

Long grass scratches my legs like hundreds of tiny fingers, all trying to get a hold of me. I'm surrounded by a motionless ocean of fading yellow. There's nothing else to do but walk forward, though without any landmarks, it's impossible to tell if I'm even moving at all. Looking behind me, the ocean of grass has swallowed my path. The weight of my steps should have left a trail of matted grass behind me, but the grass seems to forget my footsteps and stands back up straight as soon as I take another step.

With every step forward my feet grow more sore. The ground is cold and hard beneath my bare feet, like I'm walking on the moon. But I shouldn't be feeling the ground, there should be a cushion of grass under my feet. I study my feet and continue moving forward without worrying about walking into anything. Stepping down, the grass acts as a liquid, allowing my foot to slide in and be engulfed by the long grass instead of folding under my weight.

Grass behaving unnaturally is strange, but it's the least strange thing about this place. The sky above me is dark, but I can see for miles all around me. It's not daytime bright, but as if the sun was just starting to set, dulling the colors. It seems like there is a giant spotlight illuminating the field, but I can't find the source. Raising my eyes, nothing but a dark void sits above, no moon or stars, not even the red blinking of a passing airplane. Spending most of my life in cities and suburban neighborhoods, I'm used to the night sky missing some stars. But this wasn't the city, where the stars had to compete with brightly lit buildings and street lights. My chin lowers and I decide to keep my eyes straight ahead and not worry about what was above and below me.

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My legs feel stiff as I stretch them over the side of the bed. Standing up I look back at my bed where the comforter is pushed back in a tangle. The other side of the bed is still neatly made and undisturbed, the same as it was yesterday and the day before. Part of me wants to make my side of the bed match the other, but instead I turn away and step into the bathroom to get ready for the day.

As I slowly digest overcooked scrambled eggs on toast, topped with a light drizzle of ketchup, I scroll through Facebook on my phone. A guy I knew from high school posted that he was getting married. There are five different pictures of him and his new fiancée smiling together while she held out her hand for the camera, plus two close-up photos of just her ring. Recognizing the style of diamond is easy, a standard princess design, but pretty. The zoomed in photo of the diamond lingers on my phone for a couple more seconds before my thumb continues scrolling.

Walking into work all I carry with me is my hefty water bottle. It has to be big enough to last the entire day without needing to be refilled. Having to go into the breakroom two to three times a day to fill up my water bottle is just asking for trouble. With my fridge containing nothing but eggs, bread, moldy lunch meat and some condiments, I will have to go into the breakroom and buy lunch.

Noon comes and my stomach starts growling, but I ignore its demands for food. Everyone takes their breaks at noon so they can eat and talk together in the breakroom. After one o'clock, everyone should be done eating and back at their desks.

It is a long, painful hour, but eventually people start heading back to their desks. Standing up, I pretend to stretch while doing a once over to be certain everyone is back at their desks. They aren't really desks, just long skinny tables. There is enough space for two people per table. The building was basically one giant square and tables were grouped together in smaller squares, with normally four tables to a square. If you reached around your monitor you were close enough to hold hands with the person across from you. Instead of giving us individual desks we could personalize, the higher ups crammed us together the same way airlines do in order to save money. Luckily the guys on either side of me are hard workers and not normally very social.

Getting lunch from the breakroom is a delicate operation. The only decent food is the Hot Pockets, but opting for one is risky. Choosing a Hot Pocket mean you have to stand in the breakroom for two minutes while it cooks in the microwave. You become a trophy buck standing out in the open for even the most inexperienced hunter to bag. The timer passes the one minute mark and I make ready to grab and run when Justine walks in with a cup of noodles in her hand.

Justine is about eight or nine years older than me and in her mid-thirties. Which means she can make jokes about how I have no idea what a VCR was or how to use a floppy disk, even though I grew up in the 90's. Justine is one of the few people I work with who is over thirty and doesn't constantly complain about how every update is terrible just because it's new. We used to sit and talk in the breakroom all the time, which is why she is the last person I wanted to run into.

"Going for the pepperoni pizza?" Justine asks, glancing at the red crumpled up wrapper I left on the counter. "I only get the breakfast ones. I always end up feeling gassy after eating them, but they're so worth it."

I stare at the timer, willing it to count down faster. "I'm not a big fan of the eggs in the breakfast ones, they're too spongy. I don't really like Hot Pockets in general, I just didn't have time to pack a lunch today."

