

Note: In *Alone on Earth*, when the actors come to Signal Bend to get a sense of the people they've been cast to play, there are a few references to Show's difficulty facing Lindy Timmons, the young actress cast to play Daisy. This short story, in Show's POV, takes place during that time.



*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.*

—Robert Frost, "Nothing Gold Can Stay"

The girl sitting to his left looked nothing like Daisy.

No. To be fair, she did, a little. She was skinny. No chest or hips to speak of. That was like Daze. And her hair was short, cut in a like way. A 'pixie cut' or whatever Holly had called it. But this girl was fashion-model pretty, and Daze wasn't. She hadn't yet been, anyway. She would have been, if she'd had the chance. Daze was all braces and glasses at the end. Near-

sighted and snaggletoothed. She'd been bony, too, her knees and elbows practically the widest parts of her arms and legs.

She would have been beautiful, if she'd had a chance to grow into all her parts. She'd had gorgeous blue eyes and the prettiest mouth. Her mother's mouth, the lower lip pillow-full. She'd been smart as a whip and good-hearted, but with a sharp little streak, too, that came out in funny sideways comments that went over her mother's head. Her eyes showed all that—the wit, the smarts, the kindness, the hope, the light—and made her beautiful despite the fact that her body hadn't caught up yet.

This girl didn't have that. She was just a pretty girl. Pretty on the outside.

Show sighed and sat forward in the broken-down leather chair, resting his arms on his knees. "I don't know what it is you're looking for, missy."

Lindy Timmons, the actress cast to play Daisy in the Signal Bend movie, shrugged. She looked small and scared, and, buried in his resentment and freshening grief, Show sensed a little bit of sympathy for her. "I don't really know, either. Maybe you could just tell me about her?"

Not a lot of pity, though. Show huffed and shook his head. "You think it's possible for you to get to know my dead girl if I sit here and tell you stories about her? I already talked to the damn writers. What do you need more?"

Lindy's eyes got wide and then dropped. After a beat or two, she took a deep breath and looked up at him. "I'm sorry. This...this role scares me a lot. I've never played a real person before. I don't know what's going to help me. I just know that I don't want to dishonor her."

"How old are you, missy?"

"Twenty-three. But I play young."

Show laughed and sat back. "You 'play young.' Right. I don't care what you 'play.' You've already had a lot more life than Daisy got. Half again the life she got."

"I feel like you want me to apologize for that, but I don't know why."

It wasn't her fault. This slight little thing sitting on a clubhouse couch, looking pale and fearful, wasn't Show's enemy. He'd signed on for this, had offered up Daisy's story so that Lilli wouldn't have to relive the worst parts of hers. He'd done it to save Lilli, and because the story couldn't hurt Daze anymore. It had hurt her as much as it could while it was happening. It had killed her. And now she was safe from any more pain.

But he wasn't.

The thought of this girl *being* Daisy, becoming the only Daze the world would ever know, because *his* Daze had never gotten her chance to shake the Signal Bend dust off her boots and shine the way he knew she would have—that thought was too fucking much. He could feel the dark coming back on him, the vicious, serrated edge of the shadow that had taken him over for a year after she'd died. He had his life back. He had Rose and Iris back. He had Shannon. He had happiness he'd not known in his life before now.

And still, sitting here with Lindy Timmons, confronting the truth that his eldest girl would never be more in this world than a character in a movie, was too fucking much. It threatened to undo everything he'd made of his life since he'd crawled out of the dark.

"You don't need to apologize. Not your fault. But I can't talk to you about her. I'll never make you see her for who she was. There's no way you could ever be her."

"Maybe you could help me see who you saw, though. I don't want to be her. What I do is like...it's like a painting. A portrait. You don't look at a portrait and mistake it for the person it represents. You wouldn't, like, talk to it and expect it to answer. But if it's a good portrait, you recognize the person in it. And a really good portrait tells you something true about the subject.

That's what I want to do. Not be Daisy. But make her recognizable." Lindy lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. "I don't know if that helps, or even if it makes sense."

