

## God's Mouth

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I huffed and puffed under my breath as I stared into God's Mouth. I felt like the Big Bad Wolf ready to interrupt the innocent little pigs as they hurriedly fortified their makeshift homes. I grinned at this thought and then turned my head to look for Margaret. She was a couple of feet down the hill from the entrance of the cave, holding a walking stick close to her petite breasts. "Hurry up!" I called down to her. I turned back to the cave, still grinning. An old, rotted sign outside read 'God's Mouth Cave: Keep Out!' What a tired cliché.

Margaret finally made it to the entrance and stood beside me, almost doubled over and out of breath. I looked down and smiled. "Check it out!" I laughed. "God's mouth. Wonder where Jesus' anus is?" I chuckled to myself. Margaret was less amused.

"Give me the damn water bottle," she said, exasperated. The open bottle met her lips, and for a moment I felt peaceful in a way, watching her drink the water. Actually I take that back. The 'peaceful' comment, I mean. It was more of a feeling that was sort of hard to put my finger on or give a name, but I could settle for a nice 'content'. Content seemed to be one of those words that manifest itself when natural, human words seemed to fail. Again, an utter cliché, but it felt good to feel a strange, mixed-up sort of happy for once.

I sighed and turned my flashlight on. I pointed it into the cave. Black. God's Mouth. This seemed like the antithesis of a Holy Spirit. I turned again to Margaret. "You ready?" I asked. She was finally standing straight up. She nodded. I clapped a friendly hand to her back and we walked into God's Mouth.

The inside was not unlike the preview I had glimpsed outside with my flashlight. Dark, dismal, and endlessly black. It seemed to stretch endlessly, no matter how I positioned my flashlight. The rocky terrain was damp and imposing. The last natural light slowly disappeared behind Margaret and I as we made our way deeper and deeper. I found it strange how soft and compelling the world around me now appeared, despite the stalactites, stalagmites, and other various rocky formations being so jagged. It seemed that even amongst the pointed teeth of God I could lay down and rest there forever. It was comfortable.

Apparently Margaret didn't agree. She shivered uncomfortably under my arm. I raised my eyebrows. "Need your coat?" I asked. I tried to look at her and make non-verbal communication as explicit as possible until I realized that we were lost inky blackness of the Mouth. I bit my lip and waited, but she didn't respond. For a couple minutes we walked in silence. She stopped and stood motionless. I stopped, too.

"Why the hell are we even in here?" she said. She sounded irritated. I shrugged – more to appease myself than her – and shoved my flashlight under my face. Bladed shadows obscured half my face, the other half illuminated in a wretched mask. "Spooky!" I cried, chuckling. She didn't move.

I sighed. "I thought you wanted to go," I said. I noticed how my voice echoed against the cave walls at any volume. "I mean," I began again, scratching at my chin, "You did say you wanted to go see some nature for our vacation. And you did sound impressed when I told you about my visit to Mammoth Caves a couple years back. So..." My voice trailed off. I could still sense her irritation.

"No," she said. I frowned. "No, you wanted to go here. I wanted to go to a beach or something. But no, a cave. A cave, Nathan!" She sounded more like the Big Bad Wolf now. "I know that you have this weird fetish for spelunking or something, but I don't really want to be dragged in to it. Don't get me wrong, I'd love to go on a trip and get into nature and fresh air, but this," I could hear her arms flail and gesture about in the thick air. "This is cave air, not fresh air. This air is practically fermenting! Plus, isn't this illegal? Can we please just leave?"

We both stood there. The only sound that could be heard was the electricity in the air being stifled and smothered by the damp atmosphere. Finally, I began to walk. I didn't hear Margaret follow me, but I kept moving forward. Then, "Nathan," she said, "Stop. Please stop." So I stopped.

"I'm sorry," she said. I could hear her moving closer to me. "I'm tired and I'm not used to running and climbing around and the like. I'm just tired."

"It's okay," I said. She gripped my arm. "Really. It's fine." I shook my head. "Which way is out? I don't remember." I could feel Margaret physically pause. Neither of us could remember. Somehow, in the confusion of our argument, I'd forgotten which way we had been moving. Idiot, I thought to myself, I should have brought a goddamn rope or something to trail from the entrance of the cave. I had to take action, so without much thought, I turned 180 degrees and said, "This way."

We walked for what seemed to be hours. My feet were tired and sore, and I could hear Margaret's groans from behind me. She held my hand tightly. I felt terrible. This was my fault.

Then, I froze. "Hey. Hey," I said, "Put your hand out. Feel this rock." I could hear Margaret's bare palm press against the stone. "Isn't this, like...abnormally warm?" I said. She didn't say anything. I began to work my way along the wall, feeling it as I went, shining the flashlight in front of me. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain on my head as the ceiling of God's Mouth met with my scalp.

"Ow! Shit!" I shouted.

"Oh, Nathan, are you okay?" Margaret asked. She seemed on the verge of panic now.

"I'm fine," I said. "Please, calm down. We'll get out of here soon, I promise."

I started again, pointing my flashlight upwards now to see the ceiling above me. It seemed to be getting narrower. That was strange. "Listen, uh, Margaret, babe," I said through clenched teeth, "I think we gotta turn around." Margaret sighed next to me.

Again, we walked for a decent length. I kept my flashlight pointed upwards this time. Sure enough, the space in the cave seemed to become smaller and smaller. If there was any resonating light left in God's Mouth aside from my flashlight, I'm sure Margaret would have been able to see the whites of my eyes, spreading in panic. We were completely lost.

I let go of Margaret's hand and began to feverishly feel my way along the walls. "No, Nathan!" I heard her shout. I kept going. We had to get out. If we were lost,

nobody would be able to find us.

I kept feeling along the wall until I abruptly hit a corner. "Fuck," I said aloud. "Margaret, this seems to be a dead end." I spun around on my heel. "Margaret?" No answer. Shit.

I began to repeat my process again, almost running as I felt the wall run past my fingertips. Cool, damp rocks and jagged spears. Suddenly, I found myself at a corner again. "Fuck fuck fuck," I shouted. "Margaret!" I was belting her name out now. In the corner of the cave's maw where I had been thwarted so many times already, I heard a noise. It sounded like muffled static from a television. I pressed my ear against the rock. It seemed to be getting even warmer now. I heard the faint sounds of Margaret on the other side of the rock. She was screaming.

"No no no," I said. "No no no no no." I began running haphazardly into the walls around me. With dawning realization came a wave of sheer horror. There was no entrance. There was no exit. Only these four corners and me.

I could feel blood begin to trickle from the cut I managed to get by bashing my body into the cave's walls. They were closing in on me. They were coming in for the kill, and soon they would be pressing in on my skull and crushing my rib cage.

I sat there for hours, waiting for death. My flashlight was becoming dim and blinking. Finally, I felt the soft touch of these rocky walls press against my back. I began to cry as I lay down on the ground. I let my flashlight roll on the small hills of stone. As I quietly stayed prone, tears dripping down my face, I turned and looked at the flashlight. Its last, fading beams of light pointed at something not far away from my face. I squinted in the darkness. My eyes widened and I felt tears fall even harder from my face. The rocks were piercing my skin now and blood dripped from all sides.

There, in the last light of my flashlight, was the appetizer. The spotlight shone on a hand whose nails were painted red, and I screamed in agony as I watched God's Mouth chew its latest meal.

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