"What's wrong? Mackenzie got you in the dog house? Making you sleep on the couch and make your own lunches?"

I pull open the microwave even though there is still fifteen seconds left. "No, just ran out of food and haven't gone grocery shopping yet."

"Ahh, gotta make a run to Costco." Justine says as she scoots past me and puts her cup of noodles in the microwave. "I always do one big run at the beginning of the month."

"Yeah, I kinda do something similar. I don't have a Costco membership, but I go to Fred Meyer."

Justine's face looks as if I had just told her I was an alien from another solar system. "Fred Meyer? Forget that place, you need to get a Costco membership. It's expensive at first, but you save so much money buying bulk."

Her finger presses all the right buttons and starts the microwave. "Hey, how's Mackenzie doing? Haven't seen her since she stopped by that time and dropped off your lunch. That must've been... damn, like over a month ago. She stopped by my desk before she left and showed me this hilarious video, I know she posted it on Facebook. Do you remember what it was called? It was the one with these two guys having a prank war. For the first prank this dude had a water balloon filled with -"

"Sorry, don't remember it. I'll ask her about it later." I grab my Hot Pocket and scurry towards the door. "My Pot Pocket is gonna get cold, and I was right in the middle of something on my computer. Sorry, we can talk later though."

Justine doesn't turn around from the microwave. "All right man, go enjoy your reverse pizza."

Reaching my desk and setting my still-cold-in-the-middle Hot Pocket down, I grab my water bottle. My lips are coated with drying spit and the water feels amazing. My mouth is relieved, but someone has taken a rolling pin to my stomach. Flattening it and then twisting it around in painful knots. Sliding the garbage can out from under my desk, I sweep the Hot Pocket into it.

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Opening my front door, I am met with the silence that never gets easier. Floating through the house, a ghost in my own home, I settle down on the couch and flip on the TV. Mackenzie was always home before me. She'd be playing music or watching a show. I'd walk in and she'd look up from the couch, trying not to smile, but never able to keep a straight face. Then I'd walk over and -

The pain in my thigh is immediate and intense, then it gradually dissipates in waves like the tide slowly going out. Looking at my sore hand, I can see it still trembling from the impact. It slowly returns to normal as I flex it and stare at the TV without emotion. Picking up my phone, the time says 10:30. Late enough to go to bed.

Melatonin pills take thirty minutes to take effect so taking one now, before I get ready for bed, means it should be active by the time I am done. The pills gave me really weird dreams last night, but after hours of tossing and turning, night after night, and only falling asleep out of exhaustion, I can put up with a few weird dreams. Laying down and closing my eyes, I roll onto my side with my back to the empty space next to me.

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The dark void above me is familiar, but that doesn't make it any less terrifying. This is the same dream as yesterday. Closing my eyes tight, I focus my mind on the image of myself waking up. I open my eyes to see the tall grass still surrounding me on all sides. I've never had the same dream twice before. Sometimes after waking up, two dreams would have strong similarities, but this dream is exactly the same. Not only is the dream the same, but I can't wake

myself up, either. Normally, whenever I realized I was dreaming, closing my eyes and picturing myself awake is all it takes to wake up.

There's a tightness in my chest, someone's tightening a belt around my lungs. My mind stops and the panic takes over. Running through the field is like running on a treadmill. The scenery never changes and the only sensation is the aching in my body and the grass scratching at my legs.

There has to be something ahead, the grass can't just go on forever. Needing to find the ending, but no longer having the strength, leaves nothing for me to do but stop and stand in place. Why bother trying to find an end? I can see for miles in every direction, there is nothing here but more grass. Fine, all I have to do is stand in place and wait until I wake up. It might be boring, but it is better than killing myself trying to find the edge of a dream.

Standing alone in the field, I turn around to see if running has done anything to the grass. Of course the grass was unaffected, it stands upright as if nothing –

There's something standing in the grass. There's quite a distance between us and it looks like it's standing in the direction I just came from. My vision isn't good enough to determine what it is, but waving at it brings no response. The belt returns around my lungs and my sore legs begin to tremble. Turning back around, my shaky legs move me forward. The dream should be almost over, soon I'll be back in my bed, no reason to go see whatever it is. One more glance over my shoulder shows that the thing is closer.

