

The Lonely Mountain House

By

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I'd woken up early one again. I tottered downstairs, holding tight to my dressing gown and curling my toes up with each step, so as not to let my slippers, well, slip off. They had a tendency to do that.

I could feel the morning chill hanging heavy in the house, as if it had as much right to be there as I did- perhaps more, it had lived here longer than we had, after all. The windows had grown a coat of icy condensation, but it failed to hide the lands of endless shadow behind them. Muted both in aesthetic and sound – I always thought that was odd. The background noise and artificial light that most people are accustomed to, to a point where they're not even noticed – like the tip of your nose peeking in your vision – were absent here. And, the sheer lack of, well, either, was ironically deafening and blinding. I missed them a lot.

At this time of morning, the house may have been situated in the centre of space, or some vast endless void. There was nothing but inky blackness that pressed in around us in every direction, as if we were a foothold, a mere redoubt of life and vibrancy that it, at all costs, must snuff out.

I made my way to the kitchen, muttering a prayer beneath my breath which was answered when I switched on the light and the old room bloomed into vision. It was antiquated here – everything in the house was - the décor left a lot to be desired; the drapes were moth-eaten and dusty, but that was neither here nor there, as they were never used. Why should they be? There were no eyes from man, nor beast, that we had to block.

There was a stag's head protruding from the wall, its fur somehow growing matted and in desperate need of grooming. I could only assume that occupants before us had placed their greasy, oily hands on the poor soul's bust. One of its antlers was broken in half, the missing counterpart nowhere to be found. The old table that sat in the middle of the room was sturdy, considering its scraped and effaced state, but the sturdiness was mostly due to the fact that some unknown master of DIY had affixed a great wooden block to a broken leg.

More often than not in here, the generator gave way, and I had to wake my dad up early to go down to the basement and fix it. He'd tried to show me how to do it, but, outside of revving the little cord, I was at a loss. But, if I was being honest, I didn't want to let them know I could be relied on to do it – especially since I was the one who woke first most times.

The basement was old, dreary, dark- it was everything horror movies and childish nightmares gave warning klaxons about. I knew there was never going to be some assailant waiting, crouched and hidden in some corner, nor that there any supernatural entity, whether I believed in them or not (a constantly battle of logic versus wild imagination) would be drifting, in miserably solitude, in the dank sub-room, awaiting to harass me as I descended... but still, when your body tenses up, hairs stand on end and goose pimples proliferate across your body as if each a vector of some diabolic, terror-fuelled plague, it was best to pay heed and stay away. We have instincts for a reason, after all... and fathers.

With the humming bulb above, bravely illuminating the dated room against all odds, I checked the decking held tight around the walls of the old home. It was bathing in the weak glow coming from within, and I could see that it had rained in the night. The wood, dark and moist, was splintered and mossy. It rose only about a foot from the creeping weeds that were the duty of the 'temporary residents'. It was usually my mother's job to wage war on those,

but, after realising they would forever grow back within a week, she made it a monthly job. I'd escaped being drawn into that one, thus far.

I filled the kettle with water, which was, thankfully, as crystal clear as you'd want water to be. Water, just like electricity on demand, wasn't something we could take for granted out here. I placed the old thing on its base, letting the little orange flickering light give me the queue to wait, and rested my sleepy head on the counter, humming some song that had wormed its way into my sub-conscious. I hummed because, should I try to find a lyric, I'd be searching fruitlessly.

The kettle started to roil and bubble behind me, but I decided to wait for the button to click up, and the unfurling steam to waltz carelessly into the slatted roof above, before I moved away from my current state of comfort. I opened the cupboard, lifting it up on the hinge (which I'd learned quickly) and fished out the rather bulbous baby-blue mug that I had incidentally claimed as my own since we were positioned here. Then, I smiled to hear the little *tinkle, tinkle, tinkle* of coffee granules hit the base, and then poured the boiling water in, letting that hypnotic steam, heavy with the bitterness of the coffee, drift into my nostrils.

