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HOW DO YOU SAVE SOMEONE WHO  
DOESN'T WANT TO BE SAVED?



“Get in.”

He’d never seen his dad look so serious or sound so firm. Daniel didn’t move, only gave his dad a sarcastic smirk in reply to show he wasn’t going to give in, but also to hide that he found his Dad’s new attitude slightly disconcerting.

“Get in!” the older man replied.

Okay, so he wasn’t joking.

Daniel climbed into the car, pissed off. His dad lay his mobile phone on the dashboard, out of Daniel’s reach. Daniel had no intention of making conversation; he dug out his own phone from his pocket and started tapping.

“Can you just quit it with that phone, please?” his dad barked a good ten minutes later.

Daniel didn’t bother to look up from the screen. He never did what his dad asked. He never did what anyone asked.

The older man’s jaw clenched and he said no more. Daniel was not keen on the smug look he glimpsed out of the corner of his eye: he’d never seen his dad behave this way before but he shrugged it off and went back to ignoring him.

His father drove in silence for the next hour at least. They left the city behind and ventured along dirt tracks Daniel didn’t even know existed.

“Where the hell are we going?” he finally asked, fed up of sitting in the car. His phone battery was dying and his friends were waiting for him at the station. He also had some goods to take delivery of.

His dad gave him a taste of his own medicine and ignored him.

“The old man’s gone mad,” he wrote to the Hump. “If I’m not at school tomorrow, call the police!” and added a row of faces and

picture emojis: knife, blood, skull, coffin.

His mate replied with a crying emoji.

Half an hour later, he'd lost his sense of humour and was beginning to get mad.

"Do you want to tell me where the hell we're going?"

"Watch your language," his dad replied, like a broken record.

"I'll speak however the hell I like," Daniel retorted, making his position clear.

His dad fell silent again but the smirk reappeared on his face and Daniel was close to wiping it off with his fists. He only stopped himself because of the memory of what had happened at home; he let it go.

His dad stopped the car in a clearing in some woods. Daniel looked out the window — he'd been playing with his phone the whole time and had no idea where they were. Nor why.

"Give me the phone," his dad said, in a tone Daniel didn't like in the slightest.

"Say please," he replied, taunting his dad with one of his own lines.

"Please," his dad added, serenely.

"No way!" Daniel burst out laughing and responded by going back to the game he was halfway through.

His dad opened the window. Daniel heard him take a deep breath then let it all out, as if he were counting to ten. There's a good boy, Daniel thought cynically, calm yourself down; he sniggered. Out of the blue, his dad leaned over, snatched the phone out of Daniel's hands and hurled it as hard as he could out the window at a massive rock. The phone fell to the ground with a deadly thud.

"What the fu..."

His dad didn't let him finish this time.

"Get out," he gestured.

Daniel looked at his dad: he saw a light burning in his eyes for the first time ever, a boiling rage, and it shocked him.

"Outside!" his dad screamed, red in the face with anger.

Unsure what was going on, Daniel got out of the car. His father stretched over to the passenger's side and pulled the door shut. He threw the car into reverse and, without saying a word or bothering to turn around, he drove off.

Daniel watched him disappear, mouth gaping. What kind of joke was this? He'll be back, he said out loud, to reassure himself. Dad would be back to get him, as soon as he calmed down. Yeah, maybe this time he'd gone a bit too far. It'd been the first time but he'd lost control. And he hadn't realized his own strength. He was used to fighting people much bigger than him, the kind that didn't make it easy for you, whereas his mum had gone down right away like a rag doll.

His mum was an old witch. A pain in the arse, a nag, clingy. She'd literally asked for it. And his dad had stood there, silent as usual, not knowing what to do with him. Or rather, he'd phoned the ambulance then his mum had come to, so it hadn't been anything serious.

He shrugged: sometimes you have no choice. No doubt his mum would give it a break now with the lectures on doing well at school, not going out every afternoon, to come home earlier at night, stop hanging out with the lowlives, as she called them.

He went to pick up his phone from the grass, swearing between his teeth. The screen was completely shattered and the phone

wouldn't switch on. He'd paid a fortune for it, with the money he'd made selling stuff to the posh twats. The Hump had nicked it from one of them then sold it to Daniel at mate's rates. It was useless now. He hurled it at the rock again, put it out of its misery, like you would a lame horse.

