

Half Way

It was an odd pulse of light in the night sky that changed my perception of reality forever. I always felt that the ground was very solidly positioned beneath my feet until that July camping trip with my friends to our favorite waterhole. After that trip, my steps never felt so assured again.

On my twenty-second birthday, I hopped into the old army-green jeep my dad kept as a second vehicle and rode out with my friends Sandy and Travis. We drove north from Myrtle Beach with the top down, screaming classic rock tunes at the top of our lungs. I loved the outdoors and taking time to talk about life with people who had something to say about it.

We could barely speak by the time we arrived at our favorite camping spot about half way between Myrtle and Wilmington. A round of beers took care of that problem quickly enough. Our voices returned, and we began to soak in the atmosphere of the spot we had previously deemed the Half Way Hostel.

I savored the tranquility of the place, as I sat in the grass, sipping a second beer and looking on as Sandy and Tyler splashed each other in the pond. Our little halfway spot was encircled by pine trees, and I was surrounded by the exquisite sound of crickets summoning the summer evening with their perpetual chirping.

Will Mullins

Sandy's soft loosely curled brown hair and matching brown eyes made her appealing as always. She had an equally appealing intellect, and that was readily apparent to anyone within a few minutes of meeting her.

Travis and I had both strangely managed to maintain friendships with her without any serious romance blooming, but then again, Travis had yet to be involved in a serious romance with anyone. He was a second class athlete with a first class mind and a penchant for finding ways to have a good time without spending much money.

As per usual, the two of them called out to me, "Are you getting in or not?"

My typical response followed, "After a couple more beers."

We sat around the water's edge after the swimming was over talking for hours about our budding adult lives and careers. Our collective friendship was of the variety that would last while many other friendships fell by the wayside.

That night, we slid into sleeping bags under the open sky and hoped it wouldn't rain. It seems funny now that we were concerned about such a small thing.

At some point in the middle of the night, I became aware of a bright series of lights in the sky above that I believed to be lightning. Then, still only partially awake, I felt as if I had been submerged in a warm, glowing cushion of some kind that escorted me to the most peaceful sleep imaginable.

I awoke the following morning to discover that Sandy, too, had experienced the lights. "I thought the whole thing was just a dream," I said. "How could we both have experienced that?"

Will Mullins

“You’re both just lightweights,” retorted Travis. “There was some lightning last night. I woke up and saw it. The beer just made you imagine something.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said.

“Yeah. Me either,” Sandy chimed in.

“Then let’s restock on beer and try the experiment again tonight,” laughed Travis on his way towards the jeep.

The drive to the closest convenience store was odd. We didn’t see one other vehicle on the road, and by that point it was after ten in the morning. We parked between a couple of other cars, but there was still no sign of anyone around.

Inside the store, it was the same. The doors had been unlocked, but there was no attendant, and there were no customers.

“I guess the beer’s free,” Travis joked, beginning to sound slightly unnerved.

“This shit’s weird. Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Let’s just go back to the beach and make sure things are ok,” Sandy said a clear tone of worry discernable in her voice.

We had driven all the way back to the golden mile with its rows of high rises and condominium buildings by the time we stopped again. We had seen no one on the way, which was impossible according to any laws of nature that we understood. We walked to numerous beach houses and knocked on doors, hoping for responses. There were none.

We were all terrified of the bizarre reality to which we had awakened, but we still had each other. Seeing little else that could be done under the circumstances, we decided to grab some space in an ocean front hotel and talk through what was happening.

Will Mullins

Sandy knew of a three-bedroom hotel suite on the top floor of a hotel nearby. We took up temporary residence in the room, expecting to spend a night or two there as we debated what in the world we could possibly do.

We tried the landline in the room. Nothing but static. We tried the television. The cable was out. Yet the electricity worked, and the water ran.

We debated what was happening at length. It was beyond us to solve the great riddle into which we had apparently been transported by lights that caressed us in our sleep.

I was of the opinion that the same lights were our only way back to the world we knew -- the world in which we belonged. Sandy and Travis didn't disagree, but they believed that if I were right, we would never see the lights again and would be stuck in this vacant world forever.

We would find out that night.

We all passed out in the den of the hotel suite that night, draped across various couches and chairs. We stayed close to each other for comfort rather than retreating to the bedrooms to sleep. A bit of music played over Sandy's smart phone.

The lights returned. They surrounded us, and in the morning, there was no denying it. All three of us recounted a vivid experience of being bathed in their warmth.

Yet, nothing had changed. The world around us was still without the presence of other human beings.

"That's it," I said. "We're here to stay."

Will Mullins

Sandy interjected, “At first, I thought if we went back to the Half Way hostel, the lights might find us there and take us back to our world.”

Travis finished her thought, “But if it didn’t work here, there’s no reason to believe it would be any different there.”

“Right,” Sandy said, with great sadness. “I didn’t think the lights would appear anywhere else. I thought the phenomena was tied to that spot.”

We cheered ourselves up as much as we could throughout the day, listening to music and even spending some time splashing around in the ocean and lying in the sand.

Sandy dropped beside me on the beach, exhausted from the day’s heat. “The sun still feels the same.”

“Let’s stay up tonight. Let’s find out what happens if we don’t sleep,” I said, changing the tone of the conversation altogether.

And so we did. We listened to music and drank expensive liquor on the balcony. At around three in the morning, we were about to give up our ocean view, as well as our efforts to stay up all night.

Then suddenly, the lights appeared. They were in the sky above us. Something about them charmed us to sleep, a feat that even the scotch and brandy had yet to accomplish.

As we lost consciousness, we realized that our transportation to this empty world had not been the result of a random burst of energy. It had been orchestrated by the unknown pilots of the strange ships in the sky above us.

Some time later, we awoke on the balcony to a host of welcome sounds rising from the beach below – the sounds of human beings swimming in the ocean and frolicking on the sands.

Will Mullins

We never mentioned our trip to the halfway world to anyone. None of us wanted to be subjected to ridicule, much less branded mentally unstable.

We talked about it together though, and our minds could never quite escape the frightening implications of that short trip into an Earth devoid of people. If we had been chosen for such an experiment, then what else might they, whoever they are, have in mind for us... or for anyone?

