

Silent Journeys

The window pane was up. The wind bit my cheeks and nose, which splayed my hair back. With one leg out of the window, I bent forward to compact myself enough to fit through the frame. My jeans were tight around my waist, and my shirt scraped gently against the metal as I attempted to quietly make my way down to the gravel that crawled on the left side of what was no longer my home but my brother's. Seth sublet the house from my parents, and as much as it was the same, it was no longer as familiar as it once was. I had only been visiting for a brief period - I cannot remember why.

I made the jump, careful not to fall into the side of the house or hurt myself on the gravel. The moon was high in the sky and the stars lit my path, enough for me to see but not nearly enough to feel comfortable; the dark always scared me. I planted my feet and continued, slowly, treading onward and constantly looking over my shoulder.

I made sure to walk the yards of my neighbors to remain out of sight of the house, though I knew the occupants were sleeping. The houses I pass behind were places I have seen a million times and traversed less than that, but still far more than I have ever done since. They were coupled with woods, swarms of weeds, and a sea of memories and experiences. Fog clung low to the ground and broke only when my feet passed through it. Crickets sang their song, and when I came too close, they quieted. When I was out of a five-foot radius, their cacophony of music began again. Soon, I was out of sight of the house and made my way onto the paved road. It's much less damp than the long grass previously hugging the sides of my shoes and crushed by my soles. I felt the drum of my heart beat in my ears and the rush of my blood in my neck, my stomach ached in anticipation.

The street lamps were dim, or off entirely; the street lamps by which I knew when to go home - I always went home when the street lamps lit up. I had walked in this neighborhood a hundred times. During the day, at night, in the summer, and winter, I had walked this neighborhood. I knew it like the lines of my hand and the colors in my eyes. I knew that when I was at the end of the street, I would make a right and follow the road far past the houses and into the woods. A place I was uncomfortably familiar with as well, but familiar nonetheless. The woods at one point in my life were a place of refuge and solace, and unfortunately were turned sour by the loss of innocence that plagued my body and mind and the fervor for which I resented them.

As I made my way down the road and took the right, I passed a few friends' houses—people I used to call friends, anyway. This filled me with nostalgic melancholy, especially knowing I have never talked to those people again. Unfortunately, that was a common theme in this neighborhood: constant coming and going, the ebb and flow of new and old faces, but always a mirage of friends and enemies. And regrettably at this time I had not the experience to discern between the two.

The woods were gated but not locked, so the only thing that stood in my way was a simple push. I continued, and a clear path was laid before me. It had been walked so often by people before me and long after me that it was obvious where to go. Even in the dark, and even if I were blindfolded, I would have known where the path bends and straightens. The trees stood tall and cast shadows darker than the night around me; darker than I was prepared for.

I had left my phone behind and plugged up after letting the person I was meeting know I was on my way - a person I did not know well and retrospectively should not have or ever trusted. A person with whom I very unfortunately had the experience of genuinely losing

everything I was and worked hard to create. An inciting incident. The crux of my life, and the wind that pushed the snowball downhill.

I didn't have a flashlight, not that I would have needed one, my mind was much more accurate than my eyes could have been in this situation. My mind cast shadows of unforeseen dangers and consequences, and my eyes beheld the truth - no matter how different I was then and how scared I could have been; there were no monsters in the dark other than myself. My legs moved me forward, aching and cold, past the house my friends and I had explored before, and past the "trap" laid out to sound a warning for intruders - cans tied together by a string and between two trees. My mind warned me to turn back, that maybe I should have just gone to sleep, but my heart surged me onward.

I reached the transitional point of this journey—the tunnel. The tunnel felt like a mile stretch of darkness that scaled the walls. The only light that illuminated the webs and concrete came from the ends. The tunnel was directly under what I know to be a major highway or interstate, though there wasn't much difference from the tunnel's perspective. I entered, and soon, the light faded and was eaten away by the ravenous darkness.

I was surrounded by frigid, damp, and jet-black air. The only way to walk here was on a pipe that hugged the side of the structure. To walk on the floor - if you could truly call it that - would mean having water pierce your shoes and finding places where the concrete plummets - to what? I assume and could only reason to be nowhere. So, I walked the pipe. My hand was carefully placed, and I caressed the wall to feel where the brackets held the pipe in position, which I must manage to step over to ensure I do not trip. The water, although still in its own right, produced an echoed wave of sound against the concrete. A sound by which I quickly grew accustomed. The sound filled me with resolve, it was too late to turn back.

I touched spider webs, breathed heavy and bitter air, and saw absolutely nothing. My eyes attempted and failed to adjust to the absence of light, and the only way to continue forward was by touch and a hope that I would not fall or happen upon an unfelt edge in the pipe. Eventually, slowly and surely, I edged my way to the end, grateful for the sting in my eyes and the light that revealed the rest of my path. I was finally out. I still had a long way to go, but thankfully, the darkest and coldest part was behind me.

The woods were thin here, and the way was less traversed. It was nothing but grass, and led me beside an enclosed pond and a steep hill, which I knew would wind me. Up the hill I went. I could feel the dampness of my jeans digging into my ankles, and the dampness of the air constricted my lungs, especially when I was walking the hill. I could see my destination. I was in what I suppose was the loading dock of a Lowe's, about fifty feet below the actual store and edged with stone and mortar.

I needed to climb the stone like a set of stairs to get to the store. I did. My journey carried on to the main road. At least there was a sidewalk to navigate. It was still dark, and I continued to look over my shoulder in fear or exhilaration - even now years later I am not sure which. Had I been older and much wiser I would have realized my dangerous position; unfortunately, my ignorance of the world and my arrogance kept me walking. I was mature enough to sneak out, and mature enough to do whatever I wanted.

Eventually, I made it. In front of Walmart, I searched longingly for my suitor, afraid that perhaps he had not shown up and that after everything I did to make it there, I would need to turn back. The sting of the idea pierced through my heart, and brought what was left of my hydration to my eyes. Though I would need to turn back anyway, the ideas were much different. I inevitably spotted him, and we spent our time together. Icy blue eyes gazed into mine and

everything felt right. I was not in love with him. Even then I knew the difference; it was more a passionate resolve to feel closer to someone, anyone. Eventually, he disclosed that he would have left if I had not answered or shown up when I did. To think about that comment, even now, brings me intense sadness.

I also have wondered recently how he got there himself, and if by car, why did he not offer me a ride home?

We talk and reminisce on as much as a 14-year-old could reminisce about, and as much as two people who, with a mission, came together that evening. I remember feeling a sense of regret for the hour or two I spent with him, the uncomfortable and overwhelming hour or two. I make it a point not to feel regret, as what was or is there to do about something already done?

The sun started to rise. It was time I made my journey back, the exact way I came. The only difference being what was scary in darkness was now just frightening in the light, so perhaps it wasn't the darkness to begin with. When I returned, I tried to make my way through the window again, but it was too high to pull myself up. I instead went through the front door, up the green concrete stairs, past the iron railing and wooden banister my dad made and bolted down. I went to the bedroom, closed the window, and finally slept. In a bed that was not mine, and in a house I have never seen again.