

Different Enough To Be Similar By R. I. Weatherby

"How do you go from surviving in cities, to living in the wilderness?" This question played on the young woman's mind, while at her side sat a firm yet kindly elder. She respected him too much to actually voice her thoughts, but his words sounded so familiar that she struggled against her own ego.

"Always listen!" the wizened man impressed firmly enough to halt her internal thought process. "When you can hear birds chirping you're safe, but if you aren't paying attention when the forest grows quiet it'll be your final mistake."

"This I know," the young woman thought yet still she held her tongue. "It was tempting to filter out the constant overtone of voices, roaring engines or that barely perceptible buzzing from fluorescent lights. Walk wherever you will, but if the noise should fade you have entered deadly grounds."

The elder peered at her discerningly; was this child even listening, or had she been dismissing his words out of hand? Many times he had spoken of these very things, yet few seemed patient enough to hear him! "You have to watch where you walk too. Do you know why you shouldn't step over bear scat? Your overlapping scent is practically a challenge against their territory, but even if the animal isn't moved to anger it may still track you for fun."

"This too I know," she thought and bowed her head bitterly. "Back there you'd notice painted gang tags on walls, or suddenly see entire city blocks wearing only a single colour. You really had to know where you were going, and make sure you weren't wearing the wrong shade of clothing, otherwise you were lucky to walk away with your life. Even if they let you go someone would usually follow, and if your body or possessions were appealing you'd become little more than a toy for them to play with. Yes, I can understand the unpredictability of a predator establishing its territory."

"What's with that look on your face?" the Elder asked with growing frustration. "Think you know better than me eh? I grew up in the bush, and kids today don't realize how easy they've got it! Would you know how to find food in the wilderness, regardless of which season it happens to be? How about set-up a trapline, or locate the trail animals commonly use? Do you even know what scat is?!"

True laughter burst from the young woman's lips, and throwing back her head she gave it a noticeable shake. "No," she admitted aloud at last. While the aged man nodded knowingly she continued her private line of thoughts, "Not out here but in the city I could. I know how to locate unlocked garbage bins behind restaurants, and find bags that are FILLED with unsold food. Of course most businesses lock them, but gimme an hour in a strange city and I'll find a charitable organization; nobody starves on the streets, unless they don't know how to locate resources."

For a moment it seemed his words had gotten through, but as the woman's laughter subsided that peculiar look clouded her eyes once more. He knew she was holding back something personal, and couldn't understand why she didn't fully engage him. "Are you starting to see what it's like out there? You're not even close to anxious enough yet! Imagine having to find shelter: you must know what sort of ground you're on, plus the individual nature of any creatures you share it with, also which season it is and where you can gather lifesaving supplies. Then of course there's constructing your shelter, because even if you're lucky enough to find a cave something probably lives there already. How would you distinguish between an abandoned hole in the ground, and one that's in use?"

"The smell," she ventured and earned herself a nod. Mimicking his solemn gesture the young woman drifted into her own thoughts once more, "Only people like he and I can ever know a nose's true power. An oily looking patch of ground under a bridge could be urine, or perhaps it's the sleeping spot claimed by someone with filthy clothes. People's odours always told such unique stories, but when you're in a room of 200 slumbering bodies it becomes unbearable! Those were the creatures I shared my terrain with, and by their scent I could even detect ill intentions; oh the horrors that happened in the dark, especially against those who failed to nap with one eye open!!!"

Now the youth's expression sounded bells of alarm in his experienced mind, and he began to sense just the barest inkling of her prior experience. He wondered if maybe she knew more than her lips were able to speak, and for a time they sat in contemplative silence together. As the conversation stilled he noticed her offering him a cigarette, and accepting it with a smile he became further intrigued. "Màhsì' choo. You know, I've told all these things to my grand-kids but they don't listen. How come you care so much?"

"I live here now," she began speaking in a soft quiet voice. "This isn't anything like the place I matured in, but it seems that both cities and wilderness are different enough to be similar. Of course nothing I've been through can compare to your journey! Still," she paused, "it must have been wonderful growing up where you could form a mutually beneficial bond with the land."

The Elder began thinking his own private thoughts, "The last time they flew me out to Vancouver on medical it was a nightmare. I felt so lost, and nobody even noticed when I stopped to get my bearings. Is she really comparing life in the bush to that soulless place?" Taking a long haul off the cigarette he carefully formed a question before asking, "What did you learn growing up?"

"I learned to survive," she stated simply as the veil of memory overcame her senses. Trembling lips moved as the traumas flashed before her mind's eye, and despite an eagerness to be heard the youth wasn't even aware of speaking. "Being a teenager on the streets of a large city wasn't easy but, like most kids who make that choice, I was in less danger there than in my own bed. My generation would say I attended the school of Hard Knocks, but my favourite teachers were the homeless; from them I learned how to overcome regret, and take responsibility for every choice prior to even making it."

A piece of the puzzle slid into place within the aged man's mind, "She listens to me because it's a learned survival tactic! She DOES know that I speak the truth, and actually recognizes my sincere desire to arm her with wisdom." Once this realization settled on his mind he began to picture a child surviving on those unforgiving streets, and as his throat tightened with empathy he marvelled at the very fact that she was alive to sit beside him. His own life had been filled with trials unnumbered so he could relate to her struggle, "It sounds like you had a very hard upbringing."

"Hasn't everyone?" she asked with a sincerely perplexed look. "I've been inside the homes of wealthy people, and have heard them complain about how poorly their horses did in show. I've seen the brightest of my peers attend grade school with even brighter bruises, and watched them panic if any given assignment was graded at less than 100%. I've known children who became caregivers of younger siblings, and seen the silent suffering of latchkey kids who are waiting for their abandonment to end. Even so I have sat on the couches of criminals, and over a cup of coffee listened to them describe the last seconds of another person's life. I have comforted those women who sold their bodies in the night, and gripped their fearful hands as they recalled friends whose remains were never found. Rich or poor, successful or defeated; life is hard for everyone without exception."

He tried to guard his expression, but he needn't have wasted the effort on one who was so withdrawn in their own memories. His mind reeled as thoughts he kept hidden pushed across his consciousness, "How can she possibly understand so much?! Has the rest of this world really fallen so far, and damaged so many lives that this young survivor can sound so old? She speaks of living without regret by accepting responsibility for choices, and understands that each person faces challenges regardless of the public's perception. She seems willing, and maybe even capable of transferring her survival skills to this place." Straightening his stance the wise elder flicked his cigarette and looked at her, "Do you know how to make sourdough?"

"No," she confessed humbly.

"Have you ever skinned a freshly killed animal?"

"No but I've read about it," the young woman responded with more alertness. "I really would like a chance to try, and maybe even learn how to tan hides or dry meat."

"Do you know how to start a fire?" he pressed.

"I've never actually used the techniques, but I know the concept behind creating friction on a wooden platform using a stick." At last she became fully engaged in the conversation, "Iron pyrite can be found up here too right? I know that striking it against certain stones creates a hot spark."

"If you're willing to learn I'll teach you what I can," the Elder decided.