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I hope the afterlife has a little movie theatre where you can sit in silence and watch the sequence of events that led to the watershed moments of your life. Take me, for instance: a tasteful long shot of the patient-zero bird that first got the bug – set to a Philip Glass score, something foreboding and moody – and then it jumps over the pandemic and all the stuff with my family and friends dying and focuses on some survivalist nutcase out in the woods setting a bear trap eleven months ago.

Time lapse of the trap, bears walking past, a thick branch falling on it and somehow not setting it off, leaves covering it.

And then while I'm sitting there, munching on afterlife Sour Patch Kids and butter-flavoured popcorn, thinking to myself *where the hell is this going?*, my dumb ass saunters on-screen and I step in the bear trap.

Oh, that's right.

I remember I spent almost three hours screaming and crying, trying to figure out how to open the trap. Finally I ended up tying down the metal catches with T-shirts from my pack, and used the branch the universe

foreshadowed – the one that kept the trap from cutting my leg clean off – to pry the rusted jaws open.

Now I'm just hopping around the forest with a yellow T-shirt tied over my wounded leg. At least watching this in the afterlife I'll have the tongue-burning delights of Sour Patch Kids.

Unlike now, where all I have to eat in my pack is the canned food I grabbed in Jersey before I had the silly idea to get off the main roads.

I shift my weight on the crutch beneath my armpit, wincing. It's actually just a big tree branch I found. Last night I wrapped a sweater around the Y-shaped fork to pad it, but it's not working and now it feels like my armpit is just a massive bruise.

The pain in my leg is worse. Every step I take with my good leg creates a pull in the bad one that shoots fire up my calf. I tried resting last night after I found the crutch branch, shivering while my leg went numb with damp cold. I nodded off a few times, half expecting to die like that, but when the sun came up this morning, my eyes still opened.

Now here I am, hobbling through the woods with absolutely no idea where the closest road is. I just hope that if I keep walking straight it will lead me to *something*. A road, a town, a stream to clean my wounds. Anything before infection sets in. And of course now I'm on the lookout for more bear traps, so that slows me down, too.

Because of the low cloud cover I have no idea what time it is when I stumble upon not a road but a cabin. It's cute. Modest. From what I can tell from the outside,

it's maybe two bedrooms. There's a small front porch with two chairs under a wide picture window. The shades are drawn and leaves litter the front gravel drive and pile against the stairs.

No car in the driveway. Maybe it's empty. Abandoned – the owner dead in their condo in some city or in a mass grave.

Or shot dead on the side of the road by another survivor.

I take a few tentative steps out of the woods on to the gravel.

It doesn't look like anyone has been here in a while. A small, chunky garden gnome sits at the bottom of the steps, a fluffy sheep in her lap. She sits on a toadstool, smiling at the drive as if she's waiting for someone.

Kinda creepy.

Especially since the leaves aren't covering her. Like she just shook them off herself.

But I don't think too much about that – garden gnomes that come alive when you aren't looking are the least of my troubles. There are four steps up to the front porch. Maybe I can just hop up them, see if the door is unlocked.

Of course it won't be – that would be too perfect. A nice little cabin open and free for the taking? Maybe even something to eat. I let my mind have a short food fantasy moment, as a treat, then crunch across the gravel to the steps.



The house is too quiet. I should have put on some music, something to distract me from the absolute silence. But now I can't be bothered to stop and put a record on.

Seventeen. That's how many cans of black beans I have left. I write it down on the yellow legal pad on my knee, crossing out the number nineteen from last week. I do this every Monday morning: count the food I have and watch the numbers slowly dwindle. It was maddening at first, but now it's almost meditative.

Eight cans of corn. I cross out the number nine on the sheet and write the new number to the right of it. There are maybe two more weeks before I run out of space and need to start a new sheet. And this time it will all be in my handwriting, not my mom's.

Pasta sauce. It's written in her barely decipherable scrawl. And then her perfect numbers – zeros slashed and sevens with a line through the middle so there's no misunderstanding – before her writing stops and mine takes over.

I don't need to count the jars of pasta sauce because I didn't make any pasta last week, so I leave the number eleven there and continue on down.

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