I didn't take milk anymore. We had it, of course, but we'd only have a delivery every two months. It was usually UHT milk, or soya, oat, or almond variants – which I tended to prefer – but, as a general rule, whoever finished the last of the carton had to go and procure more from the stock, which was in the basement. “No, thank you, Mr. non-existent ghost or murderer, you won't get me today.”

“Fuck,” I uttered aloud, and the sound of my voice was strange when it was the only sound amidst such silence. I forgot to defrost and toast the bread (loaves upon loaves frozen downstairs, but we usually had at least two in the freezer up here). But, I quickly shrugged. Beggars can't be choosers. I opted for two rich tea digestives, the victuals my mother had fought for against my dad's commanding officers, and, funnily enough, they seemed terrified of her, and so they sent them along the other provisions (more than she could eat, so, it was never a point of contention within).

Then, quite satisfied, I gave a cursory, greedy sip of the coffee, as I always did, and regretted it, as I always did, when the liquid scolded my lips and tongue where it swilled. As if the biscuits had the power to extinguish the burn, I chomped at the edge of one – it didn't quell the burn, but at least it gave it was a sweet accompaniment. Then, having conducted my integral morning duties, I shuffled back upstairs, turning the light off as I ascended, condemning the rickety kitchen and mossy, dew-glistened deck to the pre-dawn darkness.

I was cautious not to step on those snitching steps, that groaned and creaked, which I didn't begrudge them, it was understandable in their old age. I crept across the landing, sticking to the edge for that same reason – I was always the villain if I awoke anyone before the alarm clocks – and traced my free hand across the wallpaper; a once-white, now slightly yellowed canvas with drooping tulips which had, over time, become victims to endless glare and began to fade.

I continued past my room, and opened the door which led to the attic. Strangely enough, I know that the top level of any house is as infamous for the same hidden assailants or vengeful poltergeists as the basement, but, I never felt uneasy here. In fact, I felt very comfortable. Perhaps because this was decorated, rather than old, cracked stone wall which was the backdrop to a network of rusting old pipes.

The attic had the same wallpaper as the landing, and was home to old dusty furniture. A sad old couch, brown and fraying, sat before a rug. I daren't move the rug, ever, because I was loathe to see what colour lay beneath it, as the floor surrounding it was a murky, soiled variant; an aged echo of what it once was when this place was built.

There were no lights in the ceiling here, something to do with the wiring not reaching all the way up – the house was built pre-electricity, and everything was installed, naturally, post-construction.

The one window in the room sat as the main focal point on the other end of the room - a small, boxed number with a chipped, cracked and soft frame, was now just a black patch; only a few speckled stars offered respite from the darkness. Just next to it, at an angle, was a high-backed chair, one of the legs replaced by a mound of books (none of which were of any note, I'd checked them all). And, beside that old thing, was a little end table, a dark varnished wood – flecked and chipped, ever the theme. It had a browned, aged doily resting atop it, and on that, the was an old lamp.

This lamp, for some reason, always made me smile. It was quite a magnificent piece of furniture. There was a triangular chunk missing from the body of it, little hairline cracks spread from this focal point, as if trying to escape slipping into the hole, like souls scrambling from the maw of hell – but it wasn't that I loved. It was just how disproportionate the lampshade was. The circumference was so bizarrely large, that it seemed to more depict a possible orbit, rather than a cute little halo of light. That, too, had been dirtied and dulled with disuse or time, but I didn't care. I switched it on, and plucked up my book which I always left under the cushion (this I washed after it treated me to a coughing fit one too many times), and then, with coffee, biscuits and book, I lulled into my little reading nook, and waited for the early hints of sunlight to clamber above the distant mountains.

We had a small, boxed TV in the lounge area – but, as there was no signal, it was just old VHS or DVDs that other families had brought and left here. But, as a rule, we tended to avoid using any unnecessary electricity. After a month, it was quite easy to grow accustomed to.

