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SPOILED JOURNEY

THE ROADS THAT TAKE US



THEODOR
VENTSKEVICH

Theodor Ventskevich
Spoiled Journey. The
Roads That Take Us

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Аннотация

This book may appear to be too serious a read for not serious people and it is absolutely not serious reading for serious people. I am selling it here in case there are several people who are still at a loss as to whether they are serious enough or not. Siri goes on a deadly journey through a completely insane world to find his old friends. He will meet a crying dog, a werewolf princess, an exceptionally foul-mouthed infant, a quarter doctor, a time traveler, a mad sorceress and much, much more.

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Spoiled Journey

The Roads That Take Us

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Spoiled Journey

Prologue

I do not remember that I was not – it seems I have always been. I also do not think that I have changed much during this time. The world around me changed, yes, you would not envy it. But not me, not us. Because why change when it's so cool here right now?

Therefore, I was pretty surprised to realize that, for a hundred years at least, I had not seen my friends. And this was so strange that I at once made up my mind to hit the road.

Chapter 1 | Pat

I decided to start with Pat. She lived nearby, literally next door. But that is only if you go directly through Fall Forest, and quite few do. Truth to be told, nobody goes there. More specifically, no one returns. In general, with Fall Forest, it's all about saying, not going.

For example, they say it's always fall there and there is not a single green leaf on the trees. That the vines there end with a sliding loop that is rarely empty. That the hanged men of Fall Forest turn into dry leaves when they decay... That half the leaves lying in the Forest on the ground or falling from the trees are former people. They also say that when the wind rises, these leaves whisper in a wayfarer's ear the words that make him stay in the Forest forever. First, swaying on a branch, then falling down onto the ground with the other dry leaves – to wait for the wind and another wayfarer. In a word, it's such a cool place that only a real fool would miss the opportunity to visit it. Of course, I didn't miss it.

Well, I have never regretted it. Very beautiful, for real. Ground, sky, air – everything there is filled with dry leaves: yellow, red, ginger and all that. And yes, the wind crafts them into eerie, walking figures. Like people or animals or something – all done from dry leaves, all ragged, spotted and falling apart at each step. And yes, they talk – getting after you like hell and

whispering things into your ear. What things? Well, the things they believe will drive you mad. The time you wasted, the people you failed to save, the chances you missed... everything like that. But what could they say to a twelve-year-old boy who, moreover, does not mature? They could say nothing. So they did.

True, when I already was leaving the Forest, they called out to me once again. These two looked a bit more solid than the others, but still, there was sun shining through their bodies, and there was mold and rot and soil on them here and there. For all that, it was difficult not to recognize them. Father and mother, who else. They said they love me. Well, I love them too. They said they miss me. No problem, same with me. They asked me to stay with them.

«Sure,» I answered like I always did with them. «Another time!»

Then, of course, they started to coax me and that is such a bore, that I took out my cigarettes – just mechanically – and lit one. The leafy parents shut up at once and took to staring at me wide-eyed. The forest kids, you know. Going green, healthy lifestyle and all that. Then I see that I played the fool and I quickly spat out that cigarette.

My parents always told me that smoking was hazardous but I never took that seriously. Well, they were right and I was not. But then, it was too dry there. That forest with all its leaves blazed up in fire, and it was gone in a split second, like some damned dandelion. Once and for all. So, if you were planning a trip to Fall

Forest, just forget it. It's not there anymore.

All in all, this may well be for the better: each poet that failed to hang himself is adding up to a number of living poets, and the living poets adorn our life or, at least, I was taught to believe so. True, the minuses were there too. I was smeared in soot, I burnt all the hairs I had on my body and I stank. The girls do not like that, and Pat, with all due respect, was a girl.

However, when I got to where she was, all this nonsense flew out of my head at once. Pat's house was not there anymore. In its place on the hill now stood a huge medieval castle. The castle was clean, tidy and quite brand-new. It was disgustingly white, with countless small, silly turrets, and it was just asking for trouble, like to be destroyed or at least besieged. I limited myself to just spitting on the nearest wall and kicking it.