He looked around — he really was in a forest. He hadn't been in one for years; the first and only time had been when he was about four years old — his mum and dad had been picking chestnuts and for ten long minutes, minutes that had felt like a lifetime, he'd lost them and found himself alone. Pure terror, he'd felt, petrified they'd left him. He'd yelled, called out for his mum, his voice echoing in the terrifying silence. She'd appeared out of nowhere, smiling, as if nothing had happened. The memory of that day, so many years ago, sent a shiver running down his spine, and for a second, Daniel felt the same panic he had felt back then. He hated forests, he thought. They were horrible places; he was a concrete jungle kind of animal.

He sat down cross-legged on the rock, pulled his hat down over his eyes. There was nothing he could do but wait for Dad to come back and get him. He didn't doubt for a minute he'd come. He just had to keep his cool, stay calm. He pulled out his tobacco pouch and papers and started to roll up a cigarette. The smoke relaxed him and he shut his eyes, enjoying the unknown silence of the place. It was cool, all things considered, now that he was no longer a child and things like that no longer scared him. This was a first for him: by himself, no chaos around him, no phone in his hand, nothing to do.

He waited. And waited. He pricked his ears, listening to hear the sound of Dad's clapped out car approaching in the distance. The

way he'd behaved before was totally weird, Daniel thought, his dad was a weak, gutless type. He'd no idea how long he'd been there, his phone was broken and he'd left his watch at home. Even that had been borrowed, you could say, from one of the younger kids at school who'd bricked it and just handed it over. An hour passed, maybe two; time seemed to move at a different speed in this place. It was beginning to rattle him, though, to be honest. The sky was changing colour. He hadn't looked up that often but he thought he remembered it being a bit lighter when they'd left the house.

Night was beginning to fall and there was no sign of his dad. He got up from the rock and had a wander around. Even if he'd wanted, he realized, he'd never find his way home: he hadn't been paying attention in the car and had no idea where he was. To him, the trees and the directions all looked the same. If there'd been a road at least, he would've taken it and walked somewhere. And, he thought, if he got away from here, there'd be no one here when his dad came back to get him. Because he was obviously going to come, the next day.

A story he'd heard at nursery popped into his head, of a brother and sister who'd been abandoned in the woods by their parents. He'd already been through the chestnut incident and hearing the teacher talk about it had literally terrified him. Parents don't abandon their children in the woods, she'd reassured him when she'd seen his face. Maybe not nice children, he sniggered to his now cynical self. Apparently even that could change.

When night fell, Daniel began to feel properly scared.

First of all, it was pitch black. With no moon, there was none that night, the darkness was absolute. Daniel had his eyes open



but he couldn't see anything, as if his lids were shut. This wasn't normal darkness. It was dense, sticky, with gelid claws that could reach out and seize him any minute. It was also pulsating, coming closer, swirling around him then retreating, leaving him covered in a layer of icy sweat. It was alive, evil and wanted him dead.

There were other noises, too: on the ground, under the ground, on the trees over his head. Rustling everywhere, clicking and creaking in the leaves, the rustling footsteps of unknown, invisible animals, big and small. Human-like screams suddenly piercing the darkness, grunts, strangled breathing, something lying in wait in the darkness, something else coming furtively closer, slithering, sniffing greedily then hopping away. Not too far away, he heard a thud, a body struck dead, falling to the ground, something else grabbing it, shaking it, strangling it then eating it, teeth tearing through the warm guts. These imperceptible noises were amplified in his ears, as if he'd suddenly developed super-human hearing; he knew it was fear making them seem louder but he couldn't stop it. Finally, on the brink of madness, a terrifying sigh, human-like, reached out from the darkness; almost immediately, Daniel pictured a dead body, buried nearby, that was now coming to get him. Shivering uncontrollably, he pulled his jacket tight. Cold had set in. It was damp and, at one point, Daniel thought he was going to die, the temperature had dropped so much. His teeth chattered and he kept trying to make his jacket cover him but when it was over his knees, it left his neck uncovered, and vice versa. He began to obsess that a rat was nibbling his feet, they'd gone so numb. He reached down continuously to feel with his hands that his shoes were still there

