

Easy Way Out

I always went out to the park to smoke weed. I did it all the time. Nothing bad had ever happened. I don't understand. Weed never made me all that tired, like maybe the first time I smoked it, but all it usually does is relax me, makes me feel good, think clearer, it never puts me to sleep. It never knocked me out so... completely.

It was four in the afternoon, during daylight savings time, Friday. I went out to the park, to a spot I like way out in the woods, like I do all the time. There's an old fire watch tower or whatever you call it, and then a five to ten-minute walk out to a pond. There's this tree that's got this warped shape. It grows out of the ground at a sharp curve, almost like a PVC elbow, then it curves up, forming a natural chair overlooking the pond. The pond is fed by spring water or something, it doesn't look like normal ponds with all the green shit growing on it. It doesn't have that nasty pond smell. The water is tinted blue. Close to the shore it's pretty clear, it's only out in the middle, where it's deepest, that it gets real dark so that you can't see through. The bottom is all rock, not much algae grows on it. I've never seen fish in the water. We're at the edge of the mountains, pretty high elevation, so I think that's why the pond is the way it is. I think the pond is the top of some underwater cave. It's real peaceful out there, a great place to smoke. I don't know why I never see anyone out here, but I'm glad. It's a great place to take girls; really romantic at dusk, you just want to make sure you make it back to your car before it gets dark.

I sat on the tree, lit a bowl, and stared out at the pond like I always do. Usually I just go out there when I need to be alone, clear my head, when something's weighing on me, a bad day or whatever. This time I went out there just because. I had some time to kill, an extra day off 'cause the company was experimenting with 4-10's. I like the new schedule, though I think the response to it is mixed. Some people really like it, like me, some people really hate it, like Vanessa. Vanessa is an over-achiever though, really needs to relax, and I'm not saying that just because I'm a pothead, which I am, and I'm not embarrassed by it. Before I got my weed card I was depressed, unmotivated, borderline alcoholic. After the weed card, not depressed, my work has dramatically improved, and I barely ever drink. Anyway, Vanessa doesn't like the 4-10 schedule because the break isn't long enough for her to work-out, so now she's got to do a shorter work-out in the morning. When she gets home, she's barely got time to cook dinner and then work on her social media presence, which she wants to be able to do full-time, before going to bed. She's paranoid about getting enough sleep, she read a book about it, sleep I mean. I understand though, you don't really get much time after work on a 4-10 schedule.

I follow her on every platform she's on, and it's not because of her sparkling personality. She's nice enough, I don't mean to sound like an asshole or anything, she's just a little high-strung for me. Stresses me out sometimes. She takes a lot of pictures of herself, and diet and exercise have clearly paid off. She has come up with some pretty good recipes too.

Maybe it was because I was already kind of relaxed, I don't know. It was a beautiful day. I had a real nice exchange with the pretty girl at the gas station. She was working the register. I know it's cliché, like really cliché, but the first thing I thought when I saw her was what's a nice girl like that doing working at a place like this? What I really thought is why is this hot woman working at a shitty gas station off the interstate. Pretty sure she's the owner's daughter. They're Indian, I think. All that to say, I'm definitely going back to that gas station, well I would but... I'm getting ahead of myself.

Maybe it was because I was relaxed, maybe the new schedule threw me off a bit, I don't know, but I swear I just closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them it was dark. It was so dark I thought I had gone blind, but when I fell off the tree seat, I could see grass with what little moonlight there was. I

pulled my phone from my pocket and shook it, so the flashlight came on. I could see, it was just night. I swear I had literally just closed my eyes for a second. I didn't feel groggy or anything like I normally do when I wake up, which realistically could have been because of the stress of waking up in the middle of the night in the fucking woods. Cortisol or whatever bypassed the whole sleep aftermath, dropping me right into fight or flight. I thought it was a trick, though who would do that? More importantly *how* could anyone do that. It was night, my phone said AM. I had slept for almost nine hours, that's way more sleep than I get most nights. Something was majorly off about the whole thing.

