

The Forest Dwellers of Heavenly Hill

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She was in such desperate need of a restroom that she almost killed them, the little boy and girl walking hand-in-hand along the bend of a poorly maintained gravel road. She'd been traveling on the interstate, but after an hour of maneuvering through heavy traffic, cringing every time a tractor-trailer thundered by in the passing lane, its mudflaps flashing lewd silhouettes of reclining ladies, Taylor decided it might be best to take the scenic route. Check-in at the hotel wasn't until later that afternoon anyway, and the music festival didn't begin until tomorrow morning with a sunrise service. At first, she was happy just to be away from her college roommate, a transfer student who did most of her sleeping during the day and who, on more than one occasion this semester, slunk hacking and hungover back to their dorm during the early morning hours. She had no interest in attending the weekly bible study group held in a maintenance building at the edge of campus, the Bible Bunker as she derisively called it, and when Taylor asked if she'd like to join her on this road trip to Rock My Soul, she simply rolled her eyes and buried her face in a pillow that smelled of greasy hair and cigarettes.

The music festival happened to coincide with Earth Day, and all over campus, taped to every lamp post and pinned to every bulletin board, there were propagandistic displays of pantheism—anthropomorphic planets spouting somber platitudes (“We were born to save the world, not spoil it”), mischievous woodland elves tiptoeing through lush gardens, whimsical pixies with pink flower petals swirling around their dainty ankles, alluring fertility goddesses draped in billowing lace robes of blue and green, their fingers fondling black irises and priapic mushrooms. Irritated by all of this trendy idolatry, Taylor averted her eyes and spent her evenings in pious prayer. She believed the season had a much more profound and sacred meaning. But now, as she traveled south to the river, she began to wonder if nature did indeed possess some subtle power to confound and deliberately mislead a person of faith.

The festival, taking place in an outdoor amphitheater situated on a dramatic promontory overlooking the Ohio River, was a four-hour drive from campus, and in this remote corner of the state, along country roads that descended sharply into densely wooded valleys, she saw no farmhouses or red barns or grain silos, no high-tension wires or powerlines, no signs pointing the way to a clean and brightly lit restroom, nothing except the road itself to suggest the familiarity of civilization. By then, the need to stop was growing more urgent, but Taylor didn't like the idea of squatting like an animal on the side of the road.

She stepped on the gas, and it was only later, after the festival was underway, that she would think again of that empty stretch of road and marvel at how the children seemed to have been beamed down from the treetops. A little boy and girl, not walking exactly but skipping in time to some tune only they could hear, materialized in front of the car. Letting out a shrill scream, she slammed both feet against the brake pedal and, for one horrifying moment, thought her car, a rusty but reliable sedan that handled fairly well on paved roads, was going to collide hood-first into a stand of old-growth trees. She yanked the wheel hard to the right, and the car fishtailed

against loose gravel. A blur of pale green hurtled toward her like an angel wrapped in emerald robes.

When she finally dared to open her eyes, she blinked at the thick ribbons of dust curling through the open windows. Above the pounding of her heart, she dimly perceived approaching footsteps. On the radio, a preacher spoke of a celestial light and a door standing open in Heaven. Taylor took an unsteady breath and relinquished her death grip on the steering wheel. She turned off the radio, but before she could open the door to survey the damage, she saw a small sunburned face in the open window.

“Hey, could you give us a ride into town?” A girl, no more than nine or ten years old, pointed down the road and smiled. “It’s just another mile or two that way.”

A boy, roughly the same age as the girl, stood beside her. He rested his arms, scabby elbows and all, on the door and wiped his face with a bandana. “We’ve been out exploring all day,” he said. “We’re pretty tired.”

Taylor waved away the dust and looked the children up and down. They wore hiking boots and matching camouflage backpacks and smelled of peat moss and muddy trails. Their hair was tangled and knotted, as if they’d been camping for days in the wilderness, and their fingernails were filthy.

She clasped her hands together and raised them to her forehead. “What do you kids think you’re doing?”

“We’re on an important mission,” the girl said.

“To buy supplies in town,” the boy said, “before returning to the mothership.”

Taylor frowned. “You do know that you should never accept rides from strangers, right?”
“Where are your parents?”

The girl seemed to think about this. She gazed into the woods and then said, “They’re seeking peace of mind.”

“We look for them sometimes,” the boy said, “in the forest.”