It was a bad idea, I admit it, as the wall at once fell. Falling, it slammed against one of the turrets, and that turret hit another wall, and then things moved on, and in a minute there was not a trace of the castle on the hill – only me and the clouds of settling dust. I felt a little bit ill at ease, because I had no idea how much medieval castles cost nowadays. Not that it really mattered, as I had no money at all. «Now, Siri, this is a problem,» I said to myself.

There was still a small hope that I would be able to fix it before the owner saw, so I started to raise the walls, propping up them with the towers, but that was no good. The damned castle was jerry-rigged with cardboard and was not going to be restored that

easily. So, I was standing all alone in the middle of the ruins, holding a piece of cardboard in each hand, trying to combine them somehow, when someone exclaimed right behind my back:

«Good Lord! That's horrible!»

I turned around at once and saw a princess. This was the real thing; with a gentle pale face, in a blue dress three times as long as she herself, with a crown on her head and a bouquet of flowers in her hands. I took it the poor thing was collecting flowers in the forest while I was destroying her possessions here. But then, if the princess lives here, what did she do with Pat? Anyway, that could wait. First thing's first – I had to appease the princess somehow.

«What happened here, sir knight?» the princess asked.
«Answer me! Was it a dragon?»

To be sure, that dragon was quite a gift to me.

«Yes, your highness,» I answered. «And a nasty one. I tried to shoo him away, but he would not go. I was yelling «shoo' and «scat' and «drop it' and even «bad, bad boy!» – all in vain. He just would not listen. Until he smashed everything to pieces, he did not fly away.»

For all I know about princesses, this is the only right way to speak with them. And what did I get in return?

«What the fuck, man? Are you joking me? What dragon, you doggone bastard? Are you nuts? Do you know how long it took me to build this fucking shit?»

«Wow!» I said, «It's quite a pleasure to see your highness being so smart and advanced. I believe I have enough education

here to answer all those «fucks' and «shits' properly, but the knightly codex would not allow it. Best to change the topic. There used to live a certain Pat here; and if your highness would deign to indicate to me, preferably without strong language, her new address...»

«I'm Pat,» the princess answered, «you, are a miserable wretch.»

«Sure,» I agreed. «In that case, I'm her elder sister. Nice to meet you.»

«Ugh, butthead!» the princess hissed. «Now. Wait.»

She turned away from me and started to do something with her face. Girls are always like that. If she turns away – she is probably putting on makeup. If she goes to the restroom – it is definitely to put on her makeup. If she is late for a date – you bet she was putting on makeup. If she didn't come at all – she just had no time to put on makeup. It's all straightforward and clear, the only problem is that Pat had a face no one would be able to copy in a quick minute. And then the princess turned around, and there she was: Pat in person standing in front of me! The cat-like, freckled face and the reddish pigtails are not something that can be easily confused.

«That's just great!» I said. «The castles, the princesses, the dragons... Have you not played for long enough yet?»

«Look who's talking! You haven't grown an inch since last year, you miserable dwarf. Why do you always come visit me out of the blue? There are only troubles with you. Well, what do

you want?»

Pat is Pat. I adore her.

«Okay,» I said, «I'm really sorry for the castle. I did not mean to ruin it. I looked in because I am gathering the old team... just to do something... like before. What do you say? Are you in?»

«I must admit, sir knight, I am unpleasantly surprised,» an icy voice answered, making me raise my head.

To tell the truth, before that, I was looking more at her shoes, because it's not very pleasant to look into the eyes of a person whose house (let alone castle) you just destroyed. Now I raise my head and what do I see? The princess again! When did she have the time to re-disguise herself?

«Yes, I am rather unpleasantly surprised,» the princess continued, «and not so much even by your appearance (which is not appropriate either; did you spend the night in the stable to look and smell like that?), as by the strange hints and proposals you have the insolence to make. You probably confused me with one of your girlfriends... with some Pat, sir knight, and your too obvious dementia is the only excuse. Get out of my sight, sir knight, until my patience is exhausted and I order my men to chop off that useless stump you undeservedly call a head.»

