

Peter Wall

An Infernal Hike (Revised)

“I’m going to need gas”.

I had no other plans for my day, so I was up for anything when my two friends Don and Kayla invited me to go hiking. I really enjoy hiking because it is like taking an hour-long vacation to anywhere without civilization. I first started hiking during my first semester of college, it helped me calm down and clear my head during my first year of college. Most of my hiking trips were by myself at parks that I’d drive past and check out. I loved this trail when I saw it for the first time. It had numerous ferns, sumacs, and other plants around as well as trees as tall as a hotel. The forest was filled with bird sounds so numerous that they sound like ethereal voices in the treetops, and a creek with water as clear as a pane of glass. The first time I walked this trail, there were hills steep enough to climb, and the view from atop of them was like peering at the garden of Edin.

I was low on gas, but that wasn’t important to me at the moment because I had a trail to hike. We locked our cars, grabbed our bottles of water, and set off on the trail. We entered from a different part than last time, which was good for me because I always loved seeing new areas. The trail was long, straight, and surrounded by large areas of plants along with the calls of birds and cicadas. Don took the lead, describing the other parts of the trail as he pushed plants out of the way. Kayla stayed behind Don, occasionally swatting away bugs and asking for a sip of water.

“Are those birds or an alarm?” I asked

“It’s obviously birds, where would an alarm come from?” Don responded.”

“If that’s the case, then where are the birds?” Kayla asked as she pointed up.

“That is a good point, I can only see a few but it sounds like they’re everywhere”

Just as we had ended the bird conversation, we noticed a smoke-like mist in the distance as well as the smell of something burning. My usual thought would be that someone is having a barbecue or a bonfire, but it was a smell I was not expecting in a state-protected natural area. The fog grew denser, but with it came the heat of fumes rather than the cool breeze of fog. The sounds of birds waned away as we walked closer to the cloud, they simmered down like a crowd in a cinema before a movie started. As the sound of birds left, so did the gentle scent of fresh trees and humid air. We kept walking with caution, planning to turn around if we witnessed something too dangerous. We kept on going, until we finally reached and entered the cloud. The dealer of this mystery drew his card as we entered the cloud, it was smoke. I began coughing, as the smell would enter my lungs even if I inhaled through my mouth.

“Are you sure we should keep going?” I asked.

“If you don’t think we should go we can turn around” Don assured.

“Yeah but, I’m curious now.”

“Fair enough, Kayla you good?”

“All I know is that if I see a fire I’m turning around” She explained.

“Alright then” Don proclaimed, “Pete, let’s check it out!”

“You think it’s a controlled fire?” I asked.

“I’m hoping that’s what it is, because if not then I don’t know if we should be here.”

While we were trekking this cloud of smoke, we tried looking to see if any possible source was visible. We couldn't find a blaze, or any ash like objects around, that is until we stumbled upon something. It was a tree that had been knocked over, and looking burned all over its surface. After closer inspection, Donovan saw something.

“Oh shit! This tree is still burning.”

“Wait what? Where?”

“On the end, here look.”

He was pointing on the end of the tree, and revealing that the tip of the felled tree hadn't gone out. A tiny flame was seen dancing on it, along with burning embers to go with it. It looked as if A Giant's Cigar hadn't gone out just yet. I was inspecting it, wondering where this blaze could have come from. I pondered it like the cavemen pondered the first flame, and how my parents pondered the smartphone in 2007. I turned around to find a prime suspect in my search for the cause of this fire. I saw a bush, coated with what looked to be thick wires with rubber lining on them.

“Watch out for that, that looks like power lines” I told them.

“I'm gonna go ahead and say that that might have something to do with it,” Don said.

“You think they're alive?”

“I ain't trying to find out” Kayla said.

“Alright, I say we walk past this and hope it's the only source that there is”

The other two nodded and we began to move along the trail further, hoping not to see or smell anything else burning for the rest of our hike. To our misfortune, that wasn't the case. The smell of smoke stayed for a good time after the burning tree, and the forest began to look more and more ashy as we walked along. The ashy parts of the forest looked like the trees were being corrupted by some necrotic force seeping life from their roots.