“But they told us we couldn’t join them until after we’ve learned about the world.”

“With such a nice car, you’ve probably gone everywhere.”

“Make sure to travel, that’s what our parents always told us.”

“It’s the best education there is.”

“That’s why we don’t go to school.”

“Mom and dad said school keeps people in a...in a...”

“In a state of perpetual adolescence.”

“We’ll figure things out a lot more quickly on our own.”

“And then we’ll be able to join them in the forest.”

Taylor stared at them. At first, she thought they were playing some kind of obnoxious game and considered driving away. Never in her life had she offered hitchhikers a ride, but she believed it would be uncharitable, sinful even, to abandon two small children on such a lonely road.

“What are your names?”

“We’re the Reticuli twins,” they said in unison.

“I’m Zeta 1,” said the girl.

“I’m Zeta 2,” said the boy.

They sounded sincere, but she still believed they were having a bit of fun with her. Against her better judgment, she told them to hop in.

“I’m Taylor, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you,” said the girl.

“Thanks for the ride,” said the boy.

They weren’t traveling long before the boy reached into his backpack and produced a crude map drawn in colored pencil on a carefully folded sheet of paper. He nudged his sister and pointed to a red square situated on a cockeyed purple grid. The girl shook her head and whispered in his ear. He pointed to another square, and the girl nodded.

“Excuse me,” Taylor said, “but there will be no whispering in this vehicle.”

The boy and girl looked at each other and giggled.

“Why are you making funny faces?” the girl asked.

“You gotta take a leak or something?” the boy said.

“I don’t appreciate vulgar language, young man?” Taylor adjusted the rearview mirror. “And you need to buckle your seat belt. That goes for you, too, young lady.”

The girl complied and said, “Take a left at the top of the hill.”

“We’ll show you a good place to go,” the boy said.

Taylor shifted into low gear and climbed the steep incline out of the valley. A moment later, they emerged from the shadows and burst into the mottled sunlight of a late April afternoon. Situated on a steep limestone ridge overlooking the forest, Heavenly Hill, like so many charming small towns in Ohio, looked as though it had seen better days. As she drove along the geometrically named streets—Diagonal Lane, Vertical Avenue, Straight Street—Taylor scanned the brick storefronts, and it slowly dawned on her that Heavenly Hill had become some kind of New Age tourist trap. The Galactic Gallery sold framed lithographs of lunar landscapes and ringed planets. The Time Warp sold vinyl records with psychedelic album covers. The Crystal Palace sold hunks of purple quartz, magnetized iron, and velvet bags filled with minerals. The Cosmic Serpent sold glass pipes and elaborate tentacled bongos with the heads of bug-eyed extraterrestrials.

The boy glanced again at his map and said, “Park over there.”

After rolling up the windows and locking the doors, Taylor collected her purse and followed the children to a squat brick building on the corner. Above the door, a neon sign blinked “Book Your Trip.” Inside, a man in his late thirties with bad skin and glasses so thick they left a purple indentation on the bridge of his nose, sat at the register, his red shoes resting on the counter. He smiled contentedly as he paged through a comic book but nearly fell out of his chair when the children burst through the door and skittered down the far aisle. He tossed the comic book aside, slapped both hands down on the counter, and opened his mouth as if to shout at them. When he saw Taylor standing at the entrance, he snapped his jaw shut and clumsily adjusted the pencils in his shirt pocket.

He regarded her in a curious way and said, “Help you find something?”

She offered the man an apologetic smile. “Actually, I was wondering if I could use your restroom.”

“For customers only.”

“Yes, I understand, but you see, I’ve been traveling—”

“Ain’t a rest stop,” he said.

“Of course, but—”

“Gotta buy something first.”

He stepped to his right so he could have a better view of the aisle. The children seemed to be in search of something very specific. They occasionally glanced in his direction and communicated with cryptic gestures.

“Well,” Taylor said, “I suppose I better have a quick look around.”

In a town called Heavenly Hill, she thought she might at least find a postcard of Jesus or a small leather-bound copy of the psalms with gold leaf pages. Maybe a prayer card or a box of white votive candles. Instead, Book Your Trip sold an assortment of science fiction comic books and stacks of self-published paperbacks on UFO sightings and alien abductions. The proprietor also sold flying saucer keychains, rocket-ship ball-point pens, and alien figurines with wide domed foreheads and child-like bodies. While examining an antennaed baby doll with green hair that was meant to hang like a pair fuzzy dice from the rearview mirror, Taylor wondered what possessed people to buy such things.

