain seemed to bring about denser tree coverage. The red cap again. Taking in a deep breath, I held it momentarily, and let it out in a long and slow exhale, allowing myself to relax and take in this beauty of a hike. How long had I longed and yearned for this once more. My life at the law firm had been exciting and challenging, yes, but I missed these nature hikes and adventures that seemed to be a thing of the past in recent years. It had been ages since Tom and I had done anything fun, let alone in nature. When he suggested a day trip to Mount Cassidy, I was both stunned and thrilled. It was exactly what I needed, I thought. But these hiking boots, not so much. I could feel the blister on my right heel had popped and was now rubbing raw against the boot. It stung badly and I knew I would need to take care of it and soon if I was to make it to the top of the mountain. We were only about an hour into our hike and this was a half day trek to the top.

"Tom!" I called out. "Hey Tom, can you hold up for a minute?" I could see his red cap, but he was quite a distance away. I saw him turn around in the distance and wave.

"Ok, hun! Sorry, you know I walk fast..."

I looked down and watched my steps, trying not to step on any hidden rocks or tree roots that could make me trip and fall. Every step I took I felt the blisters, but I tried not to show my pain as I approached Tom. He smiled broadly as I approached him.

“You ok?” he asked as he reached out his hand to help me up a small embankment where he was standing.

“Yeah, I mean, well I am Ok, but it’s this foot. I think I have a blister...” I didn’t have time to finish before he started laughing. He let out a howl and threw his head back.

“You think it’s funny that I am hurt?” I blurted out, realizing before I had finished saying it that it was rude and I should have just bit my tongue and not have let my ego get the better of me.

“Hun, I told you to break those in first. I don’t want to say I told you so, but...”

“I know, I know. I should have listened to you. Happy now?” I smiled back at him, apologetically. I didn’t want to start anything, not today.

“Come on, let’s take a look at how bad it is.” Tom walked over to a fallen log. “Here, try sitting down here and I’ll get some Vaseline and Band-Aids from the first aid kit, ok?” He pulled on the straps of his backpack as he spoke, removing the bag from his shoulders. I admired his biceps and strong arms as he did so. How long had it been that I had really looked at his physique? A flash of a memory from our college days came to mind when we had been dating. His strong body had only been one of the things that had attracted me to Tom.

“Thanks, Tom.” I said simply. Feeling like a jerk for snapping at him, I didn’t want to say too much, for fear of rocking the boat. I undid my laces and as I slid off my right boot, then the sock, Tom gasped at the sight of the blister. It was pretty big and as predicted was quite raw from rubbing against the boot.

“That’s gotta hurt!” He exclaimed as he started fixing up the blister, trying to coat it and protect it from getting worse. “Do you want to turn around? We don’t have to keep going. You must be in a lot of pain...” He spoke as he took care of my small injury.

“No! No, I mean, yes it hurts, but I want to keep going. I don’t want my stupidity ruin our day. I should have listened to you. Let’s just keep going and I will do my best to keep up, ok?”

“Ok, but only if you’re sure you want to.” I nodded my agreement. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Once the blisters were both taken care of and padded to protect from further wear, off we went again, to venture in the wilderness of Mount Cassidy. Tom slowed down as we headed off, making sure to not get too far ahead of me. Something else I loved about him; his complete compassion and attention to others when they were suffering. After a while though, I felt like he was pacing himself slowly, and so I told him to go on further and I’d trail behind. He didn’t object to this, as I predicted. I knew he liked to walk fast and I didn’t want to hold him back.

The next hour or so progressed as expected. The protective padding on my heels helped a lot and I could walk at a somewhat normal pace and speed. Watching my footing as I went on, taking turns between looking up to keep track of where Tom was located and looking down to make sure I didn’t trip, I was enjoying the scenery and the smells of the deep wooded wilderness.

As I looked up, I noticed Tom's red cap had disappeared. I kept moving forward, sure I would see it pop up again as I made a slight shift to the left or right. Walking straight ahead, I stepped up my pace a bit as no sign of Tom came about.

"Tom? Wait up. I can't see you." I called out, my voice carrying itself through the trees, but landing nowhere. I picked up my pace a bit more, my heart starting to pound harder.

"Tom? Where are you?" Beginning to feel flushed with sweat, I walked over tree roots and small bushes of berries as I quickly walked straight ahead, towards the last spot where I had seen my husband, mere moments ago. Only the light breeze in the leaves made noise, along with the low moaning of the trees, bending slightly with the wind this way and that.