“Should we like... Call someone?” I asked.

“I'm gonna be real with you, we might have to” Don answered.

“What would we tell them?” Kayla pondered.

“That we're in the woods, and there's fire.” I spoke.

“I'm saying like how would they find us dummy” She bantered.

“I say we wait on it, maybe we'll find evidence that it's been taken care of.” Don mentioned.

“Alright, if you say so” I said.

We decided to look for more hotspots, or any trace of first responders. Our first trace came when we noticed what looked like tire tracks engraved into the dirt. We hoped it was a firetruck, but speculated that they were from some form of first responding vehicle. The tire tracks made the ground difficult to walk, like walking through half eaten Jell-O. We moved on, and discovered more signs that came from the fire, such as more powerlines, darkened trees, and tire marks. Then the Smell and taste of smoke plagued our throats like never before. The cloud of smoke became a blanket of ash tucking us in for the night. I covered my mouth with the sweater I once had around my shoulders, wondering what could be on the other side. As the trail curves,

we were able to escape the direction the wind was blowing. What we saw was the smoke pouring over a steep hill like a waterfall down a cliff.

“Oh my gosh what’s up there?” Kayla asked.

“My guess is more fire.” I responded.

“I’m gonna go check it out,” Don exclaimed.

“Are you insane?” Kayla spouted.

“Yes,” Don clarified.

“Welp. I’m in.” I said as I began to follow him up the hill towards the smoke.

“You two are crazy!” Kayla shouted as we walked away.

Now it was just me, Don, and whatever was above this steep hill. I was cautious and concerned about the fire, but I admit that my curiosity got the best of me in this scenario. I wondered how big it would be, how concerned we should be, how large of a possible uncontrolled fire remained. Don examined the hill, and found a solid way to climb up. After hiking with him once before, I’ve known that Don was a great hillclimber. I’ve seen him climb hills covered in plants, and make it to the top in under 30 seconds. This case was no different, he was able to easily identify the clearest possible path, and muster the strength within him to find his way up there.

“Woah.”

“What do you see?”

“Well, there’s definitely more fire up here.”

“How much.”

“Like the equivalent of a small campfire.”

“Oh, I have to see this”

I tried my best to climb up the same direction as Don, walking around a great deal of plants. Though a thorny plant scratched me, I was able to make it up with a hand up from Don. When I made it up and approached the scene, I saw the fire he was talking about. It was a spread of multiple areas of small fires, stumps with chunks of them burned out, hotspots hidden within the bottom of felled trees, and what felt like more smoke than water in the ocean. I walked around and inspected it, and there was no sign of this fire being controlled. As exhilarating as this was, I was also worried that this fire would continue to spread throughout the forest.

I looked down from the hill and saw the massive carpet of clouds laid out on the ash ridden ground of dirt and trees. I could only clearly see the forest floor from outside around a 30-yard radius. After seeing what we wanted to see, we walked down. We knew that staying wouldn’t do the forest any good. We successfully made it down, and decided to turn the other way and find the nearest exit to the trail. As we made it down the hill, I pulled out my water and took multiple chugs. As we made it back, we saw our previous landmarks once more. We saw the tree with two ends still burning, the wire on the bush, the tire marks, but we saw a sooner exit that would allow us a safer exit. As we walked into this part of the trail, we saw something relieving. We saw tire marks, along with trenches dug into the ground.

“Trenches, that means the fire dept was here.” Don said as he sighed in relief.

“Oh, that’s a good feeling, I’m glad they could contain it in time” I added

“Yeah, I think the power line fell and then they came and contained it.”

“Welp. This was one hell of an adventure, let’s go home.

After spending a bunch of time chilling near the creek, we decided to officially make way for our cars and call it a day. As we made our way to the cars, we heard the chirping of the birds once again, we smelled that woodsy smell of pine and oak leaves, and all seemed well at Rancocas. After we said our goodbyes, I got into my car and remembered something

“Shit, I still need gas.”