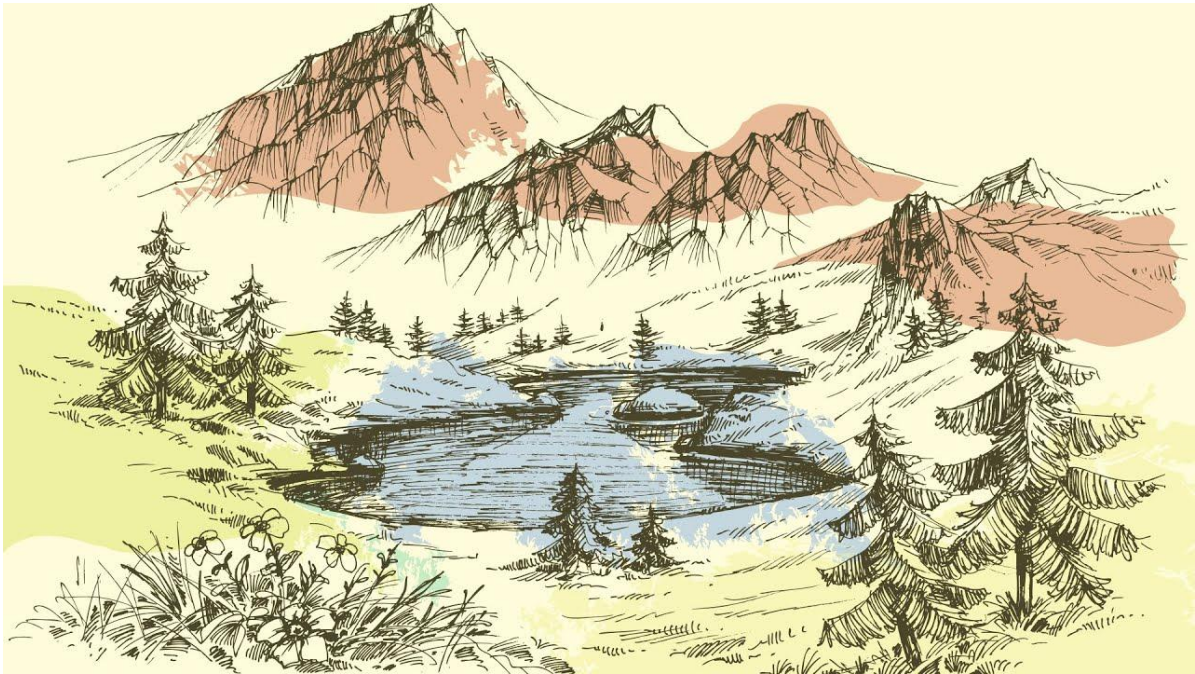


The Answer is Not a Hut in the Woods

Exubia



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The novel *Anna Karenina* begins:

Happy families are all alike. Unhappy families are unhappy in their own way.

I've always loved that line because it isn't just about families. I don't think it's pointing to something we all already know, which is that happiness when you're experiencing it feels pretty simple and usually is. Causes are easy to explain. If you're having a bad time, though, you. Might be the. First person in history ever to have had that problem. Each sad is tragically unique, and it's one thing to be sad. It's another to be sad about something odd and strange enough that you're convinced you'll never be able to properly explain it to another human being. But I'll give it a go. Please get a beer if you'd like to unfeeling turbo pretentious. About 10 years ago, I fell into one of my first I'm quite sad and I don't know why periods I have, of course, since learned that everyone else gets them too. But at the time I was even more self involved in here than I am today and believed I was special for them. 21 is a good age for that. The problem is obvious in retrospect. I just finished reading a load of the books that were going to define my. 20 is the writers I still love. Margaret Atwood, Arthur C Clarke, Gabrielle Garcia Marquez and Co, and inspired into realising the fantasy I've been harbouring since I was about 13 of 1 day learning to write that brilliantly. That beautifully precise like Virginia Woolf, but vulgar and funny like Hunter S Thompson. It was impossible. They were the greats. I was in unremarkable and, frankly, hygienically subversive. The problem was that I didn't want to do anything else. The dream of one day writing one great thing with the capital girl. Something perfect. I could always point to as proof for not all of me was ugly, that even Olga's contender. Nice garden. That was all I've wanted to do since I started reading properly. It felt like the same thrill I imagine as wanting to scale a mountain. No one has ever. Been up before or. Go mess around down in the Mariana Trench to be the first stranger to arrive in a strange land. And I was just then becoming aware of how unlikely and impossible it was because. I sucked at writing. But I've only just noticed a housemate saw I was a bit sad and restless and showed me a film called *Into the Wild*. It's the biopic of a real man, Crystal McCandless, who decided he was done with society and trapped off to commune with nature to spoil it for you. It's not really a spoiler to guys life. He died tragically and preventively, and alone in Alaska. But the main part. I remembered the only part everyone in their 20s who sees that film seems to remember was the wilderness thing, and I decided immediately that I would like to go and be alone, preferably in nature, preferably for a long time because I wasn't made for. Etc and out there. For some reason. I will be unburdened and finally happy forever, or at least hopefully escape this weird crisis I've fallen into. So a few months later I blew the remains of my student loan on a plane ticket and found myself in New Zealand because that seemed wildernesses, feeling rather bitter and anxious and lost geographically and spiritually. I very much wanted to go commune with nature. I was sure that would fix something.

