

## **The Hike**

a short story

The morning sun painted the sky with inviting hues of pink and gold as he pulled into a little dirt lot on the side of a gravel road. He had been looking forward to getting away all week, and after a moderate amount of online research he landed on this trail, about 90 minutes outside the city. The trail promised a sense of tranquility that he yearned for, and was lacking, in his busier life near the bustle of downtown. Now that he was parked in the lot and out of the car, he took in his surroundings, along with deep satisfying breaths full of all-natural, organic air. He laced up his new shoes, which were technically meant for “trail running,” but that he mostly used for leisurely hikes like this one. The sun was warm and the sweat was already beginning to mingle with his banana-scented sunscreen. He noticed that his car was the only one in the lot except for an old beat up pickup truck that looked more permanently abandoned there than waiting for its owners to arrive later that day.

He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, then focused on the sounds around him. The primary driver of this Mother Earth symphony was the wind whistling through the magnificent pine trees dotted along his chosen mountain path, but it was by no means a solo performance. Weaving in and out of the wind were the buzzing of insects, the rapid knocking of a woodpecker, pebbles trickling down the slope of the hill, and a thousand other sounds that he couldn't identify. This ongoing acoustic performance of the forest would provide an alternative, and comforting, option to what he would soon play through his headphones.

He peered up and out to reaffirm the beautiful weather—a robin’s egg blue soaked sky popped with tufts of cloud. As he was turning his gaze back to the start of the trail he couldn’t help but notice an ominous shade of gray deep in the Eastern distance, but quickly blinked it out of memory and began to step one foot in front of the other, up, up, up the hill.

It soon became apparent that the trail wasn’t very clearly marked, and he quickly found himself on no distinct trail at all. The forest was dense, there were no people to be seen nor heard, and the sun was beaming through the leaves, illuminating the bright green grass and pink and yellow wild flowers dotting the ground. The beauty and seclusion was giving him the sensation of stumbling upon a near-mythical secret garden.

He was in no hurry, and so meandered calmly up and across the side of the hill; clambering over boulders and always taking time to admire the views that presented themselves through the trees and into a valley far below. He observed the mass of gray in the Eastern sky seemed to be slowly creeping in his direction. This time he was not so successful in blinking it out of memory.

When hiking he liked to listen to a collection of classic rock and folk music—not necessarily his favorite genres but something about the twangs of guitars and banjos, oft with lyrics about long hard nights and lonely country roads, always felt apropos to him for hiking. Underneath his feet crunched pine straws, and long blades of grass as weeds grazed his shins.

Through his headphones, Jim Morrison serenaded him.

*This is the end, beautiful friend. This is the end, my only friend...*

He tuned out everything but the music and continued upward, feeling content. The weather was holding up nicely and he relished in the solitary nature of the excursion thus far. Who needs other people anyway? He grinned and fell into a rhythm with his movement and the music.

Roughly an hour into the hike, he leaned against a tree to catch his breath. He'd been walking aimlessly, but with fervor, telling himself (arbitrarily) that he HAD to make it to the top. From the North, traversing across the hill, he noticed a large dog with curly cream white fur bouncing up and down, sprinting directly toward him. Was the dog baring its teeth? No, in fact the pup appeared to be cheerful and looking for a new friend to pet her. He obliged, relishing in how soft and buoyant her white fur felt under his palm and admiring her emerald green eyes. About a hundred feet out, a couple followed, speeding up in an attempt to retrieve their retriever.

One of them called out toward him, "Sorry! She's very friendly."

As they pulled up to him and their dog, he assured them that he loves dogs and not to worry; one of the owners cut him off and between breaths, asked, "do you happen to know if there is a trail around here?"

He didn't.

"I don't." he replied, quickly adding a "sorry" as he struggled to maintain eye contact.

“Ah, yeah, ok, we thought maybe we just didn’t see it, but now we’re thinking there may not be one at all.”

He made a point of looking all around, as if in this moment he might magically find what they were searching for behind him, and simply shook his head.

“Right. Well we’re going to head down toward the parking lot. See ya down there!”

“Ok” he managed, along with a small, forced chuckle, despite not being sure if that was meant as a joke.

The couple diverted away from him and started heading East, down the hill, and one of them shouted back, “Come on Ruella!” as the dog sprinted back in their direction.

Soon they were out of his sight. Headphones back in.

