

“It’s absolutely out of the question!”

“So’s being caught by those *things*, I thought” replied Michael. Ellie peered over the edge of the waterfall below here, into the deep dark hole¹ where gruesome things waited to pick her bones clean². Behind Ellie came the noise of the *things* approaching with inhuman speed towards them³. Michael looked at Ellie, the panic clearly written in his eyes (Ellie couldn’t see this, it was written very small, but she got the general idea). Ellie’s eyes told him more than words could⁴. Hand in hand, Michael and Ellie leapt over the edge and dropped into the darkness of the hole, just as the *things* broke the tree line in the clearing above them, mere metres away. Ellie screamed every scrap of colourful language she knew (and then, believing her feelings on the current situation may not yet have been clearly expressed, made some more words up).

At the edge of the hole one of the *things* watched. Had it been human (which it wasn’t, obviously), you might have seen a look of annoyance on its face, and heard a muffled “bugger” emitting from its lips⁵. The things cold, hard eyes glazed over for a moment as it stared calculatingly into the hole, before it suddenly snapped back into the real world. With a barely noticeable nod of its head, the other *things* at the edge of the clearing quickly turned and disappeared into the forest. Our leading *thing* stared for a few moments into the hole before turning and repeating his companions actions (run full pelt for several metres into a tree which it could swear wasn’t there a moment before).

I apologise profoundly. How inconsiderate of me, not explaining what the hell is going on. I shall slightly distort space/time for a moment and take you back half an hour (sorta like hitting the rewind button on a VCR, except rewind buttons don't turn a peaceful twin star system into a supernova, single-handedly wipe out an advanced alien race on a planet far far away, or lock a certain J. A. Smith's keys in his car).

loud ringing sound signalling the start of reality's once-a-millennia ten minute coffee break and we sneak back through time while it's back is turned

Michael and Ellie energetically jumped the small fence around the school for what they hoped would be the last time (for two weeks at least, when school resumed). Michael and Ellie were not brother and sister, nor were they girlfriend and boyfriend, although you might mistake them for so. They were good friends, and had been since they were both collectively as high as your average coffee-table. They were very hard to separate (not due to bubblegum or super-glue or an accident in the science lab, they just tended to remain together all the time). They were both buzzing with the prospect of 2 weeks without school. To celebrate their new freedom, they had drawn up a busy schedule of different ways to do nothing, and were thus on their way home as quickly as possible so they could do as little as possible.

Being in such a hurry to get home before their parents (every child needs at least a few minutes to hide their report card) they both agreed to chance the shortcut through the woods near the school. These woods were the bane of the entire town. No one really knew why, but for the sake of trying

¹ She assumed it was deep, but since she couldn’t see more than a dozen metres into it, she was really just trying to build up the atmosphere, more than anything else.

² Actually the hole was home to a handful of furry caterpillars, a family of peaceful moths and a stray bat, but from her position she couldn’t see it that way.

³ For the moment we shall call inhuman speed a little faster than a comfortable run, minus the occasional few moments as a bad judgement of the path ahead led to a surprisingly solid tree.

⁴ Considering they had less than a second, this would be correct. However, had they had more time a good way of expressing her feelings would be “bugger”.

⁵ However, if you’d been close enough to hear that you also would have heard the hiss as it noticed you and the rip as your body was torn to pieces, along with the hasty but somewhat rhythmical crunch as your bones were devoured. Of course, this is only a guess, as no-one has been able to get close enough to witness this theory without having something along that lines done to them.

to make something interesting happen they were called haunted, and mysterious and a series of other names not suitable for printing. Every student in the school had heard many of the rumours going around about the evil things that lurked in the woods, the monsters, the witches and their familiars, the demons and all manner of nasty pasties. However, no one actually believe the stories, they were all just a ploy to attract tourists (it's funny how tourists are always excited by the prospect of seeing haunted mansions, mysterious woods, bone crunching demons at close range and other such life-threatening sights, and it's also funny how they always seem to be overlooked while locals are eaten alive)

Michael and Ellie certainly didn't believe the stories, but it's obvious that there was truth about them, otherwise there would be not point me writing this story, and thus this would be a large waste of paper (not to mention ink, time, and thus money, leading to economic unbalance, crashes on wall street and then a recession, but lets not get into that). Perhaps if Michael and Ellie had payed more heed to these warnings and rumours they would not be in their current predicament (of course, if they'd paid heed to the warnings and avoided the woods I wouldn't be writing this story, so they would never be heard about, thus the only way these fictional characters can exist is by doing the dumbest things possible, in this case, going through the woods).