I spent about a year volunteering on farms in New Zealand, S island. There was an organic farm program called Wolf WWOOF. It still exists big recommend and before what I say next, I really should stress that I never had a bad time doing it. Everyone was lovely. Except the first farm I worked on, it was run by a British couple. The only thing they hated more than their farm was each other. They despised each other with the same passion. New lovers adore each other. It was an art to watch. They had moved to the middle of nowhere, hoping to escape their problems and found when they arrived that they in fact were their problems. I'd get up around 5:00. But the goats spilled. Get yelled at for a few hours by the husband for and I'm not joking. Quote treating the animals too nicely. Then listen to a three hour lecture about how agriculture is going to collapse and they and they alone will be the ones to preserve the light of humanity in their post apocalyptic utopia. If I worked very hard, they told me they would even let me live there when the end times came, I would rather drink. I thought to myself, I would rather have my balls torn off by the blood drinking zombies of tomorrow's water walls than have to spend even another day with either of you vicious, bitter chuckle, fox apocalypse or not? One evening they took issue with me writing an e-mail to my parents because they Expo. That was anti isolationist and I decided it had been horrible and everything, but I was very done and negotiated getting the hell out on the last day as an act of what they announced was terribly kind of them. They let me plant the bulbs for that year's flower garden. I waited until they were out of view, then spent the next 4 hours laboriously arranging bulbs into the worst worlds I could think of. Job leaves, Centipede doing etcetera. I like to think that one day a few weeks. Later, they were having their morning cup of Pissweak coffee and looked wistfully out to the flower garden and noticed my handy while pushing up through the soil. Then both spontaneously combusted. I worked for quite a few more families and farms and really everyone else was incredibly kind and each time was different. Some days you're maintaining vineyards, other days building a house, go and volunteer with wolf or walk away. Or whatever. If it sounds up your street, most people are very friendly. It's big fun. One good thing came out of that initial hellish experience, though. The professionally depressed British couple I've worked for first had begrudgingly given me the number of a woman a few 100 miles away who owned a yurt that's a Mongolian tent in the middle. Was much to my wilderness dreams, excitement nowhere, and she rented it out from time to time. So when I got done with farms, I phoned her and she sounded nice and said sure come live here. So I bought every book I've ever wanted to read, got on the bus and lived there. It was perfect. Miles from the nearest town. I spent weeks doing nothing but wandering around in my birthday suit. Reading and writing. It's very nice to be young and on a mission, even when it feels like an impossible one, especially when all you need is some paper and a pencil. I remember lots of evenings in that years reading by candlelight, then spending the whole of the next day trying to write and accidentally, inevitably imitating. However, I've been reading the night before, there was the Hemingway week. When the sky was wide and the trees were juiced on steroids and every metaphor involved bull fighting and whiskey, there

was the Jane Austen week. When the countryside was positively refulgent and I ate so little fibre that I didn't shirt for perhaps two days short of a fortnight, a strange thing happened with the art. Though a few months in and the novelty wore off and I noticed I was going. May be insane. No wilderness euphoria had appeared. Whatever homeless Shangri-La I'd imagined was nowhere to be found. I didn't feel any better about the writing thing, nor my prospects of doing it. And worse, I missed people. It was weird. I began to realize I didn't even know what I've been searching for. In the first place. The stranger thing was that my, I suppose landlady and I got really close. She was my mum's age and her daughter. Just left home. And I think maybe she saw me as a kind of surrogate son, I don't know. But when she was in town every few weeks, we'd go walking and hang out a lot. She was very kind, very clever and very humble, quietly nodding and smiling at my stupid 21 year old musings about how. The world works. Never teasing me for being an idiot, which I was. I remember her going quiet for a while. When I eventually admitted what had started this entire freak out, then she said very gently, we will work this out, but it's going to take some time and you have to be OK with that. Well, turned out I wasn't OK with that, so ignore this. Advice completely because she. Was only more than twice my age, whether. You know, one day I walked into town and chanced on a book about a hiking route in the US called the Appalachian Trail. The trail was very long, apparently, but marked and maintained well. It was secluded, but occasionally passing the towns. It seemed insane, but people had done it before and lived. I quickly became obsessed with the idea of a massive hike, specifically the Appalachian Trail. Perhaps that was what? Was missing. It would be like living in the wilderness, just more exercising, but I could hardly just **** ** to America, so I decided I'd go do some hiking in New Zealand instead. The day I left the years, my landlady drove me to the bus stop. We were both very quiet. The mood was very sombre, and when we hugged goodbye, I noticed she was crying and I was too. If I'm honest, I realised. She made a friend and that, ironically, she was the part I really enjoys about trying to go. Alone an obvious truth was staring me in the face, but I was far, far too young and stupid to apprehend it. It would take another half my lifetime to work it out. I still think of my landlady today. I hope you're doing OK. Missus Brown the hike was even more disastrous than my other plans. Weeks of getting lost, weeks of knowing it was a stupid idea, but having too much pride. Give up. My tent let the rain in my shoes rubs. I had no idea what I was doing. Still, I carried it on until my body gave up on me. Then I gave up on me, really, and went off to have, well, not a life, but a bumbling improvisation of 1 anyway, then. 10 years passed in the way. 10 years does, and the rising thing did somehow become my job. The wilderness fantasies went away for a while. Or at least it was much easier to get lost in the silly forests. Still, once again older, not any wiser than I found myself lost ten years on, I just finished writing a book, the one about ocelots. If you know it and I was a mess, I've become so obsessed with trying to finish something that was unfinishable. I had lost the plot. Drinking with inadvisable enthusiasm, sleeping on sound insulation foam in the. Room where I. Write because that was the only place I

