A person wearing a backpack is walking away from the viewer down a path in a dense, misty forest. The trees are bare and their branches are silhouetted against a pale, hazy light. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somber.

Sensorium

A Short Story

Royal Alvis

ROYAL ALVIS

Sensorium

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Royal Alvis asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

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Sensorium

One bullet is all you'll need, but to buy time you slowly load all six, then sit by the window with a tumbler of vodka. Everything that matters is gone now: your wife, your son, the rest of your family and friends. Once you were a big deal marketing consultant, but too much drinking, too much grief . . . and now you're just an embarrassment. You've lied and borrowed from everybody. To persevere would be pointless, yet you sit with the gun in your lap all night, and you don't have the courage to pull the trigger. Eventually the sun rises. A full moon lingers in the west, and if you're not going to do *this*, you'll have to do something. You are in debt to more than one thug, and they will be coming for recompense. The sheriff is due to evict you today, and you have no place to go. You have no money, and you start thinking about the tent and backpack that are stashed in the attic.

Once they throw you out, you'll be homeless, but if you went hiking along the Appalachian Trail, you would be an outdoorsman. No one will know you're destitute. No one will find you, and once in the woods, you'll have no choice but to stay sober. You'll have time to think, devise a plan, and maybe start over. Why not? You stand and place the gun in the gun

cabinet. Outside morning papers are being delivered, and you find yourself rummaging through the house, gathering the necessary gear for a two-week stay in the woods. Sleeping bag, camp stove, flashlight . . . you glance through the window to see if anyone is coming. While foraging through the pantry, you find a box of Lucky Charms cereal, which had been your son's favorite. You find a stack of instant noodles, a bag of dried apricots, some chocolate bars. You stuff everything into a rucksack and you are about to lock the front door behind you, but on second thought, you leave the entrance open and toss the keys into the swimming pool. After all, it's not your house anymore, and this hasty abandonment leaves you feeling hopeful, as if new actions were still possible.

You spend the rest of the day driving north towards Maine. You decide to stop for the night at a rest station, and recline the driver's seat while sipping from your last fifth of vodka. You think about your son. Dozens of times you had promised to take him camping—and this broken vow might be the least of your failures, but still, your hiking trip now feels like a betrayal. Jason would be hurt if he knew you were going without him. You imagine his wide eyes, his mouth falling open. You feel your lips tremble and twitch as you fight back sobs, and you wonder which of your shortcomings were most painful to the boy, how he would have articulated such things if given the chance.

In the morning you awake at first light. Your back is sore from sleeping in the car. You stretch, yawn, step outside to pee behind a dumpster, then run back to the car and turn up the heater. You can't believe how cold it is. Perhaps you'll only stay one week in the woods instead of two. You wish you had some coffee and a

hot breakfast before starting this trek, but instead you munch on Lucky Charms then drive slowly along a byway until it meets with the Appalachian Trail.

You park in a gravel lot where a notice board displays a map and a registry. Turkey vultures are circling overhead. A white blaze marks a black tree trunk. Morning mist rolls through the clearing, and now at the threshold, you are hesitant to begin. You haven't been hiking for ten years. You're in poor shape, and you're not used to forest life. What you're used to are living rooms, offices, and cocktails. Certainly there will be no trailside bars in the miles to come, and all these facts leave you feeling feverish.

Just go, you tell yourself. What else will you do?

Your lack of options is compelling, but still you feel queasy as you shoulder the straps of your backpack and begin marching uphill. White breaths billow about you. The temperature is unseasonably cold. You should have chosen an easier entry point, and at the very least, you should have checked the weather forecast, because now the sky darkens, and sleet and rain begin to fall. These are perfect conditions for hypothermia. You hurry to put on your rain suit, but the old fabric has lost its waterproofing and you're soon soaked to the skin. You're doused a second time when falling into a stream, slipping on icy stepping stones while crossing shallow water, and the currents are so cold that you yell and moan while scrambling to the shore. You've hurt your knee. You curse while shouting at heaven, but you press on, and before long, you feel hot and sweaty from the climb. Above, the tree branches are black and wet, and when the wind gusts, thick boughs sway like tentacles. The rain builds to a downpour. The air turns to fog.

The trail leads you to a high ridge above the tree line, though

all you can see are fast moving clouds blowing past you. You're unnerved by the high winds of this narrow, desolate place, as if you were standing on the wing of an airplane. You're worried about lightning strikes, that you will be blown over a precipice. Squinting and leaning forward you trudge against the gale, until you find your way down into the next valley.

