

Before My Time

-0:10 **G**et moving. Just a whisper in my ear, the lingering of a pleasant dream.

Next second, the alarm cuts through any remaining cloudiness, but I catch it immediately to avoid waking anyone else. I wish I had that extra second. Some dreams are worth staying asleep for.

However, the earth isn't about to stop rotating for me; and though the moon is still hanging steadfast above the tree line, sunrise approaches.

As I'm dragging myself out of bed I remember there's no-one else here for my alarm to wake up.

0:02

I fumble around in the unfamiliar darkness of the kitchen, my hand running along grooves in the cold timber wall until it comes to the light switch. I flick it on, illuminating the tidy bench just enough for me to find my pre-prepared breakfast: dry muesli and two apples. One apple goes in my mouth, the other in my jacket pocket with the ziplock of muesli, and I'm out the door, reaching back only to flick off the switch, returning the quaint kitchen to its tranquil state.

I realise I don't know what to listen to, so I just drive in silence.

The trees become more dense the further I drive, until they just kind of blur into a single continuous brown-black smudge.

I try to imagine the trail map I was poring over last night instead, every twist and turn, but I know I don't have to. I've been here before, and I know every path so well I could walk them in my sleep. Actually, today I'd prefer to walk in my sleep, but this was as close as I was gonna get. I guess I'm hoping that the darkness might make it different somehow, a new experience. Not to replace any old experiences per-se, but maybe to build on them, growing out, moving on, I don't know.

There's a flash of white in the brown-black smudge, but it's gone before I can even glance in its general direction. A rabbit? *'Or something more sinister?'* she would joke.

I turn on the radio but every station is fuzzy. I didn't update the stations when I drove out of town yesterday, and I don't update them now. More silence.

I know the trail head is around here somewhere – the last few corners felt so familiar – but I must have missed the sign in the darkness. Was there ever even a sign?

Fortunately the dark and empty car park reveals itself as I round the next bend, preventing any further self doubt. But a new form of hesitancy creeps in as I bring the car to a stop and begin lacing up my boots. Because it does feel different this time, and I can't avoid that feeling, no matter how I try to frame it. *There was never any sign, but she always knew the way.* This was my first time actually driving up that familiar winding road. And now as I sit alone, illuminated only by the faint yellowed glow emitting from the dash, the silence begins to swallow my air too.

I abandon my right shoelace at a single knot, grab my pack – cold to the touch from sitting in the car all night – and bust out of the stifling silence into... a much larger, equally stifling silence. But the cool night air gives me the courage to push on – as if returning to the car would even be an option now. It waits alone in the parking area, but I don't have the mental capacity to draw any metaphorical conclusions from that right now.

0:21 I plunge further and further into the stillness of the forest, my dulling headlamp only ever illuminating the next step (she would have remembered the new batteries too). Suddenly, I come to a stop, as I realise the trees are no longer a smudge in my car window. I arch my neck, trying to follow one trunk to its highest point, only to lose it to the foliage. I do this again and again, until I am stuck staring skyward because I've lost track of where the trees end and the universe begins.

The moon is brilliant tonight, but not full, allowing the stars to flood the sky. This brings me some comfort, perhaps I'm not so alone after all.

0:53 I pick up the trail again, but now it's as though the forest has come to life. Or perhaps it's just me awakening. I can feel the plants exhaling the crisp night air and the patter of footfall amongst dried leaves on the forest floor. Life goes on.

I cast my mind back across each time I had walked these trails, and she wasn't always with me, yet somehow she was. Every tree has a story, a whole life. Everything had a story, to her at least. I never understood how she could breathe life into everything that surrounded her. Suddenly the stars seem overwhelming.

1:26 At a brisk jog now, I try to tell myself that it's because I've been walking too slowly, that I'm going to miss the sunrise, that that's what's driving this mad rush. Yet on some level I can't help feeling like I'm running away again.

Still, it is difficult not to be taken by the sheer beauty of this place. The foliage is thinning now, opening out into the clearing, and as I break through the tree line I am reminded of why we always returned here.

I want to hold each stone and embrace the earth.
This will always be my home.

2:14 I feel as though every living thing is breathing in sync now, and her energy flows through each of them. She is the smudge and the trees. Now, I'm pushing on forward because I know this is not the end. In many ways it's starting to feel like the beginning. And as I reach the lookout, and soak in the first rays of light, I am relieved to know that the earth did not stop turning. I breathe out.

3:30 But what now?

Is this really what I came out here for? I think back over the chain of events that lead me here, as though I might have left myself a clue that would explain why this suddenly isn't enough for me. Wasn't it always enough for me? The sun continues to rise, while everything around me stands still. Waiting...

What next?

Just breathe in – so I breathe in.

4:12