*It hurts to set you free. But you’ll never follow me. The end of laughter and soft lies. The end of nights we tried to die.*

He continued along through the sea of big beautiful pine trees, virtually all of whom had lived far longer lives than he, and displayed scars and cracks along their trunks, a result of their perpetual battle with the elements. He paused to appreciate their struggle; a kind reminder that no individual, no group, no genus nor species owns struggle. Struggle is ubiquitous. And so is overcoming it. Another lesson provided by the wise trees who still stand tall before him. The scarred and cracked trees who still provide shade and shelter and comfort to others.

His thoughts started wandering into the realm of non sequitur, existential musings.

Purpose, or lack thereof. Legacy, and its relative importance. Relationships, and/or their complexities, their significance. His *own* relationsh...

He snapped out of it as a roaring bellow of thunder plodded across the sky. He looked up to find that the scattered bursts of cottony white cumulus had quickly been replaced by dark rivers of portentous fog. He paused his music, took one of his headphones out, and looked all around him, taking note of the seemingly infinite forest in all directions, and finally back up in the sky, which now swirled above with ashen clouds that hindered the sunshine from reaching him.

It seemed that a clearing near the top was bathed in sunshine, and although he did not have a good sense of how far away it was, it motivated him to continue. And despite the labyrinthine maze of trees, bushes, and branches he had to navigate, he trudged on.

Although the dark cloud cover and thick forest around him were lending to decreased visibility, he did not see any other fellow adventurers anywhere around him. He was now fairly certain he was alone. It soon dawned on him that not only did he seem to be the only hiker in his immediate surrounding, but he seemed to be the only living, breathing being at all. He had taken both headphones out now and the quiet was eerie. Not even the insect... Thunder exploded nearby, demolishing the previous silence with it, and startling him into picking up his pace upwards. He noticed lightning rip through the air above him, branching out like deadly tendrils of destruction.

The eerie silence had fully settled back in when his thoughts began to wander again. The thoughts grew decidedly darker, more chaotic, as if mimicking the sky above. He ruminated on all the loved ones he had lost. A swirl of death and regrets flooding his mind. Why had she been taken from him? And why does HE have to deal with the grief. Is this it from now on? Is he next?

*SNAP*

He swiveled around to try and locate where sound of a branch breaking seemed to come from, but all he found behind him was the same expanse he saw everywhere. He slowly rotated a full 360 and felt his heart beat rising as he took note of the *sameness* that surrounded him, and a voice beginning to rise that *something was off*. Something was not right. Again he quickened his pace, heading towards the clearing ahead. Yet the clearing still appeared to be the same distance away to him as when he first noticed it. He thought, how is that possible? Hadn't he been hiking for hours now? He checked his phone to find that it hadn't even been two hours. Why did it feel like so much time had passed? His time in this forest felt closer to twenty hours than two at this point. His increasing heart rate was now being accompanied by a slight tightening sensation in his chest. He stopped and leaned against a tree and gazed up to find a grand web of lightning pierce through and across the fog. He also began to puzzle over the lack of rain to complement the thunder and lightning. He then hoped he hadn't jinxed himself into a downpour. Does he even believe in jinxes? No, he knows deep down he can't, but then why does he allow the thought to enter at all? Why entertain it? If his perception is his reality and he can change his perception then perhaps he holds power over his realit—

## ***SNAP***

He was now fairly certain that something was either following him or fucking with him. The physical result was the same regardless: dizziness. His head began spinning as his legs churned on automatically, desperately seeking to locate a sense of safety or comfort for his tortured mind above. The colors of the forest—which had seemed so pictorial, so vibrant less than an hour ago—were now blurring together into a macabre greyish-brown.

He stumbled backwards up against a tree and slid down into a seated position against it. He was beginning to hyperventilate. Deep breaths: one, two; deep breaths: one, two; deep breaths: one two. He was clenching his eyes shut when he heard a familiar sound. The sound of a pup walking across the forest floor and panting. He opened his eyes to find the retriever he had seen earlier was standing ten feet away from him, tail tucked, and curly maple brown fur and ocean blue eyes staring directly into his. A smile crept up his face, yet as he neared the dog a growl began rumbling out of her. He stopped.

Wait, weren't her eyes green? And her fur was...

He heard another familiar sound: "Sorry! She's very friendly!"

The couple from earlier seemed to have emerged from the blur. He waved at them and reassured them that it's *still* ok, and that he *still* loves dogs; he emphasized the "stills" and chuckled to imply he was only teasing.

The couple looked at each other and then him with a blank face. Without another word they leashed their dog, and walked back the direction they came and down the hill until they were out of sight and sound.

He slowly lifted himself off the ground and looked around in bewilderment.

Why had they acted like they didn't know him? Had he offended them? Was he wearing something ridiculous? He was sweating and realized he hadn't put on his antiperspirant that morning. Maybe that's wha—

Another thunderous cry rattled above him and he was fairly certain he heard the hideous snap of lightning hitting a tree branch somewhere in the not-far-enough distance.

Something innate in him whispered, "Carry on, only forward." And so that's what he did. But he couldn't help himself from looking over his shoulder, constantly dwelling on what was behind him, even obsessing over it. His feet carried on, left, right, left, right, but his eyes now seemed permanently fixated behind him, and his thoughts carried an heir of regret as he pondered why he didn't take a different route to get to where he was. Infinite possible routes and he chose this one; would he have chosen a different one if given the chance? He debates this with himself. Spiraling into it. Inwards he travels over the coals and fires of doubt and shame, all the while the snapping of twigs and branches picks up in frequency and volume behind him. He's sprinting now with tears streaming down his face, blurring his vision as he looks back to see a looming figure appear to be trailing his every movement in slow methodical steps.

His throat begins to close in on itself, presenting him with the sensation of choking. A wave of fear courses through him and reaches a crescendo. He stumbles over a rotted tree root, and suddenly, the world seems to spin around him. He sinks to his knees, clutching his chest, as waves of panic engulf him. Time has become an elusive concept and now the



thunder is ceaseless—a deafening, all-enveloping white noise filling every crevice of the air around him, replacing the oxygen with its senseless fury.

He closes his eyes and sits down, clutching at the ground beneath him so as not to be thrown from the earth, and waits for the figure to continue approaching him, knowing he could not beat it. The figure—with doubt on its breath, and self-loathing in its heart; leaving regret in every step and failure its stench—would reach him any moment now, and that would be it. He would die on this hike. But perhaps that’s why he went on the hike at all. The thoughts of impending doom boiled up in his head like some vague stew containing all the ingredients to ensure the next sip is his last. And where had the music gone? It seemed to be replaced by a scratched record, distorted and haunted as it repeated the same line over and over again in his head.

*This is the end...this is the end...this is the end...this is the end...*

Yet with his eyes closed and awaiting the doom-ridden fate that he was certain would befall him any moment, he felt a flake of warmth on his cheek. And for the briefest moment, *all* he felt was that warmth on his cheek. He felt it for what it was in that moment. And he felt where he was, and why he was there, until he opened his eyes again to find that sunlight had begun to peak through once again, streaking across the forest canopy, like threads of gold slicing across the leaves.

***SNAP***

The dread still lingered and so he took off in a sprint once more, tear streaks now caked onto his cheeks as he contemplated that what comes next may kill him. He continued to lurch up the hill until he reached the tree-line and staggered across it, letting the sunshine swathe him. Letting it absolve him of his sins and burdens. His breathing began to return to its regular cadence, and he slowed his pace down until he finally fell into a quick, steady rhythm in the direction of the summit. The foreboding slop, which had previously filled his head to the brim, drained of its contents until, at last, not a drop remained. His eyes quivered open and he saw all remained between him and the top was craggy rock submerged in sunlight and wisps of golden grass, moving like waves in the late morning breeze.

The details of what transpired in the woods just moments ago had already past its melting point and were now evaporating from his memory bank. Why had he been so afraid in such a serene locale? Was he ever really in danger? He was able to let these question and others of its ilk fall to the wayside like the pebbles tumbling down the mountain around him. Instead he took the remaining steps to reach the plaque that stated the altitude at the top: 11,109 feet.

The view from the summit was spectacular. The forest below, once a source of trepidation, now held a sense of renewal. Stretched along the South and West, he saw nothing but rolling golden foothills splashed across the horizon. To the North and East mighty peaks stood tall, stoic and unbothered. A lone bench sat at the top of the summit. It appeared to him some sort of commemorative or memorial bench. He wandered over to it and his

suspicions were confirmed. A bronze and green plaque in the center-back of the bench read, "In Loving Memory of Jo Russell. Mother, Wife, Sister, Daughter, Friend." It was also accompanied by a peculiar image that he recognized as a stylized outline of the American Sign Language symbol for "I love you." He made the symbol with his left hand as he sat down on the bench. Then, leaning back, he placed the symbol in the foreground of his vision, letting the bright white of the sun beam through his fingers and imagined it being mirrored back to him by her. He lowered his hand and looked out, and around him, taking in the majestic views with a smile. He had not accomplished much, but it was not nothing. Surely, a small victory worth celebrating with a smile.

Yet again in the distance, lingering in the East, a swirl of charcoal gray clouds smudged against the sky. He must remember, they're *always* there, but rarely remain.