The storm surges and then subsides as the trail leads you up another mountain. You walk for the next six hours but only cover eight miles, and you decide to stop for the night when coming to a designated camping area. Several tent platforms are spread across the high ground beside a gully. You drop your pack on one of these decks, and having shed this weight, your body feels lighter than a spirit. Your shoulders float beside you. You sit and stare into the ravine where a white swollen stream falls over moss covered rocks to crash into a turbulent pool below. Several small rills roll down the opposite slope. A spray rises from the falls and blends with the fog drifting through the birch and hemlock. You sigh as you wipe the sweat and rain from your face, and you would like to sit a while longer while staring at this ebullient display of run-off, but soon you are shivering and cannot stop your teeth from chattering. It's too cold and too dangerous to stay still in these drenched clothes. You force yourself to stand and begin threading poles through eyelets to raise your tent. You reach into the pack to find your down sleeping bag and thermal underwear, still dry and wrapped in plastic, and you whimper while anticipating the warmth of these garments. You crave their blanketing comfort as much as you have ever craved a drink, and you realize that you've almost forgotten the ruins of your life; the day has been that grueling and that distracting, and now you want nothing more than to climb into your tent and escape the rain.

But you cannot do it.

You hear something. A hum between the rain and falling water, and you question if it's a sound you've been hearing for a while and failed to notice, though now you definitely notice, and you stand in dire stillness as the back of your neck prickles.

You are alone. You have been alone all day, yet someone is singing in the fog before you. A high-pitched female voice, a slow trembling soprano, repeating the same lyrics in a language that's foreign to you, a churchy, medieval sound, both graceful and eerie.

"Who's there?" you shout, but receive no answer.

The singing sounds louder. The fog thins and you can see all the way to the creek, but no one is around, and you cannot make sense of this. You focus on the singing and feel scared in a way you've not felt since you were little, of unseen ghouls and stirs in the dark. You tell yourself to be calm. Maybe it's the DTs. Maybe it's just the woods playing tricks on your mind. You've heard of such things happening to other hikers, but this illusion is nothing that threatens you. Nothing bad will happen as long as you go into your tent and put on something dry. Do that, and everything will be all right.

But you cannot move, because now you see your son in the forest staggering towards you. Jason is naked except for white cotton underpants. He is shivering and hugging himself for warmth, just as you are shivering and hugging yourself. His bare feet step gingerly on the rough ground, and he does not see you, because he is staring downward as he moves closer.

You clasp the sides of your face with both hands and rub your quivering lips. You are terrified.

You try to examine your consciousness, try to determine if you are dreaming or insane, because it is not possible for your son to

be here—and you wonder if *you* are really here. You remember holding a gun in your lap all night, and maybe you fired after all, maybe you've become a spirit in the afterlife, where nothing makes sense, where you don't even realize that you are dead.

The singing stays steady. Your son stumbles closer, and you dig your fingernails into your wrist, clenching so hard that beads of blood rise and are washed away by the rain. The pain feels too sharp to be mistaken. The sobbing of your son is too real, and now he is close enough for you to see the anguish contorting his face, the corners of his mouth pulled back like a grotesque clown, and after several pounding heart beats a lambency of relief washes over the hot fear in your chest, because finally something makes sense, because this is not your son.

This is a lost child you've never seen before, the same height and hair color as your boy, and you would smile at the fright he has given you, but the situation is too serious. Obviously the boy has suffered something horrific. Perhaps he has been abducted and escaped from some cabin of cruelty— and now the singing sounds like the angelic warning of urgency— for had the child passed unnoticed, he would have died, would have walked until exhausted, and once he stopped, the warmth of his body would drain forever.

The same thing will happen to you unless you change your wet clothes, but instead you squat down to speak in a gentle voice as the wisps of your white breath rise before you.

“Hello son, would you like some help?”

The child's drooping head springs up. You've startled him. His eyes are wide as he stares at you, his arms splayed, and he crouches as if ready to dodge something.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, but you look lost and I can help. I have some nice dry clothes that you can put on.

I can make you something hot to drink, and if you tell me where you're from, I'll take you back there. I promise. Everything is going to be all right now."

Though everything is not going to be all right. At the sight of you the boy jiggles in a dance of fear. He stammers and bleats out nonsense as his mouth hangs open, as a strand of drool slides from his pale-blue lips.

"It's okay, it's okay, I have a son your age and . . ."

But you stop speaking, because the boy bolts off in the direction he came from. He is frightened senseless, but you must chase after him. He will not survive the night without clothes. You are his only hope. You have failed your own son. You have failed at everything, but you mustn't fail this boy, this one chance of doing something good.