I didn't know what else to do so sat back down on the tree. I turned the flashlight off on my phone to preserve battery. I have good battery life thankfully, unlike certain inexplicably popular brands. My first thought was to use the flashlight to walk back to my car, but while I could make my way to the pond during the day, I had no reason to think I could make it back at night by flashlight. There was a good chance I could make it back to the tower, the fire watch tower or whatever it's called, but even that, I really wasn't sure. There was hardly any moonlight, so looking up all I saw was the first row or two of branches. Normally you can see the tower if you're standing at the pond shore looking back in the direction of the highway, and while I didn't venture too far from the tree, I could tell that I wouldn't be able to see the tower. There was a good chance I could find my way back there, just from memory, I'd been on that trail so many times, but it didn't seem worth the risk. So basically my two options were to sit on that tree for another four hours until sunrise, feel totally exposed, or try to make my way back to the tower, and feel slightly safer, like I'm in something of a shelter, roughing it without being completely at the mercy of nature.

Wandering in the woods, with a flashlight, and only a vague idea of where I was going, seemed like a worse idea than just waiting for sunrise. Sitting for four hours, being terrified of every woodland sound was pretty horrible, but still seemed better than wandering lost. My only real concern was wild animals. I knew, and this terrified me, that bears had been seen in the area, and obviously if one found me sitting stupidly on that tree in the middle of the night, I would be totally fucked, to put it politely. Wolves I wasn't sure about. It seemed likely that there were wolves around the area, but I hadn't heard stories about them like I had heard stories about bears popping up and scaring people, which always ended up on the local news, because filming a bear with your phone is more important than running for your life apparently. The point is I didn't think wolves would be an issue, but a bear, which was just as bad, or worse, could be. I had never really thought about that in all the times I'd come out here, but since night is the perfect time to think about everything that scares you, I found myself lingering on the idea of being eaten alive by a bear. That's the thing, if a bear showed up, and mauled me, there was a good chance I'd still be alive, just barely, while he was eating me. He'd rip a piece off of me, chew it right in my face, swallow me, start the process of turning my flesh into caloric energy and it's byproduct, all while I bled out underneath him, overwhelmed by pain beyond which I had any useful point of reference, pain which would consume the senses, drive them to the point of madness and bright-light hallucinations. All my vitals, just protein to this asshole. If I thought about it, which I did because I'm an idiot, I could hear that low, throaty, groaning bear-roar you always hear in online videos and video games. I could imagine a massive shape leaning over me, tearing me to pieces. I imagined the smell, though I don't know what bears smell like, so I substituted wet dog. I imagined the pain, that gaping void where my thigh used to be. All animals are serial killers. We can wax eloquent about ecology, balance, the circle of life, but no living thing wants to be torn to pieces or left alive long enough to see those pieces in the mouth of their murderer. This is one reason I don't like cats, I might be wrong, but I don't think there's any other animal outside of humans with a propensity for torture. My father always said that what we hate in others is what we hate in ourselves, in this case I'm referring to ourselves collectively. I don't like torture.

Back to my choice: 1. Stumble mostly blind through the woods in the hopes that muscle memory takes me to the tower, which in the long run is an actual shelter, or 2. Just relax and wait, blind and exposed, but not *lost*, blind and exposed. Four hours is a long time to be uncomfortable, alone, and afraid, but it's do-able. People have suffered far worse. There's no reason I couldn't man-up. I'd probably end up falling asleep again anyway. People sleep outside all the time. Four hours is not a long time in the grand scheme of things. Then I heard something rustling in the bushes and I realized that four hours is an eternity. Lying in bed on insomniac nights, four hours felt like they would never end, how much worse would they be sitting on a tree in the middle of the woods? Probably much worse.