could sleep without feeling guilty about not working. Unable to finish. The thing yet unable to let it go. In hindsight, I should have just let it go. It was one of the worst things I've ever written. In any case, I'd gone quite bonkers, and by the time the book was finished, I was pretty finished too. I couldn't write another word, couldn't find any enjoyment. In it which? Was a bit. Of an issue since writing had become the one thing in the world that makes sense to me. It's the one thing that makes all the other things nice, not to mention pays my rent. Nothing worked. I hated. They abandoned everything I started. Second guessing myself the whole time this went on for. Luxury problems, I know, but it felt. Very real at the. Time the problem is that one's imagination and sense of purpose can't be bargained with or cajoled, and when they stop firing for some reason, it feels like suffocation. As you may unfortunately already know, they don't respond to reason. You just have to sit tight and wait to feel human again. There are workarounds, of course there are. But yes, your self worth goes summarily down the toilet along with the ability to play, and that's what had left me for fun. The playing the silly daydreams. I've been retreating to. Since I was little, I'm sure you know those daydreams too. And without them, the real world is far too cold and bleak. And I'm far too boring and cynical to live in it anyway. All of this was a sort of fun adventure into a mild early 30s melancholy episode, until I noticed if I was reading or looking at something close up, it would take ages for my eye to focus normally again when I look away. I say I because only my right eye can see anything. The left is a sort of cosmetic bonus, so as you can imagine, I'm quite protective of old righty visiting an optometrist. That seemed like a good idea. It happened to be the day of my 32nd birthday. Eye exams are about as exciting as birthdays in your 30s. Get, apparently, and the optometrist scanned my eye with fancy equipment and. Pearson varnished it, God knows and said Nope, everything's fine. And I said yeah, but it's not working. It takes ages to focus now, and he looked down on my notes and said. Ohh, it's your birthday today and I said yeah. And he said happy birthday. You're getting old, which I thought was extremely funny and useless and funny, but I must admit it added a whole new dimension to the whole freaking out about. Writing thing. Shouldn't I have written something good by now? I've had ages and not old yet, but I'm hardly young anymore. Where the hell am I playing at? I was supposed to have done a thing by now. I think I liked. I think I was proud. Of ***** optometrists. So I was a bit glum and getting glimmer. A friend noticed the cheese had completely slid off my cracker and said you need to go and do something else for a while. Something that isn't worrying about work. Otherwise you're gonna break some stuff on the inside. It came to me immediately. A decade in the making, all the into the wild wilderness. Henry David Thoreau, living off the land. And remembering that book I found in New Zealand ten years before, I said I'll walk the Appalachian Trail. That's the one with bears, isn't it? My friend said just a few months, I said I won't take a laptop, no pens or paper. I'll go walk the Appalachian Trail. And she said, yeah, I might go to the beach for a weekend, and it's not the one with bears. The Appalachian Trail travels through 14 States and climbs the equivalent elevation of doing every 16 times. Several 1000 people walk it

every year, and it's hardly obscure. There are movies about it now, but a lot less people actually end up finishing the whole thing. I had no intention of finishing it anyway. I just wanted to keep walking. Until I felt better and secretly more importantly, until I could write again, that was my plan. Taking a vacation while actually secretly working the whole time and. No one could. Stopped me. I looked into it and weirdly, walking the trail or cost even less than life, I wouldn't have to pay rent since I've been sleeping in a tent, most of the gear I'd need owned already, and I managed to find an obscenely cheap flight over to Atlanta near where the trail begins. If you're walking northbound, there was no reason not to do this, so suddenly realising how stupid what I was doing. Was in March of last year, I found myself descending into Atlanta a few nights later, I nervously laid everything out on my hotel bed, food and long Johns and toilet paper and realised this was it. This to be my life for a while. Everything I owned in the backpack in the woods. What the **** did I think I was do? Then the next morning, my uncertainty reached maximum. I ended up at Amicalola Falls State Park, where the trail begins. I got my bag waved by the kind ranges at the park. 30 pounds bang on about 20% of 1's body weight, though it felt like carrying a dead rhino chatted for a bit to a few other hikers who looked as nervous as I felt about what the hell was coming next. And then. Well, one by one we all just started. Walking the path was busy for a while. Families out for the day are rather arduous, climb up the waterfall, then soon enough it all gave way to forest and I was alone. The 1st 8 miles aren't the Appalachian Trail, it's the approach trail to get onto the main trail and I don't know if it's designed like this, but rather cleverly it kicks your *** just enough to make sure if. You're not supposed to be out there. You know it? My pack was obscenely heavy. Hundreds of miles away. I couldn't imagine another. I trained a few times a week for the trail for about a month before walking up the mountain that sits conveniently a few tram stops in my apartment. It was always fun throwing a few sandwiches and firms of coffee into a backpack and leisurely wandering up. To the peak. And each time I'd be thinking, man, I am so ready for this appellation thing. And I probably would have been if. And which Emma thermos of coffee and misguided confidence in my feeble sit at a desk all day legs was all I'd be taking along with it. In reality, with long hikes you have your life on your back and that changes things enormously. Imagination is limitless spinal. The break or not and within just that first hour on the real trail, I was learning not to write cheques with my mouth on my eyes, couldn't cash by midday it got rather warm. The path past the stream and I filtered some water from it cold and indescribably refreshing, a ritual that had soon become one of my favorite parts of the day and carried on into the woods. I walked until it started. Being dark and stopped. The campsite four or five other hikers had already set up for the night. I've been with about trying to remember how to actually lay ground sheet and actually put up a tent, hardly failing to notice. Everyone else seems to know exactly what they were doing and finally crawled into my tent and slept better than we have in half a decade. Then I woke when the sun rose and settled into the rituals, I would do every morning for the next while. Making coffee. Having planned a walk for a while, I decided most of

