

All because I had to take a shit.

My partner and I started rock climbing a few years ago and really love the sport. There's no Yosemite or Fontainebleau where we live though, so climbers around here have to get creative or else be stuck in the gym. Often this means driving out into the country and begging permission from the local farmers to go onto their land to sniff out the short rock cliffs popping out of their hills. Most of the time they refuse. Some of the time they allow it, become disgruntled when the sounds of a rock drill start echoing over their property, and finally shut the whole thing down when more vagabonds than they anticipated start showing up in their vans and camping out at the crag. This leaves us with few options left consistently open, so when a fresh opportunity arises you can imagine we jump on it.

This was the case with Frog Pond. The land is nice, boasting fairly tall limestone as well as heaps of boulders. You walk out on a narrow path across rolling green hills dotted with sheep pellets and lined with a lovely patch of forest on one side and boulders on the other. The sheep scatter before you; often they have adorable fluffy lambs sproinging along after them. You walk up a steep hill into the bush and pop out the other side and there are the cliffs and the croaking pool of water for which the crag is named.

There aren't very many routes set yet, but the ones that are there and bolted are mostly pretty fun. My partner, let's call him "Luka" (after Luka Modrić, because a girl can dream), and I had our sights set on 'The Project', which is pretty much the temporary name given to any balls hard route that has yet to be cleanly free climbed. Heaps of stronger climbers had been throwing themselves at it the past several weekends but so far as we knew, no one had nabbed the send.

So as Luka started flaking out the rope (making sure there were no tangles or knots), I decided to get prepared, too.

I attempted to slip away all stealthy-like, but I'd gone probably 4 metres before Luka called out, "Where are you going, 'Miho'?" (After Miho Nonaka - again, a girl can dream.)

I waved my wad of tp and grinned at him. "Nature calls!"

He groaned. "I told you to take care of that before we left camp. If climbers keep shitting all over the place, they'll close access to the crag for sure, just like everywhere else!"

"Yeah, relax. I'm not shitting *all over the place*. I'm going to find a corner in the bush where no one is likely to go, dig a hole, bury it well, okay? Also, I told my bowels what you said, but they're doing this just to spite you."

Unnecessary, I know, but sometimes you just get on each other's nerves and the snark is too tempting. I'd known Luka wouldn't like this, but what could I do? It takes my morning cup of

coffee a bit to kick in, I guess, and it wasn't like the farmers bothered to build nice toilets or even a long-drop anywhere out here. Long-drops do sometimes get erected at popular climbing crags eventually, but that wasn't the case yet here. And I had to shit. Like, bad.

I ventured back to the edge of the forested section and carefully picked my way through a veritable grove of nettles, some of them reaching up to my waist. The taller ones I attempted to break in half by wedging my shoe against the base of the plant and stepping hard. It worked pretty well, and I managed to crush a little clearing amongst them large enough for me to squat in. This was sort of risky shitting, with stinging leaves threatening to brand my ass if I wasn't careful, but then again I'd promised my dearly beloved that I would go where there wasn't likely to be other people stepping about.

I was mid-poop, when my grunt of relief caught in my throat. There was sort of a shimmering something in the corner of my eye, nestled amongst the nettles.

"The fuck?" I muttered to no one.

I was squatting and squinting, trying to make out this weird distortion in my vision but unable to move toward it until I'd completed my task. When I'd finally finished, I quickly wiped and covered my shame with several handfuls of loose dirt that had blessedly remained untouched by vicious plantlife.

I approached the curiosity I'd discovered while turning my head from side to side, as I've had visual disturbances due to migraines in the past but those would always remain on one particular side of my field of vision and distort whatever objects it crossed over. This distortion remained over a distinct patch of ground no matter how I angled myself to look at it. It wasn't me, unless I'd suddenly become delusional; it was the ground itself.

Now I was standing right next to it, almost on top of it. It was about the size of a dinner plate, and I could feel a small amount of heat radiating off of it. In comparison, the ground around it - and where I'd shat - was still damp with morning dew and actually a little chilly. The nettles that were 'trapped' in the distortion seemed to wave and bend, and it seemed to have varying depth, like a hole continually expanding and shrinking.

"Luka!" I called, but I take it he couldn't hear me. Some sheep were bleating over the hills and he was pretty distant, not to mention on the other side of the rock.

I decided to poke it, as all good and proper investigators do, preferably with a stick or other appendage besides my own. I scanned the expanse of nettles, which was pretty fruitless, so I decided to make do with the car key in my pocket. Not a very lengthy sort of stick, I grant you, but surely still better than my finger for the initial prod.

I knelt and slowly extended my probe. I'm not sure what exactly I expected - a jolt of electricity, especially due to the metal? The key to melt or vanish? Nothing at all? Whatever my working hypothesis had been, what did happen was utterly unexpected. What appeared to be an orange cat's paw emerged from the altering depths and batted at my key.

Startled, naturally, I made a choked "Eeep!" sound, lost my balance, and fell backward onto my butt and into the barbed plants, all the while dropping my key into what from this point on I'll refer to as a portal. I cried out at the stings and confusion of it all and then again when I realised a crucial item involving our only means of transportation away from this blooming sci fi / possible horror adventure had just been gobbled up by the very element that made a simple climbing expedition into a sci fi / possible horror adventure. Or maybe I just needed a prompt trip to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation, but either way, I needed that key.

"LUKA!" I bawled, with gusto this time. "LUKAAAAAAAAA!"

There was a pause, then I heard him return, "MIHO? WHERE ARE YOU?"

"OVER HERE. PLEASE COME!"

I waited until I heard nearby rustling and cursing, presumably at the pleasant flora surrounding me, and then called, "Luka, please come look at this!"

He was peeved. "Miho, what the hell have you been doing? I've been waiting-"

He halted as he finally laid eyes on the portal at which I had been gesticulating. "What the fuck is that?"

"You tell me. I just dropped my key into it."

"You *what*?"

I decided not to mention the cat just yet, as (a) I couldn't be sure I'd actually seen what I thought I'd seen - I mean, it is a pretty psychotic-sounding phenomenon to just randomly happen to you IRL, right? But the portal was proving its own existence, clearly, as he was reacting to observing it with his own eyes and not my description of it. And (b) I felt I needed him to accept first that there's a freaking unnatural disturbance in the ground, as I had, before also throwing in the idea that a creature - Earthly or alien or perhaps some parallel universe shit - can interact with us through it.

"I dropped the car key."

Luka looked at me with a mix of fury and disbelief and then, before I could predict his next move and make steps to prevent it, he thrust his hand directly into the portal. He's not a

horror genre type of guy, but I would have thought surely his love of fantasy and particularly sci fi would have provided him a bit more hesitation to such brash action, but I would have been wrong. I had just enough time to make a sort of inverted version of my previous "Eeep!" - made on an inhale rather than exhale - when he jerked his hand back out and angrily cried, "OWW, son of a *bitch!*"

He also rocked back onto his haunches, clutching his hand which now bore three long red streaks. Cat scratches.

He said nothing, glaring at the portal as if more offended by its light assault to his person than taken aback by the sudden existence of magic - or at least far more complex physics than we'd be taught at uni or by YouTube.

I cleared my throat. "Hopefully you don't get space toxoplasmosis."

He shifted his eyes onto me, a faraway, uncomprehending stare that kinda creeped me out. "It's from space?" he asked, mildly.

"Uhhh. I don't have a clue where it's from. Or what it is. Or what the hell this day is turning into."

I scooted closer to it, peering suspiciously and bracing myself for an attack - feline or otherwise. "I saw what looked like a cat's paw lash out at my key when I was poking this thing. That's why I dropped it. And I assume that's what just scratched you."

Luka shook his head. "Cat? What cat? Miho, what are you on about? I just scratched myself on the nettles."

*Okay*, I thought. *Denial mode: activated*. I, on the other hand, was feeling rather comforted and emboldened now that it was apparent I wasn't just losing my marbles and hallucinating cat-containing portals out in the middle of a sheep farm without any former ado.