The rustling in the bushes turned into movement in the grass a few feet from me, though I couldn't really gauge the distance just from sound. I shifted on the tree and the movement froze. I could tell that whatever it was, was looking in my direction. I could sense it was on the smaller side, so I wasn't too afraid, unless it was a badger, or a skunk. Were badgers indigenous to the area? It could be a wild dog though, and those can be dangerous; but if it were a dog it would be growling, or avoiding me altogether, or if it were rabid it would have already attacked. Still no movement. There are cougars around here, but again it would have already attacked, and it would sound bigger, there'd be no way that I'd be aware of it before it was aware of me. Maybe it was a bobcat. I pulled out my phone, ready to use the flashlight, but stopped just before shaking it. If it were a skunk, the light might scare it, and then it might spray, which would make for an extremely uncomfortable night. Whatever it was made some chattering sound and in a panic I shook my phone. The flashlight turned on and lit up an Opossum, which hissed, trying to look scary, but it didn't fool me. We stared at each other for a while, and then it slowly ambled off into the dark.

It was weird, the flashlight made the woods a lot scarier. I shook my phone and the light went out. How the hell do people go camping? Nature very quickly loses its charm when the sun goes down and you have no reliable source of light. Thank God it was warm at least.

My ass was hurting from sitting on the tree for so long, so I stood. I leaned up against the tree instead of sitting on it. The tower was sounding better and better. This is how idiots die. But I wasn't an idiot and I wasn't going to die. I refused to end up being one of those stories people tell about morons dying in the woods doing something moronic. I was out here all the time; this was so stupid. How in the hell did I fall asleep for so long? The weed wasn't even that strong, and it's never knocked me out like that. This experience had ruined a perfectly good, exceptionally beautiful place to have a private toke.

Something splashed in the water. I'm embarrassed to say that the first thing I thought of was a shark. After the initial twinge of fear, I scoffed, calling myself a dumbass out loud. Obviously, it wasn't a shark, and even if it was, there wasn't much it could do to me. It was likely a beaver, or an otter, or something like that. Could it be an alligator though? Pretty sure we didn't have those around here. Would an alligator, come up out of the water, walk twenty feet, which was a total guess, grab and drag an idiot the same twenty feet back into the water? Are alligators nocturnal? I could ask my phone, but that would take battery power.

More splashing. Then there was quiet just for a moment. It was weird, I couldn't see but three feet, but I felt something out there, watching me. I heard a high-pitched cooing sound, like a pigeon, but prolonged like a purr. More movement from the water, and from the sound I could tell it was moving from the far side of the pond towards me. That strange purring sound grew louder. Then the giggle. My body went cold. Goosebumps accompanied the shudder that ran through me. Something in the water, moving in my direction, had giggled. It sounded like a child.

The decision had been made for me; tower it was. I pulled my phone from my pocket, shook it, and headed into the woods, following the light, trying not to let panic take over.

I thought, and this was crazy of course, it could be a mermaid. In actual lore they're not cute little things wearing sexy sea-shell bikini tops, which would never be sexy in real life, and they'd be crazy uncomfortable I would think. I don't have boobs but seriously, a sea-shell is a rough, unforgiving shape that wouldn't conform to your body at all, but I digress. A mermaid is a carnivore, just a like a bear, just like any animal warped cruel by nature. There was no such thing of course, but I didn't know what else would be in a pond in the middle of the woods giggling at an idiot.

There was movement behind me. Whatever it was, was following me. I started running, letting the branches cling and scratch me along the way. My coat got caught in a branch and I left it. Thorns of some kind tore holes in my t-shirt and raked their way across my ribs. I prayed I was going the right way, literally prayed.

Again, I heard giggling behind me. There were rustling sounds, but they weren't even loud, whatever was following me was better acclimated to the woods than I. I fumbled through the dark, crashing through every bush and re-bounding off every tree like a pinball, I was surprised I could hear anything outside of the noise I was making.

Off in the distance the legs of the old tower reflected the light from my phone. I had gone the right way! The brush cleared a bit and I broke into a sprint. The tower, ghost-like, a vague, hazy shape in the dark, solidified into a life-saving sanctuary as I approached it. I ran up the stairs and made it a few flights before I stumbled, hitting the next step with the bone just below my knee on my right leg. I stood and fast-limped the rest of the way to the top.