«Have you gone nuts?» I asked in astonishment.

«Headsman!» the princess called out.

«I'm here!» I answered.

«Chop off the head of sir knight,» the princess ordered.

«Just a second, your highness,» I said. «Where is that this «sir

knight'?»

The princess looked around in confusion and flung her arms into the air.

«Ah, I don't see him anymore. Apparently he escaped. What a shame! To dodge his own execution! No, I refuse to understand modern men.»

«Pat!» I called out.

«Unbelievable!»

«Pat!» I screamed right in her face. The princess shuddered and looked at me, kinda surprised.

«I'll be back soon,» she announced. «Wait here.»

She turned away for a moment, and repeated her focus with the return of Pat. I was silent. Because, admittedly, I did not understand what was happening here. Pat sighed and knocked on her forehead with her knuckles. The sound was not very good, but it was the expected one. Impudence, audacity, love of life – all that Pat consists of are stored in her heart.

«This is a mask, Siri,» Pat said. I was silent. Maybe, in the end, my brain is just not as large as I would like. In any case, nothing clever came to my mind. Just nothing. Meanwhile, Pat raised her hand for a moment and took off her face, revealing the princess. After that, she returned it to its place at once.

«Now you see? These are just masks. Pat's mask, the Princess's mask... Adult girls have many masks, Siri.»

«And where is...» I tried to collect my thoughts. «And where is the real Pat?»

«Of course, she is here, beneath them all.»

«Can I chat with her a minute?»

«No, Siri, you can't.»

She sighed.

«I can't take off the princess's mask. I got stuck in it. I played for too long. So, I grew up and the mask did not. Now it altogether cannot be removed.»

«What a hoax! Let me try.»

She smiled sadly.

«It will not work, Siri. I have had enough of trying already. Just believe me: they tried this way and that. Nothing helps. Nothing.»

She smiled meaningfully. Apparently, that was some kind of hint, but I know better than to ask. Nobody likes to look like a fool.

«I get it,» I said.

«There you go. But I can't always be a princess. This is terribly uncomfortable when it comes to physiology. It is absolutely impossible to eat normally, and visiting the privy is just hell. I had to make several other masks to wear on top. This one, as you see, is the former Pat. This is the office Pat. And this one...»

«Okay, okay,» I said. «I already understood. I am not a fool here. So what about gathering a team? Are you in or what?»

Pat looked at me with pity.

«You understood nothing, Siri. Princesses don't go hiking,» she said sadly and removed her mask.

«It's dirty on hikes, it's damp on hikes, there are insects there and the chamber pot is constantly lost...» the princess began to list.

«I completely agree with this, your highness,» I said «but can I talk with your maid of honor just for another minute?»

Her Highness gave me a bored look.

«Off with you, sir knight. We are not interested in your silly childish fun. Be off.»

Well, what did I have left to do? I told them all goodbye and was off.

Chapter 2 | Eddie

Just beyond the horizon the Night Country began, where I often visited when I was younger. It would have been silly to miss the opportunity to call upon it once more, hence by the evening I was already there.

Little had changed in my absence. Some parts looked a bit withered, rotted, or stale. Somewhere uninvited guests settled, but in general, it was just like I left it years ago. I even felt tears coming to my eye – to the right one, of course, which looks into the past. The left one, which looks to the future, never gave a damn; especially as it was three years now since it went blind, the darned thing.

Ah, that damned past with its rotten memories! Here, little Siri is lying in his little bed all wrapped up in his little blanket. It is dark in the room because evening is here and it is time to sleep. But how can you sleep if you are all alone? The world is so big and Siri is so small. How can you sleep, indeed? The moment you're asleep, you need to wake up again and go to kindergarten. Kindergarten! What a shitty word! It was invented by adults. Kinda garden, ha! Like hell it's a garden. Or, better, a hell of a garden. Hellgarten, that one would be right.

Siri wraps himself tighter in his blanket and slips away into the Night Country, where everything is safe, and very tasty because everything is made of bubblegum and marmalade. The colors

are all hues of pink and yellow. The flavors are strawberry and cherry. And the smell, of course, is also strawberry and cherry. Siri has his own little cottage in the middle of the woods that is buried in snows of cotton candy. Sturdy trees made of sugar protect the little cottage from enemies. The walls of the cottage are bubblegum, which, everyone knows, can't be destroyed. No hellgarten can get through.

I wipe away water from my right eye. Ok, ok, enough. What's the point in crying over the past? By the way, there is my old cottage, all candy and sugar, right ahead. Cool, yeah, but how small it is! Not sure if I could manage to stick in so much as my head.

Though, no. I am absolutely sure I can't. Because sitting on the porch, gnawing on a baluster, is some kind of ant man. His body is made of swarming live ants, spiders in place of the eyes, and all that. He is gripping the baluster with both hands and chewing it eagerly. Maybe it's not a baluster. Maybe it's a bone – if anyone is eager to know for sure, then they are welcome to come and ask. The dude should still be there, crumbs and ants spilling from his mouth onto the ground; the crumbs falling and getting lost in the moss; the ants running back to be absorbed by the guy's body – absolutely not the sort of thing I would ever like to see again. Anyway, not the sort of a thing to hang out with just for the sake of sticking a head into a candy toy house swarming with ants. To hell with the house. Too small, too sticky, too useless. No more hellgarten to stave off, no more childish fears to barricade

myself from.

I turned around and went to play the fool elsewhere. Because I knew perfectly well that you can go anywhere in the Night Country as long as it isn't northwest. And of course, I was too lazy to fetch a compass from the sack, and as a result headed directly northwest. When I realized this, it had already started to get dark. It was the wrong place to spend the night, but there was nothing to do: it gets dark quickly in the northwest.

I set out at once to search for a secure place to camp, but it was too late: I was already hearing howling. If only those were wolves! Wolves are fairly straightforward creatures: they will never harm you, other than by eating you. But that howling... It was the kind of howl that scares the soul right out of your body and makes it run without a single backward glance at its abandoned and defenseless home.

So, I was standing there and felt like crying, or dying, or, anything, just so I wouldn't have to hear that sound. But, instead of the sound stopping, I heard it much better now. Meaning – closer. Having grown up in these places, I knew it was useless to run. So there I stood and waited, as everything around me was growing darker and darker, and fog continued to rise from the ground, and something howled closer and closer to me and, finally, I saw it, emerging from the fog...

A spaniel. A Russian one. It was black and white, no collar, his hair matted and dirty, his ears covered in burs – quite a monster of a dog. However, good news, it was still a dog and

not a monster. But I had never seen such a miserable and stupid canine. A sagging, melancholy muzzle, red watery eyes with drooping lower eyelids, and a pink snotty nose tirelessly sniffing for something. One could recognize in it a lost dog at once. Such a thing will look for its owner until it's dead. He sniffed at me indifferently and slouched to look further.

«Hey, bro,» I yelled, «where are you off to? You don't have the slightest idea what this place is, right?»

The spaniel stopped and stared at me with his dark, sad eyes.

«Listen,» I said, «Don't leave yet. I will set up my tent in a minute. Trust me, in these places, you will be much better off inside it. Besides, I have some sausage.»

The spaniel thought for a moment, sighed and lay down. He laid his head down on his paws, stuck his snout in the moss, and howled. Normal dogs raise their heads when they howl – this one lowered it to the earth. Well, not that it was any of my concern. My concern was to put up the tent, to tuck fir tree branches under the floor, and to dig a trench around it for the rain. After finishing that, I made the large fire near the entrance and lit the largest firefly I was able to find inside it. The whole thing looked really cozy.

«Come in,» I invited the spaniel, «the sausage is waiting.»

He paid me no attention – just looked at me with his joy-killing eyes and said nothing.

«Listen,» I said, «In these places, it's either you eat inside, or you are eaten outside. As simple as that, bro.»

