

It was two o'clock in the afternoon, which meant she should make it to the top of the mountain by nightfall. Ren slid her mobile phone into the depths of the glovebox compartment and reached into the back seat to grab her gear. She had packed lightly, anticipating correctly that this hike would be taxing enough without the extra weight. She smiled and breathed a sigh of relief as she heaved the pack onto her shoulders and took in her surroundings. There wasn't a person in sight.

Three fourths of the way up the mountain Ren decided to take a break. She found a small stream running parallel to the trail not too far off, and plopped down on one of the boulders at the water's edge. Rolling onto her stomach and propping her head up with one arm, she began lazily gliding her fingers back and forth, with and against the gentle current. She delighted in the gentle pressure against her skin as her fingers moved against the current. The current wasn't too strong where she was positioned, but she could see further upstream to the west where it was extremely vigorous. The water splashed violently against the sides of the rocks, which were almost flat from years of wear. If someone who didn't know how to swim fell in that part of the lake, the person could easily drown. She rolled over onto her back, stretched out her limbs, and closed her eyes, focusing on absorbing the sounds and smells around her. A calmness was restored to her that she couldn't remember feeling in weeks.

Standing up to stretch and continue on her way Ren reached for her pack to grab her water bottle. She chugged a good six ounces before setting the bottle down again, and as she did so she felt an odd chill run throughout her body. Assuming the temperature had begun without her noticing, Ren reached for her pack to grab her jacket. As she slipped the sleeve over her left arm, her right hand brushed against the exposed skin and she shuddered. The left side of her body was burning. Oddly, the right side of her body felt normal, if only slightly chilled where her lower body had been pressed against the rock. But the right side of her body had been touching the rock too. She looked up at the sky but

the sun was already dipping below the line of trees. Hugging the jacket closer to her body, she continued on her way.

As expected, she reached the top of the mountain just as the sun was setting. It took her a surprisingly minimal amount of struggle to set up the small tent she had borrowed from her sister's husband. She walked to a neighboring tree and got into a comfortably seated position. From her pack she removed one of the three carefully saran wrapped sandwiches. She would not be doing and cooking this weekend, as she was terrible at it, and lucky for her, her favorite meal didn't involve going anywhere near an oven. As she peeled back the layer of plastic and inhaled the nuttiness of the peanut butter and sweetness of the banana, she imagined her mother doing the same thing nearly twenty years ago. An avid Elvis fan, Mrs. Coppel had spent the majority of the latter half of her second daughter's pregnancy watching *Blue Hawaii* and *Jailhouse Rock* and eating the King's eponymous sandwich. She imagined the little clusters of amino acids and various minerals that passed through her mother's body, not stopping, but, finding they were more needed elsewhere, continuing on their journey to provide for the growing human inside of her. She imagined all those different particles somehow remembering from where they had come so that the baby, as soon as she had teeth with which it could chew, began craving the only thing it new.

That night before going to sleep Ren sat outside of the tent to watch the stars. The park was far enough away from the city for them to shine brightly against the black backdrop of the sky. After some searching she was able to just make out the big dipper. Proud of herself for having recalled such a remote skill from her childhood days as a girl scout, she resigned her mind to its wanderings. Sudden thirst caused her to reach once again for her water bottle, and as she did she was suddenly reminded of

the weird chill she had felt earlier in the afternoon, and the uncharacteristic heat that had radiated from the left side of her body. The sun must hit the mountain at a really weird angle.

The next morning Ren ate a quick breakfast of cereal and iced tea. She then refilled her pack with a water bottle, some snacks, and a couple of books, and returned to the trail from which she had come the night before. The open, grassy pasture she had spotted just a few minutes before arriving at her campsite was just beginning to awake as the sun peeked through the trees to the east. She spread out onto her back, holding her book over her head like a shield to block the sun's rays. She wriggled slightly, trying to get into a more comfortable position, but the grass was cutting into the exposed skin on her lower back and shoulder blades. She raised herself to a seated position and crossed her legs, but the grass was still cutting into the back of her thighs, which from the way her legs were positioned she would have thought impossible. Sighing, she stood up and returned to her tent, deciding to read inside, hoping that there was enough tree covering where the tent was positioned so that the sun's rays didn't bake the inside of the tent like an oven.

By midday the sun was directly above where Ren's tent was positioned, and she was sweating profusely. Resigning herself to the fact that she would need to leave the tent sooner or later, at least to refill her water bottle in the stream, she crawled back out of the tent. She decided she would bring her book with her down to the stream, and have her lunch and continue reading down there.

She dipped her water bottle into the stream, grateful for her mother's suggestion that she buy a water bottle with a built in water filter before going to college, which meant she didn't have to lug a bunch of plastic water bottles with her. Her mother always the hypochondriac, would likely be appalled if she suspected that her daughter was using the bottle not only to clean the decidedly dirty tap water that was now pumped to every home in America, but also water of unknown quality and from unknown

origins that was filled with its share of bug limbs and bird poo? She sniggered. She looked down at the yet to be filtered stream water. It retained no trace of the vigor with which it had been coursing only moments beforehand. In fact, it was pretty unremarkable. She supposed all its life and strength had just been the deceit of gravity.

So far she had been extremely lucky in that the weather had been perfect for lounging about doing nothing without getting chilly. As the sun began to go down it got chillier, and Ren decided to spend another hour or so out in the open before returning to her campsite and building a fire to eat her dinner by. Not getting many opportunities to watch the sunset in the city, what with all of the buildings blocking the way, she decided to invoke her tree climbing skills she gained as a girl scout and try to watch the sunset from the highest vantage point she was willing to risk taking.

She spotted a fairly young european oak a dozen yards away and reached for the lowest branch. She brushed her hair out of her eyes to get a better view of the tree, and reached for the lowest branch. As she did so, the branch, in an almost uncharacteristic way for something so rigid, bent from the pressure of her hand. She squinted and walked around the circumference of the tree. The next highest branch was over four feet above the top of her head. She looked around and spotted another tree with several low hanging branches and headed towards it. She reached for the branch cautiously, tugging at it first gently, and when it didn't give, more jerkily, until she was assured that it would be able to hold her weight. She hoisted herself up onto her feet in a squatted position. Her lanky form managed to scale it the rest of the way up without much problem. She found a nicely curved and sturdy branch just below the top of the tree and decided to stop there. Her hair felt very cumbersome, and she reached for an elastic to tie it into a low ponytail. As she did so she felt the branch beneath her go limp,

and she hurriedly reached for the trunk. She held on for dear life, breathing heavily, her arms and legs wrapped tightly around its middle.

Once her breathing had slowed and she was able to hear sounds other than the pounding of her own heart in her ears, she realized that the branch was still intact, and what's more, now that she had relaxed her grip on the trunk, most of her weight had sunk back onto the branch from which she had come. She relaxed more of her weight onto the branch and was surprised to note that it was as rigid as ever. She slowly rearranged herself into a more comfortable position, and still the branch did not move. Straightening up and reaching again for her hair tie, however, her stomach dropped as the branch once again turned to putty. Hurriedly she twisted around, as she did so dropping the elastic to the forest floor and held once again onto the trunk of the tree, waiting for the weight to drop beneath her. Nothing happened. The branch hadn't moved. Shaking slightly, she rotated to the other side of the tree and began making her way down. She exhaled slowly as her feet hit solid ground.

She walked slowly back to her tent and began building a fire with twigs that she had collected earlier. When she had a sizable flame going she sat down on the pine leaves next to it and removed her third and final peanut butter and banana sandwich from her pack. She munched on it slowly, taking regular pauses to shift her eyes from side to side, looking for something, but not sure what.

The next morning Ren was wary of getting out of her tent. She had slept fitfully, dreaming about her past. History and fiction had intertwined as she dreamt of her first day of middle school when she had sat down with the rest of the girls from the soccer in the cafeteria at lunch. Still a meat eater, she had pulled out her beloved sandwich of bacon, peanut butter, and banana, only to find that the table had gone silent as she took her first bite, and suddenly the people sitting at the table around her were growing taller and taller until their faces were no longer visible and they reached at her with their equally

long and scaly arms, and their voices boomed down at her as she sat crunched up in a ball, “Who eats bacon with banana and peanut butter?”....

She forced herself to go back outside. After all, she had chosen to go on this trip, had painstakingly asked for time off from work and driven ninety minutes outside of the city so that she could spend some time alone, to herself, without the distractions and expectations of other people. But the allure of the forest had left her.

She walked aimlessly around her campsite. After her legs had wearied slightly she sat down in the meadow to read, but couldn't bring herself to focus on the page in front of her. She lay down on her back and stared up at the smattering of clouds in the sky. As she did so she felt a stabbing sensation on the back of her legs and neck. She sat up quickly, and touched the skin of her neck. She wasn't bleeding, but her skin felt raw. She gently patted the grass where she had been lying, but it felt like normal grass, soft even.

[Note: I plan on adding more here, I just haven't decided what yet.]

Ren stopped by the stream one last time on her way down the mountain. She thought about how inspiring this place in particular had been to her over the past weekend. She thought about how some of this water now coursed through her own body, and imagined it forging a path through her veins in the same way that she could see the stream cutting a path through the valley below. Even if it was just an illusion. After all, it wasn't the water itself that was great, it was the way it did, or appeared to, behave. The way it could appear so strong and fearless, and then like the flip of a switch become so utterly harmless. She stretched out her hand into the middle of the stream to touch one of the rocks in

the middle. It was so unbelievably smooth; for how long had the water constantly flowed over the rock to get it this smooth?

Two hours later Ren removed her phone from the glovebox compartment. One missed call from: Sister. She hit the send button. “Hey Ren! So, I know you went on some kind of trip into the woods with school or something this weekend, but I really wanted to talk to you about what Anthea said to me last week because...” Ren smiled, and prepared herself for the long ride ahead.