Ever since making a conscious decision to devote her life to Christ, she had renounced materialism and assiduously avoided retail shops, but rather than judge people when they flaunted their possessions, she contemplated the deeper meaning of a verse from Matthew. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” But what exactly did the Lord mean by the word “rich?” By historical standards, even the poorest American had more creature comforts than the mightiest kings of medieval Europe. Surely the Lord didn’t mean everyone was doomed to eternal torment. Wealth didn’t necessarily make a person evil or unworthy of love and forgiveness. As far as she could tell, instead of focusing their minds on the things in life that might truly give their lives meaning and purpose, most people focused their attention on the accumulation of disposable junk. Worse still, they lived in constant fear that they might one day lose the relatively inconsequential things they already owned. In Taylor’s estimation, the supreme goal of life was to find liberation from this mad yearning for material possessions, but after only one semester in college, she realized that so-called higher education was little more than an assembly line that mass-produced obedient consumers. It was, she realized, a religious system in which its acolytes were so well-trained that they believed this life, with all of its pain and sorrow, was the only one they would ever know. With such a depressing worldview, was it any wonder they attempted to assuage their misery and desperation with silly trinkets?

“You little monsters!”

The clerk, his cheeks burning red, rudely shoved Taylor aside and stormed down the aisle. The children squealed and ran in the opposite direction.

“Thieves, I saw that!”

The man went stumbling around the corner, but the children were too quick for him and dashed out the door. Taylor turned to the window and watched them flee down the street.

“You!” The man marched toward her, his right hand extended. “You owe me ten dollars.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“They stole from me again.”

“But I didn’t see them—”

“Ten bucks right now, or I pick up that phone and call the cops.”

Alarmed by the deranged look in his eye, Taylor reached into her purse and produced a bill.

“I don’t want to see them in here again, understand? And I don’t want to see you either.”

Taylor backed away from him and left without asking again if she could use the restroom.

Rattled by the confrontation and wondering why the Lord had sent her to such a peculiar place, she hurried after the children but didn’t see them anywhere. She walked three blocks and came upon a tidy town square where she passed a fountain and a white clapboard church that had been converted into a coffee shop. High above her, at the peak of the twisted spire, six or seven sparrows chirped a cheerful tune. Shielding her eyes from the dazzling spring sunshine, she noticed hanging from the belfry a colorful banner announcing plans for a nature walk to commemorate Earth Day. Although she disapproved of caffeine, she decided to ask if she could use the restroom but stopped when she felt a blast of cold water against her back.

The children darted from behind the trunk of an enormous elm and squealed with laughter. They ran toward a park bench and aimed a pair of squirt guns at her.

“Did you steal those?” she demanded. “I had to pay the man back there. He’s upset with you.”

She chased after them, but this only made them laugh all the harder. They fired again in quick succession, but when a police car rolled by, they abruptly holstered their guns in the pockets of their dirty cargo pants. The officer lowered his mirrored sunglasses and then rolled away.

“You need to return those toys,” Taylor said, “or I’ll turn you over to the police myself.”

“They’re not toys!” the boy said.

“They’re ray-guns!” the girl said.

“We need them to protect ourselves.”

“We’re survivalists.”

“Can you take us home now?”

“We accomplished our mission.”

“And it’s getting late.”

“We don’t like walking home after sunset.”

“We hear things in the forest.”

“You can use our bathroom.”

Taylor wiped away a bead of water dripping down her forehead.

“Haven’t you read the Ten Commandments?” she murmured, more to herself than to the children.

With some trepidation, she agreed to drive them home but almost immediately began to regret her decision. From the back seat, her two little passengers shouted confusing directions and accused her of driving like an old Amish lady perched on a buggy. Turn left, they said. Turn right. Now take another left. Back in the valley, they jounced along a maze of unmarked dirt roads, and when they came upon a shaggy buzzard feeding on the entrails of ripe roadkill, the children joyously took aim with their ray-guns and squealed with delight when the bird grunted and leaped away with a heavy flap of its wings.