my addictions could go. I could give up the occasional Sunday cigarettes. The weekday beers too, but if you can't have a cup of coffee in the morning, what really is the point in being alive? Exactly, they're simply. As a general rule, I thrive on clutter and chaos, but even I eat that first morning and all the mornings that followed revelled in the simple joy of knowing where everything goes in one's backpack while breaking camp. The Swiss Army knife and water filter. The toothbrush and socks, all with their own little nooks and pockets. Then they even sublime the joy of putting that back back on and knowing it's all you own on that continent. And that first morning, things began to feel real. My calves and asserts a bunch. But I've woken up in the woods that morning and will be going to sleep in the woods that night. Something was very exciting about that. It was also rather exciting to find my shoes and pack worked fine. If you care about the sort of thing I didn't until I started the trail, I used an Osprey Exos 48 backpack and walked in luminous yellow. Altra Lone Peak sixes. I cannot recommend both enough, nor almost never gave me any trouble. I ate noodles on a rock for lunch, amazed at how good packet noodles. Only taste after a morning of walking, then set off walking again, thinking over and over. How are humans allowed to be out here until they threatened to get dark and set up camp? Aloneness time I'd camped alone quite a few times before, but never this far into the woods and never. Right. I thought the woods falling more or. Less pitch black my. Tiny tent and me probably smelling like whatever the equivalent of McDonald's is for bears, which is regular McDonald's, I guess. What the **** am I doing out here? Surprisingly, the woods are actually quite loud at night or the sound and ring owls gossiping to each other, wind breaking at the canvas of your tent, things crawling by and mincing by just a few feet from your head. You're in Nature's house, after all, but something feels primitively safe about a sleeping bag. May be the same. And for of enclosure we derived from caves I don't know but somehow a few layers of polyester feels enough to keep you safe from whatever you imagine is coming to eat your eyeballs. And that was the shape of my life for the next a while, I would wake, drink a bucket of coffee, set off, have lunch by the gorgeous view, walk until I was done, and set up camp just like I had the night before. I watched the sun go down. I boiled rice and then I got into my sleeping bag and read. I read I should have like I haven't read since I was 15, using my head. Watched cozy in long Johns. It was quite cold at night in Georgia. In March, and that only made things even cozier, clinging to every word like it was my first time holding a book. I had forgotten how to read like that. Things I put down halfway through a few years before a load of Steinbeck, stuff light by Anne John Harrison. Suddenly everything was enthralling. Then all the stuff I reread just because I created a history of the first nautical clocks. The fire upon the deep. I devoured everything I could find by David Thorne, the guy behind 27B/6. Just read it all. He's ***** hilarious. But in general, everything was better for reading properly and amid the almost silence of the forest. And knowing there's nowhere else to look for. Entertainment. But your brain. And I'd have quite enough of hanging out there. Sometimes you'd be sharing your campsites who are clearing with other hikers, and sometimes they come and say hello and it

really was that easy. It'll sound insane, but getting ready for the trip. I haven't been worried about bears or dehydration, but other hikers that I'd have to. Talk to. I've learned as every introvert eventually does, to try and mimic being outgoing, and I hope I do a halfway passable impression. But to this day, meeting new people still feels like having all of my RAM used up by a program I don't understand. It's very stressful, and I wasn't looking forward to that. This is not. How I went? In life, you're bumping into people coming from 1000 different contexts. Maybe they've had a bad day. Maybe you have. Maybe they're trying to scan you. Maybe they're just being nice for no reason, but it takes ages to work out which game you're both playing and the trail. There is only one context and that is the trail. And just as you've chosen to go and live in the woods for a while, so have they this commonality. Makes every conversation immediately easy because you know what they're doing there. They know what you're doing there. You're both going the same way. Everyone I met was lovely. Anyway, about a. Week in and a kind of hiking, then descended by hour three or four of walking in the mornings and things would turn up in one's mind's eye. Daydreams, nostalgia, old friends, old plans, lots of cringe, lots of ghosts and ghosts in particular. I remembered myself 10 years previously, also out in the woods. Considerably more naive, but. Using any small smile. I felt just as lost here I was for a while too, in some stupid self created crisis thousands of miles from home, again isolating myself again for lack of any other approach I could think of. Nothing had changed. I was still the same. Idiot and one. Morning tying my laces from nowhere, I realized it was dead endedness that was doing me in. That was my. Writing the last book. And demolished me. It wasn't working on it. That had sucked. I like working. If it's on something fun rather it was the hope that if I could pour myself into this thing, if I could write somehow truthfully enough for. It would be a salvation. It would make me UN dirty and I would wake up the next morning fixed, or at least better and find me a real person. I woke up the next morning when the book was finished and released and found I was still me. It was the hardest thing I've ever done and it still didn't work, meaning probably nothing would work. That's what I said. Lad, that's what I was. Doing in the woods because of the one thing I enjoy. It wouldn't work. I'd have to find something else. How ridiculous. It seems suddenly to put so much pressure on oneself like that ever resulted in any good work. How had I forgotten that daydreaming was supposed to be fun? It wasn't letting monetize and boost the ones ego. It's for fun. It's for playing somewhere along the way. I must have forgotten how to play. And that was stupid. And I was stupid. I thought of a line. Kayla Quinn, the greatest writer to have a live in my opinion. And if anyone disagrees, they're objectively. Long had said just before she dies talking about writing the name of our beautiful reward is not prophet. His name is free. And maybe it was the sheer, almost offensively beautiful forest. Maybe it was the joy of still having enough toilet paper for the next few days left, but a new thought hit me, a hopeful one, which was that at least I've never been particularly confused about what I wanted to do. Not generally. Ever since I was a teenager, I knew I would either aim for a life of doing stuff with words because I loved them. Because