Maybe this girl was more than just a pretty face. Show stood up. "Come on."

Lindy sat where she was, but her face took on a mask of complete surprise. "What?"

"You want to know something about Daisy. Come on. I'll try to show her to you." He held out his hand, but Lindy didn't take it.

"Go where? I don't...I don't want to ride your motorcycle with you."

"No, girl. I only let my old lady ride bitch with me. Daisy's mom never let her ride with me, anyway. We'll take the club van. Come on."

She hesitated for another few seconds, just staring up at him. He held his hand where it was and waited. Either she went with him, and he'd try to show her what he couldn't say, or she didn't, and he'd be done with this whole sorry enterprise.

She took his hand and stood.

~oOo~

He drove them out to the pond on Ted Calland's place. The farm itself was fallow now, the house derelict. The Callands had been foreclosed on several years back, and Show had no idea where Ted had packed his family off to. It wasn't much of a farm when it was going, and the house had devolved into little more than a weather-beaten shack, its rusted tin roof bowing under the weight of time, neglect, and hard Midwestern winters. Show guessed there wasn't enough good farmland left on the Calland plot to warrant the attention of one of the agricorps that had taken over half the land around town. So maybe this place would just lie fallow for eternity, crumbling into the earth.

What it lacked for farming, though, it made up, at least as far as the townsfolk were concerned, for hunting. The woods on the property were the exactly perfect density to draw wildlife, and back in the middle of those fifty acres of forest was a gorgeous natural pond, good size, but definitely no lake, sunk into a rise in the earth like a crater, one side a smooth bank that was a virtual red-carpet welcome for thirsty animals.

That's where he intended to take Lindy.

He parked the van and got out, not bothering to say anything to the little starlet in the bitch seat. He just walked a few feet in front of the van and stopped, waiting. When he didn't hear the door open after a couple of minutes, he turned and saw her still sitting there, staring at him. He stared back, and finally she opened the door and climbed out.

As she walked up to him, looking like she was waiting for him to pull a piece on her or something, he stayed still and quiet.

"Why—why are we out here?" There was a quiver in her words.

"You want to know Daisy. I'm going to try to help you. C'mon. Got a little walkin' to do."

"What? Where? How far?"

The little chick really was worried he was going to do something to her. "What do you think's gonna happen, missy?"

"I don't—I just—I'm not—"

He laughed. There's a pond. Over that rise. It was a place Daze used to like to go. I'd take her hunting out here, and we'd have our lunch sitting on a log."

"She hunted?"

He held out his hand, and when she took it, he pulled her forward and they headed to the pond. “With me, she did. Never shot anything, though. She used a bow—her mom never would have let her use a gun—but the only time she ever even nocked an arrow was at a target on a bale of hay. We’d mostly come out and just sit. Be quiet. Not a lot of quiet to be found at home. Once or twice I took a deer, but she didn’t like that. Their eyes made her sad when they died. If I really wanted game, I’d go out with my brothers.”

He hadn’t been hunting since before Ellis. He hadn’t been here in all that time, either. The pond was more overgrown than he remembered. The log they sat on to eat their lunch was there, though, the bark worn off and the wood under it a little smooth from use as a bench. Dropping Lindy’s hand, Show walked over, through knee-high reeds and weeds, and sat down on the log.

It was autumn, and the leaves were turning and falling. Over the surface of the pond floated a mottled skin of dropped leaves, in colors ranging from pale yellow to dead brown. The weather was yet warm enough that insects had not disappeared entirely, and a couple of water striders left weak wakes over the otherwise still, green surface of the water.

Lindy sat next to him on the log. At first, he felt affronted, intruded upon, but when he looked over at her, she was sitting quietly, watching the water as he had been.

In this moment, sitting on their log, watching the water, the autumn sun dropping toward the horizon and turning burnished gold behind her, she looked like his Daze. So much that the sight stilled his breath, and he had to turn away.

After a spell lost in his own memories, he said, “She used to come out here on her own sometimes, too. The house is only a couple of miles over that way.” He pointed northwestward. “Said she liked the noise—if she sat out here long enough, they’d get used to her and start up, and she could sit in the middle of the frogs and birds, watch the sunfish and bluegill pop up for some bugs. She told me once that it made her feel invisible. That worried me some. I didn’t understand it, why that would be a good thing, and she never did explain it so I could. But I think I have it now. I think she didn’t mean invisible the way I took it.”

“Did she mean ‘camouflaged,’ something like that?”

Show flinched and turned to consider Lindy. He’d almost forgotten that she was there, that it was her to whom he’d been speaking, and he certainly hadn’t expected her to speak back. “No, not camouflaged. She wasn’t hiding. I think it was more... *accepted*. Like she belonged here.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. I see that. That’s cool.”

“Yeah. Cool.”

He had not felt Daisy’s presence so keenly since she’d been alive. Sitting on this log, at the edge of a pond in the middle of forgotten woods, he felt her everywhere. In the smooth spot on the log. In the still-detectable path up through the weeds, overgrown but not yet overtaken. In the skim of the striders and the occasional lazy bubbles of fish slowing in the autumn chill. In the guarded croak of one intrepid frog, not dissuaded by their human presence. In his memories of her and him, just the two of them, sharing a thermos of soup and a few white-bread sandwiches, their bows propped behind them. And of her sitting quietly next to him, tucked into foliage, her bow across her knees. Watching deer amble comfortably, safely past.

Feeling her with him so powerfully, he felt the loss of her even more. The ache was so acute and so sudden that he doubled over with it, his hands on his knees. His girl would have been breathtaking. She would have seen the world. She would have had a big, beautiful life. She was good and loving and calm, and she would have made the world a better place, the way she’d

made his small slice of it better. His girl. His girl. His glorious girl, filled with a golden light that never had a chance to brighten the world.

“Showdown? Are you okay?”

At Lindy Timmons’ questioning concern, Show stood and walked back to the van. He didn’t bother to check if she was coming, but he heard her trundling behind him through the weeds.

~oOo~

“Show? Are you okay?”

Show pried open his eyes. Shannon was kneeling at his side, her hand on his shoulder. He was home, splayed out over the living room couch. He had no idea how he’d gotten there, but somewhere along the line, he guessed a bull had taken a shit in his mouth and then died in there.

Christ. Had he ridden home? He never rode drunk.

“Where’s my bike?” The words came out as if through gravel and broken glass. He seemed to have misplaced his tongue. Shannon didn’t answer him, and he tried to make his eyes work. Her expression was confused. Maybe she hadn’t understood him. Maybe he hadn’t even spoken. He tried again. “My bike.”

“What about your bike? Show, what happened?” She brushed her hand over his face, her thumb caressing his cheekbone. He knocked it away.

“Is it here?” He forced himself to sit upright, and the world went red and hazy. “Fuck, woman. Where’s my goddamn bike?”

Shannon stood abruptly and walked away. From the front window, she said, “It’s on its side in the front yard.” Even through the angry racket of the worst hangover he could ever remember, he heard the clipped syllables of her pissed voice. “Do you need me to take you to the hospital?”

He was sick, but he wasn’t dying, and he didn’t think he was hurt. “What? No.”

“Good. Then I’m going to get ready for work.” She left the living room, and he could hear the steps creaking as she went up to their bedroom.

In the quiet she left behind, Show forced his head to make thoughts. Any thoughts, so long as they were straight thoughts. Lindy. He’d taken her to the Calland place. To Daisy’s pond. Then he’d taken her back to the clubhouse and started drinking. He didn’t think he’d ever said another word to the little starlet. He damn sure didn’t remember.

Daisy. Fuck. It had been a mistake, taking Lindy to the pond. It had been a mistake talking to her at all. Now it was like his girl’s violated, broken body was still fresh, like the scars on his heart and memory had been torn away and left the wounds of grief still bleeding.

And he’d pissed Shannon off. He started to work his way off the couch, but he couldn’t make it. The idea of climbing the stairs made his stomach roll. So he stayed where he was and stewed in his hangover. She’d have to come down eventually. No way out of the house from the second floor.