In the corner of my eye, something red. My heart sunk almost instantly. Tom's red cap. It was on the forest floor, sitting among pine needles and pine cones, leaves and earth. It was so misplaced, it made me feel out of sorts, like I knew something was wrong, even though there could be an explanation.

"Tom, come on, this isn't funny. If you're playing a game, I'm not enjoying it." Silence remained.

Gathering the cap in one hand, I quickly stood up tall and surveyed my surroundings. Large pine trees mostly adorned this area of the mountain. There were some other smaller shrubs and overgrowth, but nothing out of the ordinary. It looked almost identical to the same trees and forest that they had been walking in for hours now. The air in my lungs was starting to get harder and harder to pull in. My head started pounding in unison with my heart.

"TOM!" I yelled out, as loudly as I could. Then, something, muffled. A voice?

I called out again, this time turning my head, closed my eyes and listened as best I could. Had I imagined that sound? "TOM! Where are you?" I yelled again.

Another muffled noise came, to my right this time. I took several steps in that direction. The muffled sound was a definite voice. As I neared closer to it, I finally made out what it was saying.

"Don't move, Anna!" It was Tom's voice, warning me. But it was much too late.

My blistered foot took one step in what felt like thin air. Arms flailing, my left foot never had a chance to even try taking a step. Down I fell, falling forward in what seemed to be a large hole in the floor of the forest. Tom was already laying down there, off to one side, half of his face and clothes covered in a black substance.

"What...happened..." I managed to say, as I lifted myself up from the ground, slowly.

"Careful. You may have something broken." Looking over at Tom, I noticed he was holding his leg. It was bent in an angle that should not have been possible.

"Oh my God, Tom!" I rushed over to him, realizing the fall had caused him much more damage than it had to me. "What can I do to help?"

"Do you have your cell phone? Call for help. We're not getting out of here on our own."

I dropped my back pack to the ground, and noticed the black substance was soot. It was all over the ground here. We were in what appeared to be a large oversized fire pit. We had both fallen smack in the

center. Looking up as I dug in my backpack to find my cell phone, I noticed we were inside a structure of some kind. As I could make out strange markings that the sunlight was peeking through along one side of the hole in the ground.

“Do you see that?” I asked.

“The only thing I can see is my broken leg. Damnit Anna, find the phone!” Tom was starting to lose it. He rarely raised his voice at me, but this situation was more than he could handle.

I took out the phone and checked it. Full charge. I let out the breath I had been holding in. Pressing 911 and then the green dial button, I waited for it to ring for what felt like forever. Nothing happened. Looking down at the screen again, I realized there was no signal. The deep wood coverage and the depth of this hole was likely causing the loss of signal.

“No signal, Tom.” He hung his head low and rubbed his hands against his forehead. Just as he was about to say something, a shadow came and cast its dark presence over the both of us. Looking upwards, we noticed someone, or something standing above us. It was peering down at us, but with the sun behind it, all we could see was its outline.

“Help! Help us! We fell down here and we can’t get out!” I called up to the figure, standing at the edge, where the strange markings were. But instead of answering or calling back to us, it simply moved away and out of sight.

“Do you think they will help us?” I asked Tom. He seemed to be scared. He looked at me and back up at the hole that was above us and just replied. “Don’t you know what that was?”

“No. What are you talking about? Seemed like a person to me.” Tom backed himself away from the centre of the soot filled area and pushed himself outwardly. I looked beyond him and realized that this was no regular hole in the ground. This was a chamber. A very large, circular chamber. I stepped closer to the outer wall of the chamber. Running my hand down the walls, I realized it was made of some sort of metal. I remembered I had a flashlight in my bag. I ran to fetch it and I noticed Tom was crying. In all our years together, this was the first time I had ever seen him crying like this. Fear had definitely set within him. I stood up again, flashlight in hand, and flicked it on. It cast a large white glow and I pointed it to the opposite wall.

The structure was built in ground, circular in form, hollowed out, where we had fallen in. In the center was a large fire pit, where only ashes and soot remained. The diameter of the pit itself was easily ten feet wide. The entire structure must have measured 30 or 40 feet wide. Along the walls there were openings, every few feet. They were carved in the metal, intricate details, like windows except instead of a view, you had dirt and moss seeping in through it.

“Anna, I love you. Please, you need to try to call for help again.”

