

The Mysterious Disappearances of Wonga

The bushland that enveloped me was an endless sea of greyish-green foliage. The air was crisp and cold, but the sun beating down provided a warmth that countered it comfortingly. Leaves crunched under my feet with every step, a vast contrast to the dead silence that welcomed me otherwise. From my vantage point at the top of the hill, the small town below should have been visible, but instead, it was gone, replaced with an ongoing expanse of trees. Not even the beach, for which the town was so well known, was in sight, in its place instead more staggeringly tall hills stretched out towards the horizon. I had heard of the folklore surrounding this hill, of mysterious disappearances and unexplained phenomena, but I hadn't paid it any thought when I came. I had hiked hills like these before, and nothing came of them. However, from the moment I stepped out of my car and onto the worn earth beneath me, something felt wrong. A frigid cold had settled over me, an unearthly shiver that crawled through my skin. The usually bustling atmosphere of birds and wind had ceased as well, leaving an uncanny silence in its place. The usual smell of eucalyptus was absent, instead replaced with a peppery nothing that made my nose itch. It felt as if time itself had stopped around me, but I ignored my instincts and pressed on regardless. I couldn't have been prepared for this.

I had not noticed the change in the trail upon entering, and by the time I did, I was too far gone. My feet were aching from the seemingly endless trudge I'd committed to, up the small dirt trail that snaked around the hill. It seemed as though the hill was repeating itself in any direction I attempted to walk, and I found myself retracing my steps over and over again. There was something else too. There was a sensation at the back of my neck, the crawling gut feeling that something was watching me. It never stopped; the feeling persisted no matter where I tried to hide. With every step I took, a distant sound of rustling leaves echoed through my ears, faint enough that I doubted it was real at all. It was as if something was hiding from me, just beyond my sight. And that was when I saw it. A small figure, on the next hill over. It was pure inky black, contrasting the dull green and grey around it, and stood as unmoving as the bushland around us. I stared, shouted, and signalled frantically in its direction, but my attempts proved fruitless, nothing causing it to digress from its standing. My feet tumbled as I scrawled over the shrubbery at the base of the two hills, scrambling desperately to get to the figure. The day stretched forever, yet my body grew tired. How long had I been there? My limbs listened not to my command but rather to the motion that set them swaying, feeling stiff yet too loose for me to gain control. I looked back up at the figure, hoping I had closed the distance between us, but it was gone. The hills returned to their familiar state, untouched and unperturbed, perfectly

balanced yet gut-wrenchingly wrong. My heart rose into my throat, pounding in my neck as I tried swallowing back the dry air that lined my mouth. I had left my water bottle in my car, as I had naively believed I would be fine without it. I was wrong.

I collapsed under a low-hanging tree, the same that I had passed countless times while traversing the boundless hills. My eyes hung heavy, drooping to the floor as I fought the drowsiness that overcame me. Slowly, I felt my body tilt, but somehow, I felt far away, watching myself from the third person, watching my slumped, ragged form slouch over as the world faded black.

When I woke, the sky seemed dimmer. The sun still burned in the light blue sky, but a light cloud of darkness seemed to filter it, despite the lack of cover or trees. The bushland had become more dim, blander, from the last time I was awake. The leaves had been stripped of their colour, and the dirt a monotoned grey. The feeling was back, but stronger this time. A cold, lonely feeling crawled up my spine to behind my neck and I whipped my body around, still crouched on the pebbled dirt. And there it was. A figure, on the other side of the hill, standing gravely, stark black compared to the bleached scenery around us. My heart began beating wildly, an instinct screaming for me to run, get away from it. I stumbled to stand, flailing backwards awkwardly. My eyes couldn't tear away from it. I couldn't escape. Suddenly, I managed to gain a footing among the loose rocks scattering the ground, and I was up, bolting fast. I ran until my legs burned, pumping them until they were screaming in indignant protest. My feet fumbled as they skidded down the hill, propelling faster and faster until it felt like I would topple over. Just as I began to lose my footing, my shoe collided with even ground as the momentum I had gained flung my body forward. I glanced back up the small mound, and my whole body flushed cold. There it stood. At the top. Watching me. Black inky darkness spilt over the edge of the small ledge and crept towards me. The darkness surrounded me in the fleeting moment I stopped, and I lunged towards the light, away from its grasp. Agonising pain swept through my body wherever this darkness touched me, and I screamed. The darkness overcame me, and despite my efforts, I succumbed. Through the black, through the last strand of consciousness I possessed, I heard a faint voice.

“Hey! Wake up!”