

Dunton's Story

Trama finished telling Dr. Hilary Dunton about Yellow Lake, and Action finally woke up.

“Well, I have to admit, you were very thorough,” said Dunton as Action began to stir.

Dunton continued, “Truthfully, that was more information about Yellow Lake than I particularly wanted. Now I owe you an equally thorough explanation of my own situation. Well, of our situation. Of the situation at hand, that is.”

This was the situation: Trama, Action, and Dr. Hilary Dunton had been aboard half of a train. That half of the train had fallen into a wide river. On the either side of the river were a dozen sod igloos. Surrounding the earthen igloos were tall cliffs. Taken together, the river, igloos, and cliffs formed Devil's Canyon.

This is the proper time to explain one of Action's peculiarities. Action possessed the unusual ability to fall fast asleep in the most distressing of circumstances. One moment he would be bursting with intensity. The next moment he would recognize that it was the correct time to sleep, and do so promptly.

Action had been extraordinarily lucky. He had survived the train's

fall with just a few bruises. After the crash, Action had been recovered by some igloo dwellers. Action had observed that he was receiving medical attention and, as was proper, fallen asleep.

Now awake and alert, Action sat up. The three train-hoppers were in an earthen igloo, facing one another. Action looked at Trama and Dr. Hilary Dunton. Action was becoming increasingly disoriented. He was also becoming increasingly agitated.

"Where are we?" said Action.

"We're in a Pawtwanee village, in Devil's Canyon. It's really not important. More or less, we're in a nice place to begin an adventure," said Dunton.

"Who are you?" said Action.

"Dr. Hilary Dunton, pleased to make your acquaint-

"Where's Dee?" said Action.

"Well, assuming that Dee is the girl who was abducted by goblins-

"That's her," said Trama.

"Ahmm. Well, that's a complicated question. I was just about to explain my situation. If you'd both simply listen, I suspect we'll stumble upon your answer."

Action and Trama listened. Dunton settled into a victorian arm-chair. He pulled out a long wooden pipe and puffed on it as he spoke.

"Growing up I came to know one of my father's good friends. This man was a professional bassoon player. He wanted to join one of the best orchestras. He went to many auditions. Oftentimes he would be chosen as one of two final candidates for a spot, but he never made the cut. Every time an old bassoon player retired, a spot would open up. Every time that happened, this man's hopes would rise and then be crushed. He never settled in one place. He floated between opera houses and the smaller orchestras, making ends meet and passing the time. All the while he poured himself into preparing for the next big audition. Most seasons brought him to a new group of musicians and a new pla-

Action interrupted him, "I don't care about bassoon players. What happened to Dee?" Dunton was not phased in the slightest. He lit a match, held it to his pipe, and inhaled deeply.

Dunton exhaled, shook the match out, and said, "Don't rush me young man. I'm the one with the information here, and I was just getting into a rhythm."

Action opened his mouth to speak and Dunton raised a finger at him, "Reciting one's backstory takes practice, you know. I have a certain order of presentation to which I'm accustomed. Its not something I simply ad lib. Without further interruption, if you please."

Dunton continued, "Now I mention the bassoon player only because his story has some interesting parallels to my own. I'm also rather fond of the bassoon. Anyways... where was I... Oh yes, the wandering lives of a few lonely, lovely souls. Or was I talking about love seats? I ran into the most curious love seat the other week. Its back was concave, and yet the lumbar support was excellent."

Action exhaled sharply through his nose in a distinctively frustrated manner.

"No, no that wasn't it. Lost, lonely souls. Myself. Your sister. Yes. Anyways. Ahmm."

Dr. Hilary twirled his mustache, then spoke.



“There is a place, not far from here, with magical doorways. The place is called Frog City. These magical doorways lead to different worlds. As a matter of fact, they lead to every world imaginable. But walking through the magical doorways is a precarious task. Without a clear mental image of a destination, you don't go anywhere. You just die. Now I didn't know about that risk the first time I stepped through a magical doorway. That is how I learned-”

Dunton paused to puff on his pipe once more. He blew out a ring of smoke.

“I learned that I have an exceptional imagination. Now I mention those doorways only because I travel through them regularly. In a professional capacity, that is. There are three steps to my profession. Firstly, I am told which world the goblins are visiting next. Secondly, I travel to that world via magical doorway. Once there, I take pictures for postcards. Lastly, I return to Frog City via repurposed soul.”

Dunton sensed that his explanation hadn't been very clear.

“Let me clarify,” said Dunton. “Postcards are very popular in Frog City. They're used to say hello or goodbye. In Frog City, postcards will say anything from ‘I love you,’ to ‘I'd like to order three pumpernickel loaves.’ So there's a tremendous demand for postcards.”

Dunton hadn't clarified anything.

“Repurposed Souls?” said Trama.

“Yes, yes. Of course,” said Dunton. “Ah, perhaps I didn't mention it. Repurposed souls. The repurposed souls are goblin vessels. For example, the train from Yellow Lake was a goblin vessel. So once I've taken pictures for my postcards, I've got to swim to a goblin vessel. The blackness and current makes swimming to vessels quite tricky. There's a strong current that pulls you around the repurposed souls, you've both experienced it.”

Action didn't really understand what Dunton was saying. But at the mention of ‘blackness’ and ‘a strong current,’ Action remembered his near-death experience. Action tensed up.

Dunton continued, “The current's strength corresponds to how wrapped up in thought you are. You have to unwrap your thoughts to weaken the goblin current. If either of you ever approach another goblin vessel, there's a trick I've learned. I know how to let go of thoughts. The trick is to pretend to melt, like hot wax.”