After 10 minutes of travelling through the errie forest, Michael and Ellie's attitude had changed quite severely. No longer where they skipping, running and shouting to each other loudly. Now they walked briskly and quietly, peering at the strange shapes forming on the edge of their vision, off into the woods. In this errie frame of mind the darkness around them started to take shape, forming black silhouettes on the already black background. These shapes seemed to follow Michael and Ellie, while never actually moving. Of course, Michael and Ellie weren't actually looking into the woods, they had their eyes quite firmly on the track ahead of them⁶.

As they crept along the sky above them remained light, while the trees around them twisted and turned in a strange darkness that reality says simply cannot exist in such an abundance of sunlight (however, if you'd like to make note that we are half an hour in the past, you will realise reality isn't all it's cracked up to be). With a shock both Michael and Ellie realised how quite everything was⁷. When there was a sudden snap of a twig behind them the sound rang out and sounded several hundred decibels louder than it actually was. Both Michael and Ellie span round, fearful of what they may find. There was nothing behind them⁸. Michael was reaching a "there's something out there and I'm damned if I know what it is" mood, while Ellie was reaching a "I heard a snap but I can't see anything so there's nothing there" mood (she was also a natural blonde, did I mention that?).

Michael and Ellie turned around but suddenly found themselves looking at a tree. It wasn't so much that the tree had moved, more that the path had. It now veered off to the right with a distinct right-angle turn that was very peculiar as it had definitely not been there before. Both Michael and Ellie stood for several seconds as still as a group of badly stacked rocks, though for different reasons. Michael was scared because he knew the path ahead had suddenly decided it didn't like where it was going and had changed directions, while Ellie was still trying to get over the tree. With barely a word, both Michael and Ellie turned and hurried quickly along the path (it's very difficult to hurry slowly, but some people might assume such). When Michael risked a look over his shoulder a few seconds later, he saw only the path stretching out behind them, not a bend in sight. Looking back on the track just in case something was in front of him, he then realised

⁶ This is because not only did curiosity kill the cat, but tied lead weights to its feet and threw it in the river.

⁷ This sudden realisation is caused when you try to hear something but don't, thus realising that there is no sound. Most people will not notice an absence of sound, but will notice changes instead. Thus, when you do notice there is no sound, it generally comes as quite a fright (Ellie could have rephrased that in much less respectable words).

⁸ Scholars generally agree that hearing a snap and then finding nothing is scarier than finding, say, a three headed monster with giant fangs, because at least you can see the monster, whereas with a snap you have a terrible feeling of suspense. Thus, to help build up to the inevitable encounter with a monster or demon(s) or whatever, I'll use the age old trick of 'snap-spin-nothing'.

something might be behind him, and looked back. As he did so he realised the risk he was taking leaving his front unguarded and so looked forward, only to feel the need to check his rear again....

For several minutes Ellie and Michael wandered down the track, Michael constantly looking behind him, then forward again, which was becoming very annoying for Ellie. However, it was then that they broke into a small clearing. Standing in the centre of it (well, actually sort of near the east edge, but you never actually say that in a story), the looked out over the trees to the valley that lazily lay before them⁹. It was an amazing sight. The carpet of tall trees stretched out before them, badly stitched¹⁰ in the middle with a small stream that erupted from the cliff only a little while away on the side of the valley.

As Michael and Ellie gazed over the awesome sight (much better than boring textbooks, which had been most of the days entertainment, so compared to that it was pretty amazing, but in general terms it was just another group of trees huddled together for safety in numbers¹¹) there was a rustling behind them as leaves were silently parted (they weren't actually parted in silence, otherwise there wouldn't be rustling. This play on words is commonly used by author's to try and create a scene that contradicts itself while being true in every way. You figure it out). Behind Michael and Ellie strange creatures edged their way towards the open space of the clearing.

At this point I might warn you that the following paragraph is quite scary, or would be if it is ever made into a movie, but since it's only paper and writing, it won't be scary to most people, except those with reading disabilities.

There was an audible snap behind them and Michael knew that this time they would face their pursuer. He hopes that it would just be a joking classmate from school, but he knew inwardly that this was the most likely explanation, and thus the one least likely to happen. Ellie was thinking along the same lines and was waiting to give whoever this jerk was a good talk to. So, with completely different motives behind them, both Michael and Ellie turned around. Ellie was disappointed with what she saw. Michael was terrified.

As soon as this moment (which seemed to last forever to all members involved, but to our camera, which never lies, it lasted merely a few seconds) finished Ellie screamed (she was blonde, but she wasn't 100% stupid¹²) and Michael's mind instantly ticked over on the possibilities. He narrowed it down to half a dozen, but since he didn't have heavy artillery, nuclear warheads or shard sticks, and he certainly wasn't very athletic and strong, he narrowed it down to one possibility. Run. With a hard shove in the back he propelled Ellie along a track which seemed to appear as he turned to look at it. Following her closely (so close in fact that under other circumstances the pose would have been considered beyond their age-limit) was Michael, legs pumping and mind racing. Behind him there was no movement for a moment as one of the *things* allowed itself a moment of pleasure at the prospect of a good old fashioned chase. However, it soon realised that thinking about it wasn't going to bring about any good chases, so he dashed after Michael and Ellie, the path behind him filled with the bodies of the other *things*.

