

“Split”

A rusty station wagon rattles into the campsite, spitting gravel and red dust as it screeches to a halt. The brakes squeal, and three small children fall from the car. Heat oscillates from the dirt, distorting the wavering gums. Bone-white limbs strain to the sky, tendons harsh and apparent. A man gingerly stands from the passenger side, tenderly stretching upright. His wife unfolds from the driver's seat, laughing at his stumbling movements. The back of the car is packed with military style precision. A hole is excavated, allowing a small dachshund a path to freedom. She unfolds from her crevice and flops from the tailgate, sleepily complaining. The adults begin to unpack the trailer, as the three children terrorise the grasshoppers and ants.

Dusk falls early in the valley. After a millennium of water wearing away at mud and earth and stone, high ranges vault to the open heavens, and the sun's sticky golden tendrils don't grace the hidden places for long, as if apprehensive of the things that wander the darkness. The light does not necessarily repel danger. Snakes seek the life-giving glow and bright insects with glittering carapieces, highly alluring to small hands, gather in the heat of the day. The sun illuminates the menaces with a daunting precision, but the darkness is full of unknowns.

The man gathers twigs and bark, grateful for the previous occupants who left a small pile of logs. Tomorrow, he will go collect more wood, but for tonight, this is enough. The woman wrangles the small children, pulling thick socks over grubby feet and wrapping the little ones in wool and down. Darkness descends quickly, the heat of the day languidly follows. Their breath fogs in the air around them, as the sounds of kids up far later than their bedtimes echo through the gums. The little dog has been lost to the darkness but there is no great need for concern. Only a dog could create the frantic sniffing, so the family sits in the little pool of light cast by the fragile flames, and toasts marshmallows, occasionally spotting the glint of her collar in the moonlight.

Long after the children have been persuaded into the tent and swaddled in flannellette pajamas and down sleeping bags, the man calls for his dog. He whistles and clicks, cursing the mongrel for its disappearance. Before he returns with a torch, he hears a crash from the bush behind him, and the little mutt appears. One of its eyes reflects red in the lantern light. The man chases it inside, and closes the canvas.

There is the smell of rot in the tent when the sun rises. The man swears, searching the cramped interior for the source of the smell. The dog must've rolled in something long dead last night. The stench of death emanates from it. He wrangles the wretched thing out of the tent and into the river, hoping the snow melt will baptize the creature and leave his dog in some semblance of how it arrived. Yelps fill the valley as he drags it in behind him.

The river didn't work. The stench becomes a constant companion, an unwelcome guest that squats at the campsite. The children wrinkle their noses, as if they consider it a personal affront. The woman makes multiple trips to the river throughout the day, usually accompanied by one or more of her children. The other side of the river beckons, tendrils of native raspberry drag in the steady pull of the current, bright red berries glinting in the sun. The children strike out towards them, kicking and whirling. The woman tells them to stay within arms reach, that the water plunges into unseen nooks and crannies that could pull them away. While the children don't listen to her, they don't like the sharp stones on the river bed that bite at their feet, so they stay in the sunlit lagoon. They follow the dog at its feet frantically churn the water into foam.

For 3 days, a rhythm is developed and sustained. The children spend all day in damp bathers, and the dog's coat never dries. It still smells of rotting meat. The man comments to the woman about how they must take the dog to the vet, as only one eye is cracked and reflects red, but in the languid heat of the day the dog appears normal. Its snuffling and digging fills the night as the family retreats to the fire, roasting cuts of meat that hiss and spit into the flames.

In the way a lazy summer often does, their time in the valley came to an end too soon. The dog lays in the shade of the gums. The man watches his children in amusement as the littlest sits astride the mutt. It doesn't move, just groans in complaint. The dog sighs, disturbing the multitude of flies. They settle as a black cloud, and the little one runs around, swatting them away.

The moon hangs low in the inky blackness. A dark sister to the sun, it can only be seen in the aftermath of her glow. A small figure in pink stripy pajamas unfolds from the canvas doorway. An animal follows, catching itself on the zip. The small child entwines her stubby

fingers through its fur, oblivious to the world around her. A red pin prick of light is thrown from the dark, and the creature leads the child to the river bed.

The child appears to be sleepwalking. The moon winks at the eccentric pair. The creature leads the small body, frantically pumping blood and life through its veins, into the inky water. Her grip tightens on the collar. The darkness extends its arms to the child as she kicks and paddles, mimicking the creature beside her. Water whirls and grasps and tugs, the darkness screaming from the abyss. The child clings to the creature, as it strikes out, and onwards.

There will be nothing to find in the daylight.