

Downpour

We arrived an hour before nightfall. The roof looked like folded paper sitting on top of four rough walls. The hut was a foot or so above the ground to guard against the many things that crawl across a jungle floor. There were two cots and three of us. Laid out in the middle of the room was one pitiful bedroll.

I've slept on plenty of floors before, even with my cushy upbringing. This one was different. Insects and spiders of varying size and scuttling speed covered the floor. They were on the walls too. We decided an extra six inches would at least provide the illusion of safety.

We settled it as idiotic, testosterone fueled teenagers often do, with a gladiatorial test of strength. The loser would take the bedroll, marooned in a lake of insect life. Dylan was nearest to a bed and quickly staked his claim. He was also a hulking mass of human being. He went unchallenged.

"So only one left then," I said. I gritted my teeth as if ready to bare them. Jay was much smaller than I was. He looked worried but not afraid. We were friends after all.

"Man, I was on the floor at the last place. Come on"

"Then take this one," I grinned nodding at the bed. "Rule of the jungle and all."

He came at me fast, double-legged me to the ground. Jay was wiry, but I was stronger. He tried to choke me out so I brought a knee up and flung him to the ground. There was real anger in his eyes now.

"This is bullshit," he spat.

I laughed. Jay gave me a hard push. I wheeled into the bed-frame and knocked my head against the wall. Hard. I saw red. I wheeled around and clocked him just below the temple. It connected harder than I meant.

After it was over, Jay lay down on the bedroll. He said nothing, just held a hand to his head. Dylan looked at the ceiling as if nothing had happened. All that could be heard was the buzzing from outside and the pounding in my chest.

The sun set beyond the glassless windows. The jungle, as it always had, hummed with life and sound.

We went about the next day like nothing had happened. We found a narrow bridge that stretched across the river. The rope looked well worn by hands that had come before us. Mosquitoes and gnats assaulted our faces. Despite the rustic accommodations and the biting insects, we smiled the smile of boys too stupid to be ever be sad.

The river was a light shade of green, glimmering in the last strand of sunlight. The water lapping against the rocks made quiet music. Each one of us paused to appreciate the melody.

"I wonder if there's a way in," I said.

"No way in hell would I get in that water," Jay scoffed, visibly disgusted by the idea.

"We're doing rafting in like two days, you still not getting in the water then?"

"That's different," he countered. He glanced away, rolling his eyes.

"How?"

"Because I heard there's this parasite in the water that swims into your dick and lives in your balls. They have to cut your dick off." Jay explained, miming the crude gesture.

"Well there's no sand bank or anything, just tons of grass and trees."

Jay conceded. Sweat dripped past a dark purple bruise on his face. I looked away quickly before he could catch me staring. I felt a stab of shame. We sat for a while until the sun finally disappeared behind the untamed treeline. The warm sun gave way to grey twilight as clouds approached. Our guides warned us to move indoors. Rolling clouds loomed behind them. Safe inside, it was only us and the uninvited insects. We went on a rampage.

Each one of us began slaughtering the insects like we were being paid for each kill.

"Got a fat one,"

"I only got the legs on this one"

“Hit it again!” The limping stick-bug tried desperately to escape Jay’s onslaught.

“He’s getting away,” Dylan yelled, sweat dripping as he raised his shoe again.

“I’ll finish it off,” I proclaimed with gusto. The stick-bug tried to inch away, dragging its shattered hind legs along. I lifted my foot and brought it down until I heard a satisfying crunch.

After the war was over, we sat, finally able to relax now that the room had been cleared. Eying the corpses of the fallen insects, I felt guilty. Yet the fear of tiny, scuttling shadows eclipsed my morality. My mind reeled with the thought of hearing the soft fluttering of many legs scraping against wood and skin.

Then the storm hit. The heavy drumming of the rain silenced the ambient noise of the jungle. No birds cawing. No insects buzzing. Everything had taken shelter from the downpour. There was no thunder or lightning striking the sky. Only the heavy deluge of water rattling against the wood like thousands of seeds.

For many, a rainstorm may sound like soothing like a lullaby. The soft, rhythmic ticking of the drops against wood and glass. But for some reason, I felt electrified. Compelled to be out in it, in the jungle, to experience the storm. I felt it pull me out. The storm called to me.

“Guys, we should be out there,” I whispered into the dark.

"In the rain?" answered Jay from beneath his covers.

"I saw a path that went into the jungle and I think it loops around."

"And if it doesn't loop around?" Dylan asked, his voice full of doubt.

"Then we walk back the way we came, easy." I got up to open the door. The rain misted around the frame like a portal.

"Alright. I'm in. You up for it, Jay?"

"I'm not going." Jay said. The words stuck in the air for a moment. There was nothing defiant and rebellious in his voice. Just empty resignation.

"Hey Dylan, would you mind going ahead to ask around and see if anyone else is interested?" I gestured to the cabin closest to ours. He nodded and walked out. I turned to Jay. "I want you with us for this, man. It's us three. Can't have you sitting this one out."

"Yeah...well I don't know if it's us three anymore," he said. I could see him biting his cheek. "After yesterday. I don't think I'm in anymore."

"That was...it was shitty. I never wanted to be that guy," my stomach knotted. I could not find the words. No TV punchlines or renegade cop movies ever had the lead apologizing for beating a friend.

"I wouldn't care if it was someone else. Everyone else gives me enough shit as it is. It's that it was you,"

For some reason the limping stick-bug came to mind. Me looming over it as it struggled.

"Sorry."

I wiped the rain from my face and turned to walk away. I only got a few feet before I heard Jay coming up from behind me.

"It's alright."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah I guess. But if you get us lost, I'm convincing everyone to eat you first."

I grabbed his shoulder and grinned. Then we set out toward the jungle to meet Dylan.

The three of us were drenched within moments, but I had never felt better. My skin tingled in the tropical air. The rain hit my warm skin like pin pricks of lightning. We broke into a sprint.

We raced at breakneck speed to the next dwelling, manically knocking on each door, recruiting more rain worshipers. Behind me I could hear the whooping of revelers and the sound of feet pounding soil. Still running, I looked back. I saw at least twelve more people had joined our expedition.

"This is it!" I said, pointing to an overgrown path leading deep into the trees. The jungle was dark, but the faint moonlight fell through the canopy on to the trail. I yelled, leaping over roots and into puddles with joyful abandon. I yowled the howler monkey's screeches back at them until the jungle was full of noise again. The splatter of mud, the sound of laughter,

each turn unexpected and new. The leaf-cutter ants, unaware of trampling primates, went about dissecting the treeline.

"This is insane," yelled someone from further back.

"Keep them going Jay, I'll catch up" I called, jumping aside.

"You sure?"

"Never been so sure, now run!" Jay beamed and threw up a hand to motion the group to follow behind him.

The train of people followed him into the inky blackness of the jungle. The sound of the troop faded along with their footsteps. For the first time, I was alone. Alone but not isolated. Now, I felt only the constant rain and the life surrounding me. The entire biosphere moving and reacting. I've never been religious, but if there is a God it is in those leaf-cutter ants. It's in the tall Ceiba trees. It's in the calls of the howler monkeys. Maybe it's in the pounding rain, or in boys too stupid to be sad. I stood in reverent silence, and part of me is still there.

Back in the room, Dylan and Jay had already grabbed the two available cots. The room was muggy and the musk of sweat filled the air. The water dripped into puddles on the floor. I ran hand through my hair to wring out the moisture.

"That was intense," Jay said.

"I know, right?" I replied.

"I can't believe we got everyone to come, it's crazy," said Dylan. He then turned toward a beetle which had followed me in from the storm.

"Ah damn, thought we got all of em'. I'll grab this one," he said raising his shoe.

I put out my hand. "It's okay. Let's let this guy live to tell the story."

The two boys looked at me incredulously.

"You gonna go vegan now? Get a *Pura Vida* tramp stamp?" Jay said laughing.

"Not just yet," I said, setting the black beetle outside the door, "I just don't feel like killing it anymore."