~oOo~

She took her time, but finally he heard the distinctive knock of her heels on the wood steps. She’d dressed up today, sounded like. Oh, right. Show remembered that she had a meeting with a prospective bride.

He watched from the couch as she came off the stairs and into the front hall. Without pausing, she reached for the knob on the front door. Damn, she really was pissed. Had he said something?

“Shannon.” His voice was still raw.

She stopped, her hand on the knob. Then she turned to him but didn’t come to him.

He started to apologize, but he wasn’t yet sure why. He had no doubt that she deserved an apology, but he wanted to know what he’d done. For all he knew, he’d been an utter shit. She still wasn’t coming, though, or saying anything.

“I need you.” It was all he could think of to say. And it worked. Her posture changed subtly, her ramrod-straight resistance easing, and after another thoughtful hesitation, she stepped into the room and came to sit next to him on the couch.

She was beautiful. He loved the way she looked always, but when she was dressed up for work, it was liked she’d stepped out of a classic movie. Nobody else in town dressed like his old lady. Today, she wore a dark grey dress that hugged her sumptuous curves, with a shiny black belt that made those curves stand up and shout. And her legs when she wore high shoes like this? Christ. Even through the pain of his hangover and his fully revived grief over Daisy, he wanted his wife. He reached out and put his hand on her stockinged knee. Shannon wore stockings in cool weather. Not pantyhose. He knew if he slid his hand up her lovely leg...

She pushed his hand away. “I have a meeting this morning, Show. What is it you need?”

Still that sharp edge to her voice. “Why are you mad, hon?”

She laughed, but she obviously found nothing funny in the morning. “You won’t talk to me. You’ve been a thundering ass since yesterday, and this morning I wake up to find you passed out on the couch. I’m worried, and when I try to help you, you bark at me about your damn bike. I guess I’m just not feeling like you’re my favorite person to be around just now. I’d rather be at work and let you sort yourself out alone, which is clearly what you want.” She turned her face up to his. “It’s what you always want lately. You won’t talk to me.”

He’d been feeling dark the past several days, since before the actors started coming into town, dredging up old shit again. He thought he’d had it under better control, but apparently not. Show pushed the wall of hangover back a little and focused on trying to talk to his wife. “I don’t like the actors around. Guess it’s just got me down.”

“I thought you liked Doug.” Doug Warness, who was preparing to play him.

“Yeah. He’s okay. Still hard to talk to him, but I got nothing against him.” He sighed. “Lindy Timmons came in yesterday. I talked to her.”

Her expression transformed instantly from resistant anger to loving concern. “What? Show—why didn’t you tell me? I thought you weren’t going to talk to her.”

He shrugged. “She was there, and...I don’t know. I talked to her. It tore me up some. Sorry I brought it home.”

Shannon reached out and brushed his hair back, combing her slender fingers through his mane. He closed his eyes and leaned into her soothing touch. “What can I do?”

Her voice was soft with love. He liked that sound so much better than the brittle tones of her earlier words. But there was nothing she could do. He shook his head, and for a few minutes, they sat silently on the couch together.

“She died in the morning.”

“What?”

Until Shannon’s startled question, Show hadn’t realized he’d spoken aloud, but he continued his thought, finding solace in her audience. “I was thinking about it yesterday. I took

Lindy to the Calland place, to the pond Daze liked to hike to. Watching the sunset, seeing the leaves falling into the water, I thought that Daze died in the morning of her life. Or the spring, maybe. My Daisy. Her life was all promise. And then it was just gone.”

Shannon didn't reply, not with words. But her hand, her fingers still laced in his hair, moved to the back of his head, and she pulled him close. He tucked his face against her neck, took in the sweet smell of her skin, the soft silk of her hair, the steady thrum of her pulse against his cheek, and he let her love give him succor.

He had lost much. He'd had his Daisy for a mere fraction of the life she should have had. But his life, even without her, still had promise. The woman in his arms was proof of that.

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