they are music, because story is really just metaphysical investigations of reality, with characters thrown in, or I would spend the rest of my life trying to do that. It was a non negotiable. No other joyable path. Never made sense to me. I don't know why it's this way, but it's always been this way. How lucky I am. I've realized that either by biological accident or miss why a brain and the lack of character that I am like this. I know lots of people who aren't who just never had an obsessive calling, and they're doing fine, often their sensible and pay their bills. They seem quite happy with their lives, but a sensible life has never really appealed to me. I am simply too incompetent, even if it's fruitless. I like that feeling of walking towards the mountain, the mountain of one day, I might actually make a beautiful thing. I don't. Know how else I? I would have lived. I was unfathomably lucky, I realized. For having that compulsion, even if it occasionally spiraled off into borderline madness and self pity in the woods of Georgia as it had now, as it has on another continent 10 years before, as it may well 10 years hence. But I was lucky. I probably should keep that in mind. I thought I finished tying my laces and. Looked out to whatever absurdly gorgeous view was below. Then I put my backpack on, setting walking again, and didn't think about writing for. For the first while on the trail, it was impossible not to play a quiet mental gamers. I wonder who will be dropping out? It almost never worked. One evening I watched a couple walk into camp, apparently having packed for our Antarctic expedition, carrying enormous bags of fruit in the sort of elaborate fold up chairs one takes to festivals. They were lasts, I thought, to myself. I met the couple a few weeks later. Doing fine, minus the chairs and bags of fruit, but doing fine all the same. Other folks ripped like Hercules, positively hopping up mountains, would suddenly drop out from random injuries or just not vibing with the woods. There was no. To it, barring injury, the only signifier I ever found reliable for whether someone would stick with it, was whether or not they wanted to. Eccentrics seemed to have a special advantage and the trail was full of benevolent eccentrics. One guy who wore kilt. I never got to know, but we hiked at roughly the same speed and kept bumping into each other. I fondly remember climbing a rather. Pleasant Mountain and him already having reached the peak. We did it. He yelled and offered his hand in congratulations. I went to shake it and realised he was using his other hand simultaneously to take. This, which I found more charming and demonstrating of character than I can tell you. I walked also for a while with a Californian gentleman who I immediately fell in blow love with reported one morning when he suggested getting stoned, might make the day's hike a little easier. I declined, not particularly wanting to get off my kids for breakfast, then setting off I went to find him again. And by then he had inducted some new friends into his wake and bake. They were sitting in silence in the shelter with extremely red eyes. You're not walking today, Angie? I said. He shook his head and opened a bag of marshmallows. I never saw him again. In my experience, this was how friendships worked on the trail. They got deep and honest rather quickly, but we're also a female and without expectation. Another friend I met with an artist from New York and brilliant one of those irritating people who claims they dabble a bit, then presents the ***** Mona Lisa to you. Or

walk together for a few days, having a wonderful time moaning about our respective birth nations. Then he stopped in town for a day and I carried on walking and seemed to wouldn't meet again. It snowed a week later, heavily enough, but walking in it seemed like an extremely bad. My dear, I set up my tent and hunkered down for a day of reading about Richard Feynman's various exploits and eating pop tarts. Near sundown, I heard someone setting up near me and they came over to ask if I wanted them to brush the snow off my tent. We chatted through the tents for a bit, then he gingerly said my. Gingerly and set his back, I got out. And of course it was my artist friend from New York. As I remember it, we did a sort of impromptu reunion dance in the snow, the sort dogs do when you take the lead off the wall for a walk. Deprived of any other entertainments, freezing our balls off, it was a party. A good one too, and deprivation is the name of the game. Maybe I'm misremembering it, but there's a theory of locants that I quite like that we don't desire things we desire to feel desire itself. The thing isn't. Gentle deprivation is a rather fun way of gaming your desired protocols. After a week in the woods of stray or nearing one's full bag is a banquet. Having just enough battery left for your phone to kick your *** at chess is about as entertaining as an evening of gin tonics. One day I was getting a bit miserable about a blister and looked down on my shoes and noticed those little holes at the top. No one ever seems to use. Experimentally, I threaded my laces through them and justice never got blisters again. This felt like an achievement, tantamount to discovering cold fusion. It was the best thing. That had happened in weeks. Another treat to look forward to was trail magic. Sometimes you'd be coming down the mountain, swearing to yourself about having you born in the 1st place and during the road, some ex hikers or just inexplicably kind humans would have set up tables for coffee and doughnuts and biscuits and everything you've been fantasizing about expecting more money in return and would gladly stand and chat to you too. It was. Miraculous, there was another. Day close to a miracle, we meet lots of section hikers on the trail. People just out for the day or the weekend. I got talking to some older guys out for a catch up walk with each other. They teased me extensively about the Boston Tea Party and I tease them extensively about what their country calls beer, which is *****, by the way. It's just European snobbery, Americans. But exactly what they're doing with beer these days, their IPA game is on point anyway, this older gentleman said, well, if you stop at the campsite near where our truck is. The beers on us, I assumed this was a joke and tried not to think about it. I'm not a foodie. I didn't miss Falafel or Curry. I only craved one thing in the woods, and that was beer. Not to get hammered, not even to take the edge off the day, but just that one cold beer to round off doing something difficult. I thought about it constantly. We got to the campsite and said our goodbyes. And the older guys wandered off to their truck, maybe a few kilometres walk away. I set up my tent and stared into space for quite some time. About 40 minutes later and and just text in hand reached into my tent, offering a can of IPA. One of those older guys who walks, not an inconsiderable distance, just to go and. Be a beer just to be kind. Then just to walk all the way back to the truck again. I practically shot myself