and that there were no holes an animal could get through to eat him. He'd heard stories of babies devoured in their sleep by rats, that their parents had found them dead in their cradles. Why did he have to keep remembering this stuff now? And why had people even told him such stories? A part of him knew that it was stupid to worry he might be eaten alive, one bit at a time without him realizing it, but in the dark, with all those noises, fear could make anything seem real. He'd never thought the night could be like this: he wanted and had to stay awake, even if the cold was making his eyes stream, exhausted from staring into the darkness. But at one point they closed, for what seemed like only a second when he opened them again, terrified. He looked around, blinded. He was deadly certain, even if he couldn't see it, that there was someone near him, very near him. He could feel them. Someone who could see him perfectly, was watching him, but who he couldn't make out in the darkness. All he could hear was their slow and controlled breathing, right next to him.

"Who's there?" he shouted, trying to make his voice sound fierce, stop it from trembling. But the dampness and long silence made it come out like a gasp which scared even him. It sounded nothing like his own voice.

No one answered. He pressed his hands over his ears and stuck his head between his legs. He had the feeling that, any minute now, someone was going to hit with an axe, skewer him with a knife. He'd seen too many horror films and they all came flooding back to him at once. He wanted to scream but had no voice. And who would've heard him? Who would've run to help? Someone wanted to kill him, in the dark, and all he could do was sit there and wait to feel the sudden pain of a blade between

his ribs. It was all just a nightmare. It had to be. But he couldn't wake up. What was he doing there? Maybe that's how people go mad. For a second, death seemed like the better option, to get it over and done with, rather than this nameless fear.

When he managed to pull himself together and shake off the sheer panic he'd felt briefly, he was sure, without knowing how, that the presence had gone. He took a deep breath, and another one, each mouthful of cold air hurting, like a new-born taking its first breath. It was like he'd stopped breathing throughout the whole thing. His heart stopped racing so fast and Daniel forced himself to control his fear.

The night felt like it was going on for ever but eventually, and to his relief, he saw the sky begin to lighten. The outlines of the trees gradually reappeared in front of him, in surreal colours at first then in more recognizable, reassuring ones. The lighter it became, the more his fears receded and he saw how ridiculous they'd been. Knives, rats, madness, death: what an idiot he'd been! He rummaged in his pockets for a cigarette and tremblingly rolled one, fingers still shaking from the cold. He lit it to warm himself up and feel like he was still alive. Holding his lighter, he burst into hysterical laughter, mocking himself. Why hadn't he lit a fire with it? It hadn't even occurred to him, what a total twat! The truth is, he'd never actually used a lighter for anything else before. For cigarettes obviously, and once he'd set fire to an exam paper in class. "Too difficult," he'd told the shocked teacher. I'm an absolute moron, he berated himself, brushing aside the fears, full of himself once again. If his friends had seen him like that, they'd have laughed at him till Doomsday.

That's when he looked down and just about jumped out his skin.

Lying on the ground beside the rock he'd hurled his phone at was a folded piece of paper. He shivered. And realized it hadn't been a dream after all — during the night, someone had come up close to him, close enough to plant that thing right under his nose.

He looked around then bent over and picked it up. It was a map. He turned the paper round in his hands, not knowing what to do with it. Clearly someone wanted him to go somewhere, someone who didn't want to be recognised. And that someone was in cahoots with his dad. It couldn't just be a coincidence. The situation was weird enough to be a dream, if it hadn't been for the hunger, thirst and cold, which were all very real indeed. How long had it been since he'd eaten something? Especially since he was the one who snacked all day and had even gotten into trouble for it on multiple occasions. Crisps, sandwiches, pastries, fizzy drinks. His mouth started to water. He spat on the ground and went back to looking at the map. Clearly, he had to go north, if only he knew which direction that was. He vaguely remembered talking about this stuff at school. It was no coincidence he'd been sent back twice to repeat his first year of high school. But he'd honestly never believed anything they studied at school would be any use in real life. He wandered around the forest for a bit, feeling like a complete idiot. Then kicked a tree in anger but only ended up hurting himself and ruining his shoe, which flapped open at the front like a duck's beak. It was crazy! What the hell was going on? Why on earth had his dad dumped him there? And where was "there"? He rolled up the map and shoved it into his pocket. He wasn't going to be ruled by him or whoever the bastard was that was trying to make a laughing stock of him.



# THE NET

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