“Tom, what is going on. What is this place?” Seeing and feeling the fear he was experiencing was enough to frighten me.

“This is where the sacrifices are made. I thought they were only stories. Urban legends to keep us out of the woods when we were kids...” Tom cried harder and let out a small scream, such as a child

would while crying incessantly. I quickly realized that my husband was losing it. I ran over to him and hugged him tight.

“Tom, listen to me. It’s ok. I’m sure you are just in shock right now, ok. That was probably another hiker up there and he just left to get us some help.” Tom cried more heavily.

“No, you don’t understand. It’s too late...” He looked up at me, his face covered in black soot and ashes. “He went to get the others. There will be three of them and they are going to kill us.”

“Enough, Tom.” Anger rose up in me. “I have to figure out a way to get us out of this hole and you losing it isn’t helping right now!” I shot backwards and turned and walked to the opposite side of the in-ground structure. I looked for something, anything I could use to climb up and out of the hole. Tom kept crying, sitting in a dark corner. I felt bad for not being able to keep it together and help him. But I couldn’t let myself panic too.

From up above there came another shadow. Darker now. Standing at the edge of the hole in the ground, two more figures appeared next to the first. As predicted, three figures in total were now at ground level.

“Hey, can you help us?” I called up. Nobody replied. Nobody moved.

I walked up to where Tom was sitting and grabbed my flashlight again. Walking back to the center of the pit, I looked up. The figures were now removing debris and large pieces of wood from the rest of the structure. Now it was obvious this structure had some kind of cover, with an opening as wide as the fire pit. As the debris was cleared, more markings became visible, the sun shining through the openings of these carved markings, casting odd symmetrical shapes all around us inside of the chamber.

“What are you doing?” I called up. “Can’t you help us?”

The figures all moved together at once, in perfect harmony. They all stood at the edge of the opening, peering down at me. I flicked on my flashlight and shone the light in their direction, and gasped at their reflection. They had no faces! They wore long black hooded cloaks but their faces were smooth, no eyes, no nose, no mouths. Just a smooth covering over where a human’s features should have been.

I screamed and ran back to Tom, who had now passed out cold on the ground. There came a sudden and sharp high pitched squealing sound in my left ear, and I thought I would pass out too. Stumbling off-balance as I stood up, I grabbed my back pack and searched for the bear mace we had bought but never had a need for, until today. Would it even reach them? Would it even work? They had no eyes, no nose! How would this even work on them? I threw myself directly under them and screamed up at them.

“What do you want from us?! We didn’t do anything wrong! Who are you?!” The squealing in my ear continued. I could feel liquid starting to cover my face and my bare shoulders. Looking down at my tank top, I noticed it was sprinkled with some sort of liquid. They stood above the hole and were pouring from large vials what appeared to be a liquid solution down onto me. The squealing in my left ear now started in my right. I grabbed my head with both hands, the sound unbearable. I screamed loudly as it felt as if my temples were going to implode, the pressure from this sound so difficult to bare.

Suddenly, all went silent. Not only the squealing, but all sounds. Nothing made any noise anymore. No trees moving, no breeze or wind, no birds, nothing. I felt different. Something stirred to my right. It was

Tom, he was crawling to me, speaking words to me that I would never hear. As I tried to speak, I realized I couldn't open my mouth. My words trapped inside of me. As Tom's hands grabbed my ankles, I looked down at him and noticed my eyesight was getting blurry. Just before all went dark, I saw Tom being doused with the same fluid the figures had doused me with.

The last thing I saw was Tom grabbing my ankles and his mouth disappear behind skin growing over his face, his ears, his mouth and nose. I must have walked in circles for a few minutes before I was no longer able to live off the breath that resided in my lungs. I know I passed out because I felt myself fall and hit the ground. Yet I knew I was still there, in spirit. But my spirit was trapped. It was being held inside of me and it couldn't escape. My body was dead, in the physical sense, but my soul remained within, just as I assumed Tom's was also. Eventually came the spark that lit us up. The fire pit was more than for flesh. It consumed us whole, both physically and ethereally.

The three Keepers of the Fire, enslaved to their own trapped souls, carried out their duty as they always had and always would, eternally. The chamber, cast atop a mountain where few now trespassed, held countless souls that would never be reborn and never know life essence again.

Days later, the dying embers still glowing in the deep and dark underground chamber, the three Keepers would cover up the chamber once more, until the time came for another soul.

The End