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Sleeping through the first two of my alarms, I am now stuck eating my breakfast at work. Crunching dry cereal, my eyes struggle to stay open as they scan endless numbers on my computer screen. As I finish the page of data, I realize I haven't comprehended any of it. My eyes had followed the lines of data down the screen on autopilot while my brain was checked out. Scrolling back up to the top of the page my eyes refocus on the data while invisible fingers reach through my skull and pinch the front of my brain.

Rubbing my eyes with my hand does little to relieve the pain. I am so focused on the pain in my head that, when a hand rests on my shoulder, my whole body jumps.

"Richard you don't look so good, are you all right?" Peeking through my fingers I see my desk mate Ben staring at me.

"Yeah I'm good. Slept in through my alarm and now I feel groggy as shit. Don't know why getting more sleep leaves you feeling worse than when you get a normal amount."

"The only cure for that is some coffee, I always drink one first thing when I wake up. I try and hold out as long as possible before I get the second one, but if you need one then I won't make you drink it alone." Ben stands up and pushes in his chair. "Do you like the vanilla or the cinnamon creamer?"

"I'm good, Ben, you don't have to do that."

“Just answer the question Richard or I’ll use both.”

“Vanilla. Thanks Ben.”

Ben smiles and turns towards the breakroom.

“Don’t worry about it.”

The coffee is provided by the company. Nothing fancy, but it’s free. Ben isn’t gone long. He gives me my coffee and holding up his cup, we clink our cups together, which is underwhelming since we both have disposable paper cups. That doesn’t stop Ben from smirking and sticking out his pinky like a British aristocrat while he sips. His smirk quickly changes to an expression of pain and tears spring to his eyes. He sticks out his burned tongue and coughs, forcing me to smile despite my efforts to look concerned. It feels good to smile.

With the bittersweet aftertaste of coffee and vanilla fresh in my mouth, I go back to reading numbers. I am able to read the whole page this time and punch in the right numbers without any pinching pain in my head. Finishing the first page of the day, I take a little celebratory stretch. Leaning back in my chair, I notice Justine walking past me to her desk, two rows behind mine. Justine always has a snarky comment to say when she walks past me, never stopping long enough to allow me a comeback. Passing my desk, we make eye contact. She pinches her lips together and gives me a small nod of acknowledgment. That is it, no snarky comment, no stopping to chat with Ben, just a nod. Swiveling around in my chair, I peer past the table of people and computers and watch Justine sit down. I know she can see me staring, but she doesn’t look back as she ducks down behind her computer monitor.

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It doesn’t take me long to spot it, it’s closer now than it was last night. It’s standing far enough away that I can tell it’s looking at me, but far enough that I can’t make out what it is. It looks like it could be a person, it has two arms and two legs partially obscured by the grass. Why? Why after two nights of being alone in this strange field is this thing now showing up? Has it always been here and I never noticed, or maybe it was too far away to see before? So many questions, but it just continues staring at me. Until it takes a step forward.

It takes until it’s third step before I start to back away. Watching it walk towards me, without saying anything or making any gesture towards me, fills my insides with ice. Nothing in this dream is right - not the strange grass, or the black void above me, so why should this silent mysterious thing walking towards me be any different? My eyes lock on it as my legs carry me backwards. I have no fear of bumping into anything or tripping, it’s not like there was anything else in this place to bump into. But wait, what if there’s more than one?

The thought makes me whirl around, hands up ready to defend myself from the second creature that is sneaking up behind me. The field behind me is empty. Seeing the empty, endless field is a relief for a change, but the feeling disintegrates as I turn back around. The field in front of me is empty, too. Where the hell did it go? There isn’t anywhere for it to hide, unless it is hiding in the grass and crawling towards me. An icicle slides up my spine, clinking and bouncing off each vertebrae. If this was normal grass, it would move as the thing crawled

towards me. I would be able to see it coming. But this grass isn't normal, it could be coming from any direction and there would be no way to tell.

Cold sweat leaks from the pores on my forehead. Wiping away the sweat with the back of my hand, another thought comes to me. Can you sweat in a dream? It must be possible, but it has never happened before that I can remember. My hand comes back up to my face and pinches my cheek. There is pain, even more pain when I pinch and twist the skin, causing my eyes to water. The icicle clinks its way back down my spine as my legs resume walking backwards.

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