You run as fast as you can, swinging your arms, digging in with your soaking wet boots, and though it seems impossible, the barefooted boy is getting away. You chase him uphill. You are terrifying this child who has already been traumatized, but you mustn't lose sight of him. The wind dies down but the rain stays steady. Thick fog drifts through the dim twilight, and for a moment the boy disappears in the mist. When you see him again, he has veered sharply to the right. You change course and put all your might into sprinting, but the boy dashes into the underbrush. You follow and are snagged and scratched by the dead briars of wild roses. You trip and land hard, and when you get to your feet, you see the child behind you.

"Young man, please don't run!"

You've hurt your ankle. You hop and limp, trying to keep up the chase, but again the boy vanishes in the fog, and now he is on your left, and you realize that something is abominably wrong. You have been chasing him for ten minutes and this scared

stumbling child could not have turned into someone so fleet. You try to keep running but realize that you are only staggering, that you are breathing heavy, so tired you feel light-headed and dizzy. Your lungs are burning, your legs are exhausted, and you realize you've lost track of which direction you've come from. You look about, but it's nearly dark, and you don't even have a flashlight. Everything is in your tent, and you don't know how to get back there.

This child has doomed you. You cannot save him. You cannot save yourself. You make a guess at the direction of your camp and try to follow that course, but a stabbing pain in your chest causes you to collapse. You are so tired. You are lying on your side in the wet forest leaves. You cannot move. The rain changes to broad white feathers, melting as they touch ground, and the boy now stands still just before you. He has changed, darkness where his face should be. His eyes glow like embers and his body has been stretched to some tall, thin deformity, the branches above reaching down like gnarled fingers to touch him.

You are too fatigued to be frightened. You are reminded of the gun you held without firing, because all you have to do now is close your eyes and give up, and maybe you'll be asleep before your sweat dries, before you start to shiver. As easy as that, and maybe this is the real reason you came into the woods, and maybe this ghost child has brought you to the very place you longed to be.

You feel uneasy as you drive to the river, because you don't know what you'll do when you arrive. Jason doesn't like fishing. He doesn't like to play catch, or any sports, so you wind up walking along the banks as Jason collects pieces of driftwood. He has the idea of stacking this flotsam into a sculpture, and you support

him in the effort. You tie a rope around the base to add support. You search the river wrack for bleached branches and twisted roots, and the task turns out to be more fun than you would have imagined. The stacking rises so high that your son climbs onto your shoulders to add the last towering piece. You're pleased by what you've done together. You take a selfie with your arm around Jason and the driftwood sculpture in the background, and you're so impressed, that you might send the photo to a local paper.

Afterward you both swim in your underpants and eat sandwiches on the flat rocks by the shore. This day has turned out to be splendid. You are grateful to Jason for sharing his childhood. You make a silent promise to spend more time with your son, and for a moment you ponder the paradox of joy, how sometimes it comes easy, and at other times it evades all your best efforts.

You glance again at the driftwood sculpture. Jason goes for another swim, and you stretch out on the warm rocks, gazing at the blue sky and the tall white clouds. You turn your face away from the sun and notice several dark stripes on a shelf of granite twenty yards to your right. It takes a moment to make sense of these markings, but you soon recognize them as snakes, stretched out and basking. Each one is thicker than Jason's forearm. You sit up and shade your eyes and can see the skin patterns, the pale beads at their tapered ends. They are rattlers, eastern diamondbacks, and the sight is stunning and ominous. You wonder if they've been there all along. You wonder if you should point them out to Jason, but decide against it. He is a delicate boy, easily frightened, and the sight might spoil an otherwise perfect afternoon. Instead, you gather your clothes, and when Jason comes back you will move away to a safer distance—but your son is not where you expected.

He has drifted downstream. He has already climbed out of the river and is running across the ledge, directly towards the snakes. He doesn't see them. It's impossible! He must think they're sticks or logs, and you stand up to yell and wave your arms, but your whole body is paralyzed. Your voice is gone. Your eyes are open but blackness surrounds you, horror when you hear the screaming, because you have failed to protect your son; you have always failed him.

When you open your eyes, all you can see is red as if the world has turned to crimson. You realize that you are staring up at the inside of your tent, that the sides of the dome are smeared with mud and dried blood. You don't remember what happened last night. Your muscles are so sore you can hardly move, but eventually you unzip the sleeping bag to find yourself dressed in long thermal underwear. Bits of leaves and twigs are strewn in your bedding. You pull up your sleeves, and your arms are scratched and caked with dry mud, and when you rake your hair, a confetti of black dirt and forest mulch falls before you.