The boy told her to slow down and turn into a gravel driveway partially concealed by a stand of Norwegian Spruce. The driveway was more like a primitive two-track road that hadn’t been used in months, maybe a year. It wound its way between trees and through thick scrub. The brambles and branches pressed close to the car and scratched at the finish. Taylor was beginning to feel claustrophobic when the trees suddenly gave way to a rolling meadow bursting with the brightest bluebells she’d ever seen. Under the immense dome of the cloudless sky, the meadow looked like a tranquil lagoon of lushest lavender. There was something else in that meadow, something she couldn’t quite comprehend, and she lowered the visor to cut down on the glare.

“This is the impact crater,” the boy said.

“You probably read about it in the brochures,” the girl said.

“Our parents bought this land after the famous meteor shower.”

“That was the year we were born.”

“All kinds of strange things started happening around here.”

“Mysterious lights.”

“A heavenly aura.”

“Sightings.”

“Abductions.”

“Our parents always said only gullible fools believe in space aliens.”

“They thought they could make some easy money if they built a spaceship.”

“But when that didn’t work, they decided money was just as foolish a pursuit as chasing after UFOs.”

“The inward trip, they said, that was the only way to understand the cosmos.”

“So, they retired to the forest.”

“These days, no one really visits Heavenly Hill.”

“Unless they’re lost.”

“But you’re not lost, are you?”

“You know exactly where you’re going.”

“That’s why you decided to come here, right?”

Taylor put the car in park and stared.

In the center of the meadow, floating ten feet off the ground, a flying saucer glimmered in the setting sun. It took a moment before she realized the saucer wasn’t actually hovering in the air but was fixed firmly to three sturdy legs bolted into immense granite blocks. An ugly thing with a dozen acrylic oval windows and a set of retractable stairs, the saucer was some kind of

prefabricated fiberglass dwelling that looked as though it had been incompetently riveted together and slapped with a thin coat of silver paint.

Taylor said, "Your parents don't live here with you?"

"They're forest dwellers now," the boy said.

"We haven't seen them in a long time," the girl said.

"Not since we were little."

"Sometimes we search for them."

"Whenever we go exploring."

"But the forest is very deep and dark, and we never hike too far."

"Maybe you can help us find them."

The children climbed out of the car and were nearly swallowed up by the bluebells. They resumed their intergalactic ray-gun battle and chased each other through the meadow. Taylor sat very still and listened to the insect sounds. If her windshield was any indication, the meadow was swarming with bugs, and it felt like she had crash-landed on a remote alien world crawling with intelligent life. She'd grown accustomed to the song of a single cricket obstinately serenading her from a dead shrub outside her dorm room window, but now she heard the unceasing drone of insects, and it occurred to her that, rather than meaningless noise, all of this buzzing and trilling was, in fact, a sophisticated form of communication, a million creeping critters, resurrected after the interminable winter, giving directions to food, or trying to attract a mate, or warning each other about a dangerous intruder. Half-expecting to find a mosquito readying its needle and rubbing its forelegs together in anticipation of a succulent meal, she scratched furiously at her neck and scalp.

The children ran beneath the saucer and called to her.

"Aren't you coming inside the mothership?"

"To use the bathroom?"

"We won't shoot you."

"We promise."

Too frightened to enter the saucer for fear it might sweep her away to someplace she didn't particularly wish to go, Taylor said, "I need to be on my way."

"You should stay here with us."

"Stay until our parents get back."

"They'll like you."

"You're a fellow traveler."

"They'll be coming back for us."

"Very soon now."

"They promised to return when we got tired of life."

"And we're getting pretty tired."

"Aren't you getting tired?"

"I have to go. I'm sorry." Taylor put the car in drive and forced a smile. "It was nice meeting you. Please be good until your parents get back."

The children were, of course, teasing her about their parents. Still, as she turned the vehicle around and navigated through the deep ruts and muddy craters, she looked into the woods and thought she saw two figures lurking in the long shadows. Behind her, the children disappeared inside the saucer and raised the retractable stairs. When she finally found her way back to the main road, Taylor was shaking very badly. Or maybe her old car was just shuddering. She turned on the radio and heard a small, plaintive voice insist over and over that Jesus was the cosmic master. This was a truth not to be denied, but as she sped away from Heavenly Hill, Taylor almost hoped to see a spinning silver disk rising above the forest canopy and vanishing into the fading light of a spring evening.

Kevin P. Keating's first novel *The Natural Order of Things* (Vintage 2013) was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prizes/First Fiction award and received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. His second novel *The Captive Condition* (Pantheon 2015) was launched at the San Diego Comic-Con International and received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal*.