I fell to the floor and struggled to catch my breath. I hadn't been keeping up with my exercise as of late, and that was a lot of cardio. Then, and only then, did it occur to me that the creature had followed me from the pond and through the woods, why not up the stairs? I pushed the panic down, shook my light off, tried to breathe as quietly as possible, and listened. I heard nothing. It's hard to gauge time when you're terrified in the dark, but I think five minutes passed in complete silence. I relaxed just a bit, and then there it was, at the base of the tower, that cooing sound. I didn't move. It was a longshot of course, but maybe it didn't know I was up there. I was grasping at straws and vain hopes. I heard it again. It wasn't moving on. It knew where I was, but it was hesitating. It didn't climb the tower, I would've felt it shaking the rickety thing, which in ordinary circumstances I would've never stepped foot on. I could feel it swaying in the wind. The thing below was smart enough not to add its weight to the structure, which was in no way comforting. You don't want to be pursued by a smart predator.

The sound was moving, circling the tower. It paused, and then I felt pressure on the structure, as though it was putting a foot on the first step, testing it out. It must be big, because I could feel the structure leaning in its direction. The pressure released, and the tower shifted slightly, steadying itself, into its precarious equilibrium. If this thing climbed the stairs the tower would collapse, that was pretty obvious. I imagined the tower looking down at me saying, "what the hell dude? Why drag me into this?" Just like Everest, you were there.

That sound, shifted from coo to purr, and then it threw some weird sort of growl into the mix. It sounded like someone gargling. Then the sound began to smooth out, morphing into something like a human impersonation of a cat meowing; a weird high-pitched moaning sound. The sound took on depth, lowering into a more human tone. It began to start and halt. It sounded like a kindergartener trying to read. It was a sound trying to find its way, experimenting with various intonations, imitative noise like

what you hear from a baby, but not cute. It was trying to speak, but it didn't know how. It experimented for a while until it managed to form a familiar word.

“Haaauhllllphh.... Haaauhllllphh”

Haa was a weird croaky breath, uhhllll was a drawn-out gravelly L, phh, was a soft P sound followed by what sounded like someone breathing out through the mouth.

“Haaauhllllphh.”

It was mimicking a sound it was all too familiar with. “Help.” It had heard someone saying, probably screaming, “help.” It knew from experience this was a sound that people made, to try and get others to come to them, which in turn meant, it had killed someone who had called to their friend for help, saw that the friend came, and then probably killed the friend too. That was why I never saw anybody else up here. This thing was probably killing them all.

It chilled me to think about all the times I had waded in that pool. I thought about how I had brought Trish up there and tried to convince her to go skinny dipping. Thank God she hadn't gone for it. At the time I was disappointed. Looking back I feel pretty good about her decision, but hindsight's twenty-twenty.

I became angry thinking about how many people this thing had probably killed and eaten, and now it was trying to lure me down using sounds it had learned from its victims. This thing was an asshole, like all predators. I like to think I'm not violent, but I was having some pretty violent thoughts. But I didn't even know what to imagine myself killing. The thing was a complete unknown to me.

Then it leaned on the tower. I felt one paw, or hand, or whatever come to rest on one of the tower legs, followed by another, as though a quadruped were standing up on its hind-legs and leaning against it. It shifted under the creature's weight. I heard two soft thuds on the ground below. The monster had gone back to all fours. I knew what it was doing. Once again, I felt the weight, the pressure against the tower leg. The tower shifted further. The thing was trying to push the tower over, and it was going to work.

I knew I was going to die. My only concern was to find a way to make it as painless as possible. I had nothing around to facilitate or expedite the process. Panic consumed my body but somehow my mind remained clear. My heart was pounding harder than I thought possible and I was sweating more than I think I ever had in my life. There had to be a way to keep the pain to a minimum. The easiest thing would be to dive over the side so that I would land on my head, which I would think would be a pretty quick way to go.

The tower was swaying back and forth, and it wouldn't be long before it came crashing down. The only thing to do was to jump and end it that way. But I needed to know what it was, or have some idea anyway. I stood, trying to keep my balance. I fumble to the edge, raised my phone, and shook it.

