

CHILD *of* GILEAD

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The Hurricane Group

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Wolf and Boy is a Native American legend of unknown origins.

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Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

—JAMES 1:27 (NIV)

If you think that you can only touch God by abandoning everything in this world, I doubt very much that you will touch God.

—THICH NHAT HANH,
GOING HOME: JESUS AND BUDDHA AS BROTHERS

Thus saith the LORD; for three transgressions of the children of Ammon, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have ripped up the women with child of Gilead.

—AMOS 1:13 (KJV)

ONE

“Take the road less traveled, my son. Always. No exceptions.”
Sounds like the start of a fairy tale, or some sort of fable. Kind of like the ones they read to us in school. But it’s really Mama’s playful way of talking fancy. It’s just her way of reminding me about her golden rule. Her law. And though they’re words that Mama can’t claim as her own, “They do,” as she always tells me, “reveal a higher truth about what it takes to live a more meaningful and transcendent life.”

“Most importantly,” Mama is quick to add, “the Road Less Traveled is the true way, and will best keep a child away from harm and danger.”

All this elegant talk beats Mama just saying, “Boy, just do as I say. Take the long way home. Never take the shortcut.”

But taking the Road Less Traveled makes life a little more difficult. It means getting off the bus a stop early or riding in the last car of the train and walking out the station’s back exit.

Both put me about four long blocks further from my home. A real pain. Mama doesn't care.

Perhaps that's because the path she prefers I take seems almost too good to be true. There are nice brownstone homes set along quiet, tree-lined streets. You pass my school and its peaceful playground. You never see any children playing there. Nor do you ever see a Mr. Lonely—that's a man with no family, no friends, no home—sleeping on one of the park's benches. There are a lot of churches along this path, too. Some are small storefront churches. Some are big and look like cathedrals, like the one Mama and I go to. Mama says, "Walk this way home and you'll know that God is in this place. You'll see all that you *need* to feel good about life—a nice home, a school nearby to enrich your mind, and an altar to worship at." Most importantly, Mama says, "There's peace and there's quiet along this path, so you can listen to God talk to you."

But The City is a kind of funny place. You can walk a few blocks and feel like you found a little piece of heaven. Yet, turn a corner and watch out! You're surrounded by...madness! That's what Mama calls the world outside the peace and quiet of the Road Less Traveled. She calls it... The Madness.

It's kind of hard to tell where the Road Less Traveled ends and The Madness begins, and vice-versa. The circular path of the Road Less Traveled flows into The Madness at opposite ends of a simple two-block cluster of small storefront businesses. Businesses like Chef and his Golden Sun take-out spot, and Injun Rah's pizza joint. The Madness is where you'll find brothers and sisters from the Dark Continent selling traditional garb

at their fashion boutique. And not long ago, The Madness was where you'd find my grandpa's old candy shop. A sort of general store. I can't tell you much more, because I'm not allowed to go there. It's an old, battered corner store. It sits across the street from what had been, at one time, an old gangsta social club called Illusions. Illusions' window used to be black with its name written in script and in dripping blood red paint. But now it's a nail salon with a windowpane that is large and clear, so that when you look inside, you see a group of lady manicurists from the Far East at work. The Madness is the world. It's a place where you can find anything and everything you want. I think that is good.

But Mama says, "No, no, not so fast. Don't be fooled by those profiting amid The Madness." According to her, there's no nobility in always giving people what they want. "Drug dealers give people what they want. Does that make them noble?" That's Mama talking. I'm just a kid.

"Stay away from The Madness. Take the Road Less Traveled, my son. Always. No exceptions."

Mine is the story of a little boy who doesn't always listen to his mama.

TWO

There's a light that shines dim but steady at the point where a smoothly-paved road leading out of town meets the ragged, rock-strewn path of the low country. It's a tiny speck of light, one that radiates from within a battered wooden shack store that stands alone and secure amid the vast darkness of an open field.

Inside, the Old Man stands behind a glass-encased counter filled with candy. He is lean and sinewy, robust and fit for a man in the early light of his sixties. He surveys his empty store with a keen eye, searching for anything he may have forgotten to do before closing. The Old Man sees that all is well.

But this is no ordinary closing for the night. He has made plans that will take him far from here. How long he'll be gone, even he can't say for sure. One week, two weeks, perhaps three. So, this pause to look around the shop one last time has more to do with reassuring himself that the people of this village will

be ok. The Old Man hasn't told anyone of his leaving. He'll just up and go without notice; kind of like the way he seemingly appeared out of the blue ten years before. Cruising along this unpaved road, he spotted a group of children playing beside an old, abandoned shack, and the small, empty home behind it. This was the place the Old Man had been searching for.

It belongs to me.

In no time, the tiny home out back was tidied up and rebuilt and became the place he would call his own. And just as fast, he had a hand-painted sign in the doorway of the once-abandoned shack. It read simply: Hannah's.

No one needed to ask the man where he came from. The people of the village deemed him as one of them and embraced what he had to offer. A little country store set along an open dirt field—three miles from the center of town, and a quarter mile from the last cluster of ranch homes along the main road. For adults, it offers a welcome respite after a long day of work at the slaughterhouse. The Old Man always has a cooler full of cold drinks, and a group of picnic chairs out front for them to sit on after a day spent spilling the blood of lambs.

Still, only a handful of adults actually make their way to Hannah's on any given day. Perhaps they're scared off by the steady flow of children who, when they hear the Old Man ring the bell on the front porch of his store, seem to magically emerge from the thicket of trees just off on the horizon; many of them hopping across the stream that runs deep and forever steady out in the back of the little house. Leaping from one bank to the other, the children know that Hannah's is really

their place. At first glance, the Old Man seems to have very little to offer them except a small assortment of candy and ice cream bars. But the children come because they are welcomed. The land around his small shop is their playground.

However, the time has come for the Old Man to tend to business up north in The City, a place where there's a million lights that shine higher and brighter than those here in this little village. There are answers to questions he's been waiting on for years. The time has come to seek them out.