That got through to him. He slowly lifted his ass, staggered over, and collapsed again inside the tent. I took a moment to tie up the entrance a bit better and dove into my sleeping bag. The spaniel instantly lay at my feet, put his head down on his paws and stared at the tent wall.

There, on the wall, a shadow play began. Someone was tearing off someone else's head, somebody was knifed and axed and sawed, others were just eating each other. The sounds only made things worse: all that cackling, whining, moaning and screaming. Basically everything that made sleeping impossible.

«Let's read something,» I said, and pulled a book out of my backpack.

It was named, simply and nobly, «A Feat», by one H. Potter. A real heart-warmer, five solid stars from me. All about the heroic everyday lives of ordinary people (like you and me, gentlemen). The author, for some reason, first calls us muggles, then simplemen, but that's not a big deal, right? The idea, that's what really matters. And the idea of this Potter is the whole life of an ordinary person is one continuous feat. From dawn till dusk and from birth till death. Inspiring, right?

Just imagine: a muggle does everything all alone, by himself, without so much as a single wave of a magic wand. Amazing. The author seems to be especially impressed with the fact that these people find the strength to enjoy their lives. Is this not a feat, is this not a triumph of the spirit, asks this enthusiastic H. Potter once per page.

The author of course bends the truth a little. The picture he proposes to his readers is this: a common muggle gets up early in the morning (with a happy smile on his broad, weathered face), eats his breakfast (half oatmeal, half smile), grabs his shovel, goes underground and starts digging a tunnel to get to his office (joking and smiling all along the way). Once at his work place, he immediately starts to move an enormous pile of shit with his shovel from one place to another. Smilingly. After everything is in its new place, he heads home. He finds out that the tunnel has already collapsed, smiles understandingly and starts digging it anew. When he is finally at home, he smiles at the empty freezer and falls asleep, not forgetting to smile happily.

Well, I suppose, yeah. I agree with the author. It's really an amazing epic. In fact, I had just made it to the chapter about horcruxes. The author seemed to be kind of obsessed with living a healthy life, therefore he suggests they not actually be used. He doesn't advise that anyone attempt to make one, and seriously worries about anyone who decides to do so anyways. Muggles here are the most at-risk category. The author brings in statistics stating that literally every muggle had taken part in making a horcrux at some point in his life.

If the author is to be believed, the process goes something like this: a muggle finds an individual to mate with and puts a piece of his soul inside of it, and then it becomes a horcrux. Later this horcrux-person will disappear, leaving the muggle with a rather poor choice. He can either search for an escaped vessel in the

hope that he can extract the contents out of it somehow, or he can start all over again and search for another storage place, which is risky, as the soul has its limits and sharing it all over the place doesn't work. In extreme cases the muggle can completely lose a human face. Then he turns into a creature known in science as a «heartfreak vulgaris.» It looks exactly like an ordinary dog (canis vulgaris) with one small difference. Namely, it can sob, cry, and throw tantrums.

I had to stop reading here because it felt like I had peed myself. The entire bottom part of my sleeping bag was wet. I was already starting to turn red, when I understood that the fault was not mine. It was the damned spaniel that had started crying rivers. Tears came pouring out of his sad eyes, down his grim muzzle, and onto the floor where it gathered in a puddle right under my sleeping bag. I petted the poor thing and continued to read. And then, all of a sudden, it dawned on me!

«Now,» I said, setting the book aside and watching the spaniel cautiously, «let's see, who might you be? An Erich? A Key?»

It was like I had already seen this sad mug before. That drooping nose and dull eyes reminded me of... And then it hit me. I knew that face!

«Eddie?!»

The spaniel began to wail. Tears came gushing from his eyes, and snot from his nose. He threw himself on my neck and howled right into my ear.

«Wow, Eddie,» I said, «long time no see, bro. Okay okay, stop

keening and let's just read and see how we can fix this.»

I flipped through the book and began to continue reading aloud.

«Unfortunately, the process of transmutation into «heartfreak vulgaris' is absolutely irreversible. The maximum modern medicine has been able to provide is to teach the afflicted to follow simple commands like «stay, «sit', «down', and «fetch'...»