The view was always stunning, anyway – or at least, it was before it was diluted by familiarity. I was always used to sub-urban life, and a little getaway like this would have been such a dream that my fancy for halcyon, romanticised, escapes always yearned for. But, it was funny how quickly I grew accustomed to this, and began to pine for what I considered mundane... such as streetlamps and the distant grunt of passing vehicles.

Still, we had only just over two months left of our six-month placement here. So, for posterity's sake, I came up here whenever I rose before the drowsy dawn, to convince myself upon my return, that I took full advantage of my time away.

After bout thirty, to forty, give or take a few, I started to see, far in the restricted patch of distance offered from my dainty living canvas, the unmistakeable gradient of morning. A diluted pink that valiantly began to sail into the void, embracing it with a, today, pinkish hue. That was nice, that meant that today was going to be warm, bright, pleasant. Within an hour or two of the sunrise, the rain may have evaporated into a cold memory, and I may take my sister on a little adventure. It was rare I left the house, but I liked to make a journey of it when I did.

I closed my book with a muffled *thump*, and placed it on the doily-ed table-top. Doing so, I noticed I had been so absorbed in my book, that I forgot about my last biscuit, and the dregs of coffee. I downed the drink, the sensation of the cold liquid was almost as undesirable as the scolding contrast I subjected myself to earlier on. And, as if someone may reach behind me and snatch the treat from my hands, I shoved the whole disc in my mouth, and then snapped my teeth down.

When we first came here, the winter was hard and brutal. The journey over here was turbulent. We had to drive from our home under heavy, black gathering clouds, which, by the time we got onto the small military transport ship had begun pouring forth with an insatiable primality. We docked at some non-descript island, that was home to nothing but some old

‘lab’ as my dad called it. The people there weren’t exactly the most scientific, in aesthetic or demeanour – but apparently were dealing with experiments which couldn’t happen on the mainland, “nothing top secret,” my dad assured me when I grew wide-eyed, “just stuff we can’t really risk over there,” a quick jerk of the head that, though indicated clashing waves and darkened skies, I knew was the direction of home. We stayed there for the night, the four of us in one room – with creaky dorm beds, a brave heater buzzing away to keep us warm against the persistent gushing that clanged like steel drums on the corrugated steel roofing.

The next day, we took advantage of the calmer weather – though it was still colder out here, with no structures to break the salty, icy wind – and boarded the precarious looking seaplane. I fell asleep, nursing a flask of coffee, as the plane bounced and swayed. The large noise-cancelling headsets, which thankfully diluted the screaming engine and roaring wind, and replaced it with the inane chatter of the pilot and my dad.

Then, we were brought to the house – the mountains surrounding us were completely snow-capped, the grassland was frosted a solid white, and the island air was glacial. Thankfully, the family who were posted here just before us had left two days prior, so the house needed no assistance in settling.

When I first found this little attic view, I’d watched with an uneasiness through the frosted window, the edges and corners closing in with a frosted vignette – but, as the pale sun yawned awake, and I could see the view – with lingering mists enveloping the hills, and rolling down to drift above the land, like a chorus of spectres, I decided six months here wouldn’t be all too bad.

The view only got better as our esoteric world warmed, though. The snow had melted, allowing us to see an army of trees – no longer shivering, naked, in the winter – and as if offering consolation for the bleakness that greeted us, a stretch of colourful flowers popped and bloomed all around. Venturing for as far as I could peer, crawling into the forest that started a fair distance from the foot of the mountain, and crawled all the way to the tip.

Even now, I could see, almost as if alive, the trees bristling and basking in the warm stroke of sunlight. I struggled with the little drawer under the end table, which was less of a drawer and more of a test of strength, considering it forced you to pull with all your might, before it finally acquiesced, and seemingly exploded. Then I took the binoculars out. I decided to leave the drawer open, because closing it – jagged, staccato shifts from side to side – was just not worth it until I was putting them back.