You squint while staring downward. In your groggy thoughts you remember dreaming of snakes. You begin to remember moments from last night, the chase through the woods, how you had collapsed in the mud, shivering, lost, and so cold you begged God to spare you this lonely death—and perhaps the boy had led you in a circle—because you remember laying in the still darkness and hearing the creek where you had set your camp. The rushing water had sounded so near that it gave you hope, and you remember crawling, weeping, and praying as you inched forward, banging your head against trees in the dark, using the sound of the creek as a beacon. You don't remember finding your tent, or changing out of your wet clothes, but here

you are, dry and sheltered.

You unzip the front flap of your tent and stumble down the slope towards the sounds of the creek that had saved you. The air is warmer. The storm has passed but the trees are still dripping, and the dawn sky is colored like a dark blue slate before the sunrise. You're wearing a dry fleece jacket—you don't remember packing this garment but still you are wearing it—and in the pocket you find a plastic bag that you spread on a wet rock before sitting. You have the sleeping bag draped across your shoulders. Your feet are snug in wool socks and sandals, and you would almost be comfortable if not for the ghost of hypothermia still shivering in your body. You're not sure what happened last night, but you know you were colder than you've ever been before. You know that you almost died, and your survival now fills you with a grateful ease that spreads deeply beneath your chest bone. You have trouble remembering things like your name, the disappointing details of your life, the events that brought you here, and when you sigh, something strange happens: your attention is becoming a thing of its own, moving out towards the water as if your mind were cleansed of everything except the creek and the mist. This peace is so complete, that you wonder if part of you did not make it back last night, if your stone-cold body is still out there buried in the fog. You're tempted to go look for yourself. You sense something is amiss, because a toad is hopping towards you, and this is not an ordinary toad, this creature is the size of a cantaloupe.

It stops just before you and stares defiantly while flexing its pale vocal sac. Your former self would have reeled away from this giant amphibian, but now you're too set in this amnesiac calm, and you stare back until you enjoy the toad's company. It's a fascinating animal, its tan bumpy skin, its amber eyes the

size of pennies, and you pat your thighs welcoming the visitor onto your lap, but the frog seems miffed, and merely moves off in its own direction.

Disappointed, you stand and drift back to your tent to breakfast on Lucky Charms and a chocolate bar. Your sense of taste registers as a marvel you've never used before. You drink some water and roll the flavor of several minerals on your tongue. You take your time striking camp, packing everything back into your rucksack, and when you start on the trail, you start slowly until your legs are limber, and even then you trek at an easy pace.

You come to a high vista as the sun is rising red above the clouds, and the valley before you is a lake of fog. You see a small boy walking on the trail before you. You know he is there, and that he is not there, that he is your son and he is not your son, and you know you must follow as long as he leads you, even if it means trekking the whole length of the trail until you arrive in Georgia. You sense that this new feeling of calm will be steadfast if you stay six months sober in the woods, but thousands of miles lie before you, hundreds of visions and nights, and you wonder if any part of your old self will survive. You wonder if you're already dead.



About the Author

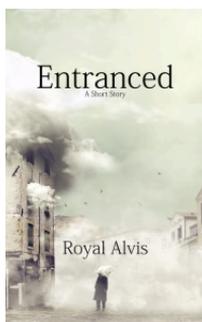
Several of Royal Alvis's stories have appeared in literary Magazines and on-line journals. Although he has said this before, his novel is nearly finished and will be available soon; it's a mix of yoga, travel and the supernatural. A bunch of short stories are also on the way, most of which share a surreal and fabulist vibe. When he's not writing, Royal likes to practice meditation and Tai chi. He has not been in trouble or done anything excessively stupid for a very long time. Instead, he volunteers at a New York senior center where he delivers meals and teaches creative writing. He is very much in love with his girlfriend, and both of them are very much in love with their dog, Ember. He would mention his degree from the MFA Writing Program at Bennington College, but he doesn't think anyone will care.

You can connect with me on:

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Also by Royal Alvis



Entranced

Robert is skilled at manipulating juries until he develops a mental condition that causes his career to crumble. His symptoms are so unusual that Robert's wife wonders if he's faking them. Soon he is humiliated, alone, and desperate. He enlists the help of a several doctors, but the only cure comes from a spiritual cult leader, who restores Robert's health, but leads him to a devotion which is even more ruinous. This story explores the relation of allegiance to truth, if such truth can be manufactured, and the consequence of self-deception.