with gratitude that evening. I watched the sun go down drinking what was without any contest. The greatest fear of my life. I think what most hikers were enjoying out there was pretty identical to the kick I was getting, which was the constant sense that you're all on an adventure. Because on balance, it is very pleasant to wonder without being lost to plan without foresight, to spend a few days alone and getting sick of one's company, then chance on the best company you've had in an age I was feeling a bit lonely and camping by a stream in the evening when the guy passed going for water we established. We were both readers, and somehow we got around to a shared love of the. Kirk, David Graeber. When he checked my watch about 3 hours are gone by, we went back up the hill to where his girlfriend had built a fire. Then two more hikers joined while we were presumably played a private mental gamers is. Anyone here a murderer? Then satisfied, it was unlikely we watched the dark folding around us until the campfire was the only visible light in the whole of the woods. And here we were. Occupying a tiny orange universe together, there was nothing outside, just each other to trust many nights or that way, I came to enjoy the feeling very much. I won't pretend there weren't low periods. I won't pretend there weren't unsettling periods. One night, I woke to the sound of something large and not exactly human. Wandering around in the near vicinity of my tent. And told black bears are fairly harmless as long as they don't think their Cubs are in danger. But I didn't sleep great. The rest of that night. There was really only one day when things went wrong and how long. The wind. The trail is marked all the way to Maine with white lasers of paint on trees that tell you if you're on the right path. It's hard to miss them. One evening I was eavesdropping on 2 hikers, talking about how one of them had briefly gotten lost that day and thought to myself, come on, how do you wander off and mouth past the universe was listening, though, and she had a dark sense of humour the next day. I was trying to make more miles than I probably should have and was rushing turned. In a white blade. Listen, after a while the path started to look a bit spotty in places, the blazes disappeared, but maybe they haven't been that well maintained sides. I've just come down the hill and had no interest in walking all the way back up it mile or so and the past disappeared completely. I turned around and realized I couldn't even find a path back the way I can't stay calm. I thought he can't be that far from the trail. Only I could. I just walked maybe a few miles in the wrong direction somehow and have no idea which direction I come from. I wandered cautiously for about an hour and for. Rather aware I was only getting myself more lost and further from the trail the weeks before the woods had always felt big, but wholly somehow he didn't know where he'd end up. But you knew where you were going. Suddenly the woods was still very big. But that bigness felt terribly alone and foreboding. I panicked finally only for about 20 minutes. But as you know, 20 minutes of panic is about three years of most other emotions. Visualising the headline in the local newspaper idiotic Brits, skeleton found, etc. I tried everything, retracing my steps that didn't work, listening to voices of other hikers, tried my phone to the GPS, but the battery had run out days before. In the end, I decided on going. And broke. I'd been walking north if I just carried on walking

North Ish. Maybe I'd find the path again. I'd come down a hill, so I picked a hill looking Fulton northwards and went up there and about an hour later, miraculously I found the path again. I haven't even been that far from it, but I never wanted to kiss her, nor I noticed a few trees. The bark had been peeling off. And realised in my stupid rushing I've probably seen something like that and assumed it was a blaze and taken away. I never sneered at stories of people getting lost again, and I didn't get lost on the trail again. While physically not emotionally, it's leaving only having one thing to do for the day, and that's to get where you're going. It's very difficult to worry about anything, to stress about anything when that's all that's in your mental inventory. You spend your waking hours inside nature, traipsing through evolutions. Imagination and feeling miniature food. I cannot tell you how peaceful betrayal is and defies words and inevitably things surface inside you people you haven't thought about in years when visiting arguments, visiting kindnesses, thinking of your parents and your friends. Wow of my cats. I'm always thinking about my cat. You should be thinking about my cat too. And inevitably, you realize just what a stressing **** you've been to yourself for such a long time now. And every day, every minute of every day. I couldn't believe all this beauty had been out there the whole time. In any year before I've been born and would still be out there in any year after I die. Physics with trees on top, all of it moving in next will be slowly to its own rhythm. My life and mayfly compared yellow Birch mountain Maple beach. All of the towering over you in Vermilion Kaleidoscope. Mountain peaks pulling away into the horizon behind the head and tie a. Silent wall below. That will make you cry if you look at it too long. It's ridiculous. It's absurd. It's America. There is also the beauty of stopping in a town. Occasionally the beauty of sleeping in a bed of ordering extra fries, of getting to walk around the whole day with nothing on one. I liked being brought large plates of large American things, and getting called hung feeling like the favorite cat in the Buddhist temple. I learned to regard gas stations with new and enraptured eyes. 20 minutes scrutinising the candy section for all the delicious things I was going to take back to my room. Entire fridges stocked with beer. We have so much beer in civilization. I kept thinking, and it's easily accessible. Why am I not drinking it all the time? And in one hiker town I drank 3 or 4 pints of beer and left for a walk. Just as I was leaving the bar, I noticed. The bartender had been slightly cautious about serving me the last one. The beer was 9%. It kicked in on my walk back to the hotel. I had a little tumbling ditch by a high. It's difficult to America when you don't have a car. I noticed I was exceptionally *****. I got back to the hotel and realized I'd forgotten my room number. The guy working there began insisting they had no record of me. I began insisting that was pretty ridiculous as I checked in just that afternoon and I would really like to go to bed. He was kind but clearly thought I was insane and it just made me more. Frustrated, arguing with the kind of inverse proportional logic any alcohol can make possible, the less sense your point makes, the stronger you believe it. Just as I was about to start being passive aggressive, I pulled the key card out of my pocket and noticed I was in fact staying at a completely different hotel. I told him I was going for a quick walk. Apologized without.

The United States is very strange. I think even our friends living there will agree. It's made weirder for most of us, non Americans, having grown up on American television and movies and thinking, we all know what the states is like. But Hollywood doesn't mention the miniature toilet stall doors that basically may as well not be there for all. The cover and. Don't cover or the way people just say hello and start a conversation with you out of nowhere just because they feel like saying. In Europe this would usually be indicative. You're about to get robbed or even a little stabbed, but it works there. It's outgoing, it's kind. I don't know why we don't do this. I also came to adore American television halfway through a sports match. The adverts will suddenly come in with some of your McLaughlin wants to burn your house down and. Goldfish, oki doki. I like Taika towns very much. But after a day or so, a familiar feeling would hit. And kind of longing to get walking again, knowing that all we had to do was go to the supermarket, buy some food and toilet roll. And at any moment, if you're choosing, you could wander back out into the woods, and every time my Kindle had enough books on it and the IPA hangover wore off, that's exactly what I did by Tennessee. Things were rather comfortable and nice because everyone still on the trail. Probably meant business and had adapted to trail life compared to the people one met in town. Pickens lived at a different pace, woke early and slept early, usually had strange and interesting things to say, and you had to. With ticks and throw bare bags, it was a parallel universe, one that became so natural to me that going to resupply in town felt like the impostor reality. I'm not sure I saw a single instance of passive aggression, let alone an argument or a fight, on the. But my favorite part was the culture of self-sufficiency about 200 miles. Everyone was wildly self-sufficient. They weren't rubbing it in your face. You just knew if you gave them a rubber band and the thumbtack and said, please build me a voice activated laser guide. They would probably do it. It even started to rub off. On me, I. Liked the days when I was alone, knowing I had carried myself all this way on my own goofy feet. I liked building fires. I liked finally knowing what Poison Ivy looks like, so I won't have to go another week where I simply just cannot sit down. I liked especially that I wasn't dead and I must impart somehow be responsible for some of them. But I wasn't made of titanium like those other hikers. I haven't meant to go the whole way anyway. A violin, and I decided I'd probably gotten a message and hung up the phone. A family member had just died and there was a war going on two countries away from where I lived these days. Staying in the woods started to seem like I was neglecting my life. This felt like an ending. I caught a ride back down South, near to where I'd started again. Enjoyed a bath at Bath and retired my short lived status. For hiker, there was only one thing left to do in America. The other thing I've been dreaming about for years, and it was the US space and Rocket Center in Alabama, Mecca for me, landing obsessives like myself. I hired a car in for a Rover there for a day and it was paradise, full scale, Saturn fives, space suits and an entire hangout full of engineers who'd originally worked on the Apollo program. Then you could just walk up. Talk to them. So I walked up and talked to them. I'll try and keep this vague to preserve their dignity. But one engineer and I got chatting

about an astronaut who'd walked on the moon. Not the first famous 2. And that said, engineer had worked with them all. My God, I said he worked with an actual moon Walker. What was he like? The engineer paused for a second, thoughtfully glanced up at a rocket hanging from the ceiling. Total *****. I'm very almost peddled my pants. Then a visit to see a friend. And soon enough I was back. In Europe, I lay down my hiking stuff in the corridor of my apartment for a while so I could trip over it and remember how wonderful it had all been. I followed blogs and my trial friends who carried on and lived vicariously through them for a while. Was strange because I noticed the Henry David Thoreau Wilderness fantasy had finally gone away. This confused me. I haven't come back with any epiphanies or. I wasn't willing to my desk to get anything down. Why in the hell did I feel better? I wandered around the apartment for a bit, hung out on the bed with the cat, folded up the laundry. Nope, still me stole me. Been before I left wearing the. Wilderness thing gone. There's a day on the trail. I still think of sometimes when a mum and her son were kindly giving me a lift into town. Maybe 16 or so ridiculously clever for his age, for any age actually asked me what I was doing on the trail, I answered. I wasn't sure yet, and he said, well, a lot of people out there are just trying to. And well, desires for a fact find themselves. And I thought I've just tried everything I own for the last few 100 miles through the woods with only my mental illness for company woodland creatures with large teeth have been trying to abscond with my food. And last night I took a **** in a snowing hole in the ground. Won't be lectured on lifestyle by an embryo. When I realized, oh, he's probably right. Lots of the folks I met on the trail, they were at some transitional stage in their lives, had just graduated, had just quit their career. Lots were just out there because they liked the choir and the walking too.

But it was definitely a place to go and have a think, I suppose. That's why I went too, and no revelation to come of it, which is in itself a sort of revelation.

I think it kind of fell into place one night, months after getting home, when I went for beers with a friend, we laughed our asses off and drank like sailors, and he asked me why I'd gone into the woods in the 1st place?

I told him about the book, about burning a few circuits out, about loco, and in that irritatingly clever way of boiling what feels like a complex problem down into a sound bite, he said:

"So you weren't feeling very inspired?"

"No," I said.

"And you can't control when you are?"

"No," I said.

"Well," he asked, "Would you want to control it?"

And the problem immediately solved itself, because of course I don't want to. Of course, no one does any more than you'd enjoy tickling yourself, those misguided aha

moments are few and far between, but they're rather special from being few and far between. That's what makes them nice. And when you sign up to a lifestyle that involves trying to turn them into something as I stupid. They have you sign up to them also being unpredictable. That's how it works. That's how it will always work. That's the deal and the quiet months are part of the deal. One's imagination going dormant for a bit. You have only one job during that catastrophe and it's to sit tight and remember that it isn't a catastrophe. Your brain will come back online being made too many demands and it needs to be. That sit tight, you idiot. It's just another mini crisis. Through the others, you barely even remember them now.

I got home that night and opened the folder I keep all of my stupid 'could be something, but probably won't be' ideas for stories. They weren't great, but they weren't. The disasters I'd seen them as months before when I've been freaking out. It was the same game I'd always been playing. Everyone is playing. Keep going. Ohh, I realized. Though glaring in front of me, only an idiot like myself could miss it. I was supposed to stay here, wasn't I? Here we're home finally, years after decades of searching for one here where my friends are here, where me in weird, imperfect, perfect Bulgaria.

I went into the corridor and played with the straps on my hiking backpack for a while, thinking how strange it was that it had contained my entire life for a time and realised ultimately that I am not a. I am a cat. Dogs will come to you for help when they're sick. They need you. And they're. Not ashamed of it. Cats, in my experience anyway isolate themselves. They shut down and most distressing me when they think they're dying, they go somewhere to die alone. I do the same not to die, but getting stuck with the problem in the world, then escaping from the world to try and solve it. Which is not unlike trying to debug code by throwing the computer out the window and joining the circus. This is not a good reason to go to the woods. This is how you go to the woods. Try and use them for your own ends, which is not where the trees are there and I find myself now in this weird position of realizing Christ from the countless the hero of into the wild. That film I saw what feels like a lifetime ago, had the answer to his own question and to mine that it was there all along a line he scribbled in his copy of Doctor Zhivago. Not long before things went South. Happiness is only real when shared. I really thought I could go off and live like a hermit and come back with an answer to myself, but our entire lives aren't equations to solve. There is no master theory of us. We don't arrange things right and forever live the rest of our lives and emotional utopia. It's more a succession of little fires. One has to keep putting out. And for me, learning to turn that into a dance. These days I do not believe if one is SARS or something has broken on the inside that the answer is a heart in the woods. Of course, there are isolationists. Of course, there are introverts. Of course, there are people who just like hiking or living outside and aren't escaping anything. But for those who are low about something or spun waywards by something in a pinch, I think. We often hide from shame when in reality, if we were just honest about what's going on in our heads, our friends would give it down and try to help. And those friends I've

told about my little Devil with madness back in March with that awful book have all said more or less the same thing, which is why the hell didn't. Tell me I should have. They would have made jokes, made light of it, and I don't know if they could have fixed something, but it certainly would have stopped the problem growing.

If you get the urge to take off into the woods and then you crack on. There are so many beautiful, quiet meadows out there just waiting to be chanced upon. I cannot tell you how fantastic your adventures will be. Refund laws will be better, I'm sure. Go do lots of that. In my limited experience, when I really look back on it, the real adventures were someone you know doing something you don't expect, or trying to remember how you fixed yourself after a blue patch and realising it was largely thanks to someone standing benevolently in the background of your life and doing it quietly from afar without you even realising it. I'd even gently suggest that perhaps the strangest adventure. Perhaps the most humbling one happens on the inside. Discovering those parts of yourself you've never acknowledged, just singing those parts you've never liked and constantly, constantly. Being aware that. You will soon turn into someone else and whoa. That is, is decided at every moment by you now and in two minutes and two minutes after that until 10 years later, one very long succession of two minutes. You'll find a new you sitting there and you're not even sure where they began, nor where they'll end, which makes us custodians of a sort looking after this body until a new, hopefully better. Plus inhabits it a while from now. Maybe you know a book called *Three Men in a boat* by Jerome. It's very funny, which is weird considering it was written by Victorian and in the fashion of popular authors who have their day then fade into obscurity. He wrote a book *A while later* called Paul Kevlar. Which was obscure then and was completely forgotten now, but I hope it never fades into total forgotten Ness just for this passage alone. Returning home on this particular day of. I paused upon the bridge and watched for a while, the lazy barges maneuvering their way between the Piers. It was one of those hushed summer evenings when the air, even of grim cities, is full of whispering voices and as turning away from the river I pass through the white toll gate. I had a sense of leaving myself behind me on the bridge. So vivid with the impression that I looked back, half expecting to see myself still leaning over the iron power pet, looking down into the sun net water. I think this all just goes on. I think it doesn't stop until we stop life phase after life phase. The illusion of understanding inevitably usurped by yet stranger problems arriving, then strangers who arrive in one's life with the solution and are no longer strangers, but friends, that the only control one can ever truly maintain is whether we dance. Despair when confronted with such a constant lack of control. Just like Joanna Newsom sang the nullifying, defeating, negating, repeating joy of life, this constant process of thinking, you've got it nicked, then starting over again with new problems completing the final theory of you and the world and realizing it's just the beginning of a whole new class of theories of you and the world, many of which you'll never solve. And say you say goodbye to final theories, isn't that? OK, I think it's OK. Rediscovering yourself, rediscovering the world, or those basements down there, or those both ways above.

Isn't it cool being remade? I'll keep walking until I come, like all of us, off the veranda and out into the blue morning with friends. I hope and will find more friends and walk with them too. I hope and blunder. In the group I'm blunder. I hope you'll remember. I hope I'll remember that there's beauty in it all that we do emerge from darkneses and we're helped out of them by the awful hands of those we love more often than we scramble ourselves. I hope we remember that this beauty in it all that we do emerge from darkneses that we hear now that that's enough. We do this together, though we do this together. I think that's enough. I think that's enough. And I think that's enough.

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The Answer is Not a Hut in the Woods

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