And then, all of the sudden, the spaniel stops wailing and a weird expression slips into his eyes. Something like «whythefuckdidInothangmyselfyesterday?», but a little more complicated than that.

«Eddie,» I said quickly, «now we don't need any hasty decisions here. Everything probably isn't as bad as it seems to you. There should certainly be some positive aspects too. Like, you don't need to wipe your ass anymore, and you can run faster and... Why, you look much better now! Such a handsome doggie... Do you remember who you were before? A pathetic nerd and eternal loser. You don't need that.»

Eddie calms down and quietly whines.

«You know what?» – I continued quickly, as the hay should be gathered while the sun is high, – «I truly think it is much better for you this way. For real, Eddie. Forget it. I'll buy you a leash and a collar. I promise. Just imagine: such a nice little collar with your name and rhinestones. Listen, you know the commands, don't you? Sit! Lie down! Yeah! Good boy. Good Eddie. What

a fine fellow, what a smart doggie!»

Chapter 3 | Tim

All the night Eddie whined, barked, howled, scraped the floor of the tent with his claws, and sobbed nonstop. This caused a large puddle on the floor and intolerable dampness in the air. That night I did not close my eyes for a second, and with the first rays of sun jumped out of the tent – away from the temptation to stop Eddie’s (and my) torments drowning him in his own tears.

Skipping breakfast (all the food, including the canned food, was thoroughly salted by Eddie’s tears), we set off. The journey was exceptionally far from being pleasant. Eddie continued to sob incessantly, and I felt sleepy and kept stumbling with every step. A wet tent and a soaked backpack did not improve the situation. In addition, Eddie was running ahead on dry land while I splashed through the puddles left in his wake, slowly but surely gathering onto myself all the mud in the forest.

By noon, it dried out a bit in the sun, and things went better. Or, rather, they would have, if I had not been three-quarters dead from fatigue by that time.

«Enough,» I said. «Stop. Stop right here. This place is no worse than any other to die in.»

Eddie kinda did not hear me. On and on he went, without even turning, and soon enough he was entirely lost between the trees far ahead. I called him and I shouted for him until I got hoarse, and I waited for him on the spot until the evening, but...

Okay, that's not true. Actually, I just hid behind the nearest tree and stood there very quietly until his sobs faded away. Not good of me, I know. Just ugly, I agree. Despicable, yeah. But, gosh, if you knew how good it felt! I felt great immediately. Energy, positivity, and a will to live filled me out of the blue. I put the backpack on my shoulders and set off, taking care to keep considerably to the right of the direction in which Eddie disappeared. Somewhere ahead, as I remembered, Tim had lived when I last saw him.

I had remembered correctly and by the evening I was already approaching Tim's house or, rather, hut, from where yellow framed windows shone affably in the distance. I had already opened my mouth to shout out my greetings, when I tripped over a tree root and, falling, hit my head on another. Everything around me faded, the yellow windows rushed over the horizon like shooting stars, and instead of a nourishing supper and cozy bed at Tim's house I had a wacky and hard dream.

I dreamed that I was lying in the forest on a pile of fallen leaves, with my hands folded under my head, chatting with my friend Tim, who lay beside me in exactly the same position.

«Siri, are you a friend of mine?» Tim was asking.

«Now, that's really nice!» I answered. «Have I ever given you a cause to doubt it?»

«Never!» Tim confirmed solemnly, and manipulatively asked: «You will not fail me this time either, will you?»

«No,» I replied, starting to get angry. «Whatever it is, you can count on me.»

«Then listen carefully and try to remember,» Tim continued, not paying attention to my offense. «As you wake up, go right to the barn behind my house and fetch three things there: a chainsaw, a gun, and a bottle of milk. It's all ready and sitting right at the entrance. Will you remember?»

I nodded.

«Good,» Tim continued. «So, take all the junk and come back to this very place. You can leave your backpack and tent in the barn so you don't need to haul them back and forth.»

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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