"Hand me one of your quickdraws," I instructed, pointing at the side of his harness.

"What?" He was still stunned. "Why do you-"

I sighed. "So I can fish out my key without being scratched by nettles like you were."

He quietly unclipped a draw and handed it to me. A quickdraw is what you clip the rope into when you're climbing to act as safety in case you fall. It has two carabiners with sort of stiff material in between; this one was 12 cm in length. I'd decided to try probe #2, harbouring a small ray of hope that I could yoink my key out of whatever abyss it'd fallen into with one end of the draw and not be mauled by Portal Kitty.

For all his refusal to believe in such, Luka leaned forward to watch my endeavour intently. I dipped about half of the quickdraw in and hesitated, expecting to either feel or see our little friend. Nothing happened. I moved it about, eventually making little loops around the whole of the portal without an exchange of any kind.

"Hmmm," I deduced, brilliantly.

I lowered the draw farther in, leaving just the 'biner I was holding onto outside of it. That's when there was a sudden tug and a yowl. More prepared than I had been with my key, my reaction this time was to yank the quickdraw back out with all my might, and with it came the creature, jaws clamped around the carabiner at the other end.

"AHHHHHH!" Luka and I intoned together.

The 'cat', which we could clearly now recognise as not *really* a cat, went soaring over Luka's head with the draw I'd released upon realisation that there was something remaining attached to it as I pulled it out of the portal. It landed in the nettles, screeching, righted itself, cast an absolutely existential-horror-inducing gaze at us for about two "Mississippis", and then tore away among the nearby ferns and out of sight.

We sat there hyperventilating for what felt like several minutes but was probably more like 30 seconds.

"Miho," breathed Luka, eventually.

"Yeah," I huffed back.

"What was that thing?"

"Dunno."

"Did you see its face?"

"Yeah."

More panting. And reflecting, I guess.

The terror's face was of particular import because it was like nothing we'd ever seen. The best explanation I've been able to come up with is like part faun from *Pan's Labyrinth*, part Gatherer from *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, part I-don't-know-what-the-fuck, and still, sort of, part cat, but without ears? Its front legs and paws were also pretty cat-like, hence me thinking of a cat's paw when I'd first had the pleasure of meeting its acquaintance, but its

back legs had a more twisted-kangaroo vibe going on, and I didn't notice a tail. All I know is that looking at it looking back at us felt soul-wrenching, and now I can totally relate to all the horror stories I've read which have said similar things about this or that other-worldly monster.

And this other-worldly monster is at present running around freely in this poor bloke's pastures. Or maybe dispersing elsewhere, like to more populated areas. I'm feeling very Pandora's Box about this whole thing, I've gotta say. I mean, I didn't open the portal - at least not to my knowledge or intent - but I *did* make the solid choice to go poking around in it without first consulting... I don't know, NASA? Paranormal investigators? The farmer, at least?

Luka and I are currently chilling with our packs near the crag where we'd meant to do some climbing today. I still don't have my key and we're pretty isolated, but I feel a modicum of safety being not right next to the creature-releasing nettle hole.

While we're waiting for our wits to return to us, I thought I'd write this all down straight away in case, you know, I'm ripped to shreds before I get the chance to articulate my whacky experience to anyone. For posterity. My phone's signal is very spotty and doesn't seem to be keen on making calls at the moment, but maybe I'll be able to upload this at some point.

Luka is apparently in the mood for napping and, frankly, is seeming a little blasé about this whole thing since we trudged back through the nettles and plunked ourselves down next to the pond. I guess I am, too, in my own way. It's kind of a lot to process, and honestly I'm now 50/50 with the notion that there are some poisonous mushrooms growing around here releasing toxic spores into the air and we're both just tripping the fuck out. I'm hoping for that one, because otherwise I probably need a witcher, and I'm not feeling great about my prospects of hoisting Geralt of Rivia out of the portal any time soon. For one thing, he's too big.

I know this is finishing in an anti-climactic way, but I'm feeling quite sleepy myself now. I promise to update when I can - whether it's shrooms or interdimensional demons or what.