Dunton trailed off, mumbling, “Pretending to be wax makes me feel

poorly afterwards. And I work a lot, so I end up spending lots of time uncomfortably. I'd say that's the biggest disadvantage to making postcards for a living."

Dunton regained his composure and finished, "So now do you have a better idea of where Dee is?"

"No," said Action and Trama together.

Dunton looked downcast. "I suspected as much. I guess that part of the story didn't go very well. I might as well move on to the next part. Now, usually I like to tell a short narrative about my favorite sofa—"

Action gave Dunton a seething glare.

"—but in the interest of time I'll skip ahead... No. Actually, I'll skip to the very beginning!"

Action rubbed his temple. Dunton said, "I was born in a town, in a far away world. Most of the chairs there were unadorned wooden affairs. Generally very uncomfortable. However, there was one set of wooden benches I adored. They were in the middle of a park. Long before my time, some carpenter had carved these two exquisite benches into a fallen redwood. Very comfortable benches. In between the benches was a table. Now I mention these benches only because they provided an excellent spot to play chess. I would go there each week to play chess with a man named Darby. Darby was of no relation to me, and many years older. I do not remember how we met. I do know that, from a young age, he was my dearest friend."

Action shook his head. Dunton raised an eyebrow.

"You doubt that a boisterous teen could have been best friends with a mild mannered retiree?" Dunton questioned.

Action said, "no." Dunton had misunderstood why Action shook his head.

"Well, we were best friends," said Dunton with finality. "We shared the little things that best friends do, and I doubt that you've ever had a friendship as close as ours was." This was true. Action had never had a best friend.

"Each Monday we'd play chess. Darby almost always beat me. Afterwards he would say 'not good enough!' with a throaty chuckle. Well, perhaps I wasn't. Wasn't good enough, that is. But Darby was good enough for me. So, when goblins grabbed Darby during one of our chess matches and dragged him towards a river, I think you can understand why I tried to save him."

Now Action and Trama were alert. Dunton's convoluted story seemed to be leading somewhere informative.

"I followed Darby and the goblins. I followed them down into that river, through blackness, and onto an underwater double-decker bus. I was aboard that bus the first time I arrived at Frog City. But I failed to save Darby. The goblins repurposed his soul into a goblin vessel."

Dunton blew another smoke ring. He watched it dissipate with squinting eyes.

"Darby's soul was repurposed, but I still hear him occasionally. Whenever I settle in any one place for too long, I feel him near me. I hear Darby whispering 'not good enough,' and then I move along to somewhere new."

Action and Trama shared a glance with each other. The glance conveyed 'this guy is crazy.'

Action and Trama thought Dunton was speaking nonsense, but I don't think so. Goblins did, in fact, repurpose souls for inter-world transportation purposes. I also think Dunton's age and experience had shown him an aspect of friendship that Action and Trama didn't understand.

Each friendship is some combination of circumstance and connection. There are more types of friendship than there are ways to make sushi. Friendships can be distant and warm or close and cold. Friendships can light up like shooting stars and burn out just as quickly. Friendships can simmer for years before some happy accident brings them to life. However, the unfortunate truth is that the forces of circumstance are often stronger than those of connection. Most friendships eventually fade into the distance.

We, as humans, do not form our own identities. We reflect the people that surround us, and we see ourselves in them. These reflections endure. We continue to reflect our friends long after they fade away. So I think it makes sense that Dunton sometimes felt like Darby was nearby.

Dunton didn't pay any mind to Trama and Action's shared glance. He continued his story.

"I wanted to wander, and goblins offered the most lucrative wandering career opportunities. Yes, it is a little strange that I work for the soul-stealers who killed my best friend. The goblins did give me an apology though. They sent me a postcard that said:

*Goblins don't want to be Goblins
They're broken and mean
And they're sorry
When a good thing happened to them
But it was a bad thing for someone else*

I'm not a fan of goblin poetry, but it made me feel a little better that at least they'd made the effort. And I have to say, I find the type of poetry that fits on a postcard to be fascinating."

Dunton mouthed the words to the goblin poem, repeating it to himself and weighing the words. Then Dunton remembered that he was telling a story.

"Far be it from me to know what goes on inside a goblin's head. But let goblins be, except perhaps to marvel that such a strange creature exists."

"Goblins have Dee," growled Action.

"Well, strictly speaking, the goblins have no real hold on her now," said Dunton. "When I ventured after Darby some years ago, I found that goblins are idle creatures who seldom hold the key to any venture. To find my friend, I had to search out a few particular frogs, and a turtle."

"Frogs?" said Action.

"Frogs," agreed Dunton.

Dunton continued, "And now I arrive at the conclusion of my tale. Mine is a path that few would choose. Alas, I was destined for the nomadic lifestyle. I wrote a poem about it, on which I like to end my autobiographical narrative."

Dunton cleared his throat yet again and said, "ahmm,

*Always wondering never knowing
Always wandering never growing
Shoots and stalks and leaves
Watching friends grow into trees
Floating onwards on the breeze
Never stars but often flowers
That the trees will never see*

So there you have it. I'm a tumbleweed with an affinity for postcards and comfy chairs."

As Dunton finished speaking he gave a curt bow (while remaining seated). Action had raised an eyebrow and was breathing heavily. Trama noticed that Action's fingers were trembling and curled into a fist.

"You didn't answer my question. Where's Dee?" said Action.

Dunton sighed. "There's two answers to that question. I already gave you the long answer. The short answer is Frog City."