The island wasn’t all so much littered with wildlife. There were a few beasts of burden that had been placed here, and allowed to graze freely. The reason for this was, god forbid something awful happened, and either the supply drops that came every two months didn’t make it for some reason or other, whoever was on the island could, in extreme circumstances, take themselves out and, before long, bring meat enough to feed their family without having to worry about starving. Apparently, this had only ever happened once, and even then, the supply drop was rectified within the week.

Still, I liked to scour the land to see any roaming sheep, or flitting bird that had decided to roost here. When the notion took me, I’d take my sister to the advancing forest, and together we would search for bugs to bring back, or count how many nests we could find – and I’d always tell her there was a family of bears here, which sufficiently terrified her.

I took in the view of the dew-kissed nature, and enjoyed the little glistening dazzles of pink where the wetness caught the ever-blooming pink; scintillating like some great, grand monarch’s treasury. I often felt a little pride in this – only a small number of people would ever see these sights, and, the very vision I was taking in, I knew, that the floral ancestry had only ever been witnessed by our predecessors. Whenever I stroked my hand amongst a tree,

or let the scent of some unnamed flower tickle at my nose – I may have been the first human interaction, in the entire history of the planet, that had ever graced it. Was a bizarre feeling.

I carried on scanning the land, feeling more and more like today may be an adventure day, compelled by the tantalising petrichor that was no doubt suffused into the morning breeze, when. I'd maybe even take a trip to the mountain top, get some nice landscape pictures to show my friends when I got home, or post up on the socials when signal was no longer a sweet, convenient memory. The trees were getting thicker and thicker in their foliage, but it should be easy to traverse without getting lost. My dad said if we ever go in there, it's easy to lose yourself – because you're suddenly swallowed by a different biome altogether, and that the weather conditions here often just let the trees grow wildly, but if we were to ever get disorientated, to just carry on descending, because sooner or later we would break out of the perimeter, and our temporary home was visible enough once outside.

I followed the small brook that was our main source of drinking water, outside of the bottles. Our tap water was from this reserve, bath water, etc. It snaked its way up the mountain, just a meek little thing that froze over in the winter, near enough, and flooded in the rains. It was rushing today, the little white surf looking like an old, faded scar, and just before the trees conspired to cover it from my view-

An intense, haunting uneasiness stole over me.

I dropped the binoculars in fright, even though the sudden clatter of them snapped me back to my sense, it felt like the time from dropping to collision was eons.

I felt the nerves in my body tingle, traipsing down from my scalp to my toes in a fuzzy panic.

A figure- a person-

For a split second.

I was certain I saw someone. Out there. Naked flesh, hunched over, cupping their hands into the stream. They looked emaciated; near skeletal with pallid, clinging flesh. The brief flash of their hair showed a wild, unkempt and patched mess. The image that was now scorching itself into the forefront of my mind was more ghoulish-like, than human.

My heart was storming a rapid beat, and I ducked to clutch the binoculars back, almost bruising my eyes with how hard I placed them to my face. The zoomed in world was shaking, quaking, trembling, as I scanned up and down the brook once again. It took a few seconds before I could stabilise my breathing enough so that the world wasn't just wild blurs.

But, nothing... no person, no trace, no evidence.

It was impossible. I knew what I saw, but... I couldn't have. To get here, anyone would have to- no, it was impossible. But, what else could it have been? I was too clued up about normalcy bias to start doubting my own experience. There was no animal it could have been. But- we were so far away. A boat to a classified island, then a sea plane?

I couldn't focus. I scanned as much as I could, just waiting to see a slither, a flash of flesh somewhere out in the distance. But, nothing. No-one.

I instantly retreated from the window, and scrambled backward. I didn't know much of my dad's job here, but I knew it was of utmost importance to national security. If someone was here- if something was here- it couldn't be a positive thing.

Shaking, terrified, I crept away from the small window – the sunlight beaming through, and giving stage to a flurrying whirl of dust particles. The intense sensation of distress was mounting. Then beneath me, I heard a chorus of screeching, as the alarms in the house began to drag everyone from their sleep.

This was good, because I had to tell my dad what I just saw.