⁹ It's hard to say the valley lay energetically before them, because valleys don't generally do that, at least, not while anyone's watching.

¹⁰ It's generally frowned upon for rivers to be expertly stitched in straight lines, as this leads to superstition and rumours of corporations dumping toxic waste and things, so most gods cleverly hide their expert stitching by making it look terrible, in a good way that says someone with experience purposely made it bad. This seems to solve any problems, although a lot of people still say toxic waste gets dumped in these rivers (which is probably true, anyway).

¹¹ The concept that large, concentrated groups of trees were prime targets for logging hadn't yet occurred to these trees, and wouldn't for another few thousand years, due to the fact that the average heartbeat of a tree lasts a little over a month, so you can't expect them to think terribly quickly.

¹² Scientists revealed at a later date that after a series of tests they had found she was only 99.9% stupid.

After running for a short while they suddenly broke into a clearing down in the valley where the stream disappeared into a large dark hole in the ground. They had made good time on the *things* (mainly because of all the nice trees that seemed to always get in the way of the *things*).

roar of anger as reality finished its coffee break and finds that while it was enjoying tea and biscuits, we have slipped back half an hour in time, several stars went on strike against nuclear fusion and a grape on Earth had suddenly decided to give some poor little lady a good talking to about a 'proper diet'.

Now, as we left our two characters they were plummeting helplessly into a deep (we think) dark hole, after being chased through a forest that is unsure where it wants its tracks to go by big things that, apart from being short sighted when it comes to trees, love nothing more than a good chase.

thwack as reality's ruler of knuckle-cracking obedience sets the universe right again, except for Mr. J. A. Smith, who's still trying to get his keys out of the car

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” screamed Ellie as she fell. Then, since nothing new was happening, she yelled it again. Suddenly there was pain all over her body, and suddenly she found herself weightlessly floating in mid air. Actually, she was floating in mid water, and after a few seconds she realized she was going to drown and swam in the direction she guessed was up. It wasn't up, it was down, but reality had broken its ruler and had gone to the store to get a new one, so Ellie quickly snuck to the surface.

When she reached the surface all she could hear was the muffled roar of the water cascading down behind her. Looking for Michael didn't occur to her, so it's lucky he was looking for her. With a curse muffled by a mouthful of water, Michael bumped into Ellie. “Where are we?” screamed Ellie to Michael. This of course is the pitiful question all dumb blonde female characters ask, so I won't bother you with Michael's spirited response. After a few moments both Michael and Ellie felt a slight pull around them and realized that they were starting to gain speed. It was still pitch black, and they had no idea where they were, except they new were they were because they read a pre-print copy of this story. They were in a hollowed cave of running water, with tiny bumps - the beginnings of stalactites - descending from the ceiling to almost head height. In the small cavity between the water and these painful obstructions Michael and Ellie gasped for breath and a handhold or foothold or general 'hold' of any sort. They could not find any. The walls of the cave were smooth from decades of water rushing past, and almost pushed Michael and Ellie away, such was there slippery qualities. I won't go into any more detail about the rather uneventful trip through the tunnel, and instead we'll just run take a quick detour and go see what our leading thing is doing.

Above the underground river, only a few dozen metres separating it from Michael and Ellie, the head thing ran. It was heading towards a cave hidden in a hidden pass around a hidden corner found via a hidden trail in a hidden forest. Rather than bother about all this running round in circles stuff, our thing pushed a bush out of the way and stepped into the cave....

For several minutes Ellie and Michael were dragged along by the river, until all of a sudden there was a sudden **pop**, followed by a short fall of half a dozen feet into more water. Resurfacing and relocating each other, Michael and Ellie allowed their eyes to adjust in the dim light, brought into the cave by a few hundred shinning moths that squated (moths always squat, they never sit, just another bit of useless trivia) on the rocks around them. As their eyes focused Michael and Ellie took in the large cavern they had landed in. The roof above them towered almost two dozen metres over the pool, and the walls of the cavern formed irregular shapes, passages, hollows and curvetures. Being the owner of 99% of the collective IQ in the cavern at that time, Michael swam towards a flattish outcrop along one edge of the cavern, pulling Ellie behind him. Immensely

relieved to be out of the freezing water, he threw himself on to the rock (regretting it instantly as a stomach-churning *crunch* told him that side of his rib cage would never be the same again).