The creature stopped. The light from the flashlight didn't travel very far, but I could make out reptilian eyes staring up at me. Gray, scaly hands with opposable thumbs were holding the tower leg. It was very big and there were a lot of teeth. Like a river-pike, nothing but teeth. It only existed to devour. Cruel in both nature and design. It smiled, or that's what it looked like anyway. I swear that evil grin was too big for its face.

Terror took over. I ran to the other side and plunged into the darkness. I could hear it running to meet me. It caught me in its mouth. The fear consumed me to the point of madness. Insanity was a

welcome alternative to reality. My head was stuck in its throat, its teeth had pierced through my stomach right where my belt was. Either it had bitten me in half, or broken my spine, regardless I couldn't feel the lower half of my body. I sensed it turning. It was taking me back to the pond. My arms were trapped in its jaws, impaled by its teeth. Its tongue felt like sandpaper against my cheek. It was fast, I don't know how I had managed to outrun it. I hadn't, of course I hadn't, it had just been toying with me. I heard the splash of water, then I felt it rush into the creature's mouth. I tried to breathe it in, drown myself before I could be eaten. My body refused to comply.

My mind was breaking, the last line of self-defense is taking the mind elsewhere, anywhere. I drifted, barely aware of being literally stuck in the mouth of a monster. I couldn't struggle, I couldn't move, I was completely and utterly trapped, but my mind was still free, and it took me to every good memory it could find. It conjured up a thousand stunning imaginary worlds. It was only interrupted when I was spat out onto the floor of a cave.

Somehow, I could still smell, which was something I regretted. The smell of rotting dead filled my nostrils, that odor you can smell from a mile away, emanating from something underneath my right shoulder. I threw up on myself. I tried to move my right arm but realized that I couldn't. I reached out with my left hand and felt fur, crusted with what I assumed was dry blood. I felt my right shoulder, which seemed like it was just a gaping hole now. I ran my hand over my chest and to my mid-section, which was ripped to shreds. I had been turned into ground meat. I reached down, despite the searing pain, and felt that my legs were still there. They seemed to be in much better shape than my stomach.

The creature walked away; I had no idea where. It was pitch-black. All the hormones that had flooded my system had left me completely drained, that might have been the blood-loss though. The fear, was not gone, but it had dulled into acceptance. I tried to move my left-arm again, the only thing that was still working, but it hurt too much. I don't know what I would've done with it anyway.

I was reminded of a wounded raccoon we had found when I was a kid. The dog or something had gotten to it. It had wandered up to the front yard, this was back when I lived on the farm with dad, before moving to the city with mom. By that time it was just ready to die, I think the only reason it came up to the house is because somehow it knew that we could either help it, or kill it, and it didn't really care either way. It looked up at us mournfully, pleading. Dad looked it over, and regretfully decided that there was nothing we could do for it, and he wasn't taking a raccoon to the vet. Jackie, my younger sister, was very upset, so he sent me inside to set her up with a movie. When I came back out, he told me go out back by the big tree and dig a grave so we could have a funeral for it, to try and make Jackie feel better. I remember being startled by the gun blast. Why did I have to think about them at that time? Dad, and my sister. I was destined to become a statistic, another missing person. They'd never know what had happened to me, and if anyone suggested the idea that some creature with a subterranean lair had killed me, they would think the person was both crazy and disrespectful of my memory. The worst thing is not knowing.

Somehow, I think had started to fall asleep, I guess from being so overwhelmed. Dying was exhausting. I heard the creature shift and it startled me awake, or at least back to awareness. I waited, preparing myself as best I could. It didn't move again, wherever it was. I was relieved, which was absurd, but I was still hoping for the easiest way out. Being aware, and awake, as you're eaten alive, is too awful to even imagine. With Herculean effort I managed to reach out to the cave floor surrounding me, running my hands through a hot, sticky liquid. I was both surprised and relieved by the amount. It was a morbid blessing in disguise. It's hard to say, but I think my last thoughts were, "thank God. I'm bleeding to death.