

NIGHTMARE SOUP

THE ULTIMATE FEAST



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Nightmare Soup: The Ultimate Feast
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NIGHTMARE SOUP

TALES THAT WILL TURN YOUR STOMACH

I HATE CLOWNS

“Mom, I don’t want to go to Daniel’s party!” Max stood in the entryway pouting with his arms crossed. His mom had her keys in hand ready to leave.

“So all of a sudden you don’t want to go to your best friend’s birthday party? What’s the problem...”

He hesitated before answering. “It’s at Chuckles & Cheese, and those weird robot characters freak me out, especially the clown. I hate clowns.”

“Oh honey, you’ll be fine. Just stay in the game room or something. Plus, you’d probably hurt Daniel’s feelings if you didn’t show up.”

Max just stood there, unsure of what to do.

“Well, it’s either Daniel’s party, or you can help me run errands, and they’re not fun errands. I have to go to the post office, and then I have to get a dress for your aunt’s wedding. You’re going to be bored out of your mind.”

He sighed. “Okay, fine. Take me to the party.”

When Max arrived, he felt an immediate sense of dread floating through the air, along with the stench of cheap, poorly made pizza.

He said hello to his friends and gave Daniel his birthday gift, but all he could really think about was one thing... the creepy animatronic characters awkwardly dancing and singing on the stage in front of everyone. Their jerky unnatural movements and cold robotic expressions made his stomach turn. But the worst by far was Chuckles the Clown. It had a wide crooked smile, wiry green hair, and beady dead eyes punctuated by a large red nose. It

was almost like whoever designed it was trying to terrify kids on purpose.

“That clown really creeps me out.”

Max was shaken out of his gaze as Daniel spoke up from behind him.

“You too?” Max exclaimed. Daniel walked up beside him, both glaring at the mechanical monstrosities in front of them.

“Definitely. The only reason I had the party here is because my mom knows the manager and we got a huge discount.”

“Well, I’m glad I’m not the only one... I hate clowns.”

Suddenly a bright spotlight hit Chuckles, startling Max and Daniel and forcing them to take a step back. A goofy, blubbery voice emitted from the clunky mandible of the animatronic character.

“Oooooookay kiddos. Chuckles and friends are going to take a short break! Make sure to fill up on pizza, and remember to tell Mom and Dad that all Chuckles & Cheese merchandise is 25% off today! And hey before I go, how about a joke? ‘Why don’t cannibals eat clowns... because they taste funny.’
Hooohohehehaha! See ya in a bit!”

The spotlight shut off and the mechanical clown clumsily shuffled behind a large red curtain, where it waited for the start of the next show.

“Yeah, I think this is the last time I’ll be coming here. Creepy robots and bad pizza, no thanks.” Max turned to head toward the game area but Daniel stopped him, his lips curling into a mischievous smile.

“I dare you..” Daniel then glanced over to the big red curtain.

“Dare me to do what?”

“Go behind the curtain and see what those things are doing back there.”

Max immediately shook his head, “Absolutely not. No way.”

“I double dare you...”

“You can dare me to infinity. I’m not doing it.”

Another one of Daniel’s friends walked up to them, “What are you guys doing up here, let’s go play games. I’ve already won like 500 tickets.”

Daniel smirked, “Max is gonna go behind the curtain and mess with Chuckles.”

Max scowled, “No I’m not...”

Two more kids walked up to the group and joined Daniel in daring Max, then another joined, and another, and for the first time in his life, he felt it... peer pressure.

“You’re really afraid of that clown?”

“Dude, don’t be a wuss.”

“You’re not going to get in trouble. Do it.”

The chorus was getting louder and louder, pushing Max more and more. He could feel the sweat forming on his forehead, the pressure building in his chest...

“FINE! I’ll do it! Just because I’m the only one brave enough and you guys are too scared to do it yourselves.”

Max talked a big game, but inside he was absolutely petrified. Why did he just agree to this?

He took a long, deep breath and turned toward the big red curtain. “Are any of the adults watching?”

Daniel quickly looked around, “Nope! You’re good.”

Max paused for what seemed like an eternity. “You don’t have to do this!” he thought. “WHY are you doing this?” He could feel the glare of Daniel and his friends, just waiting for him to chicken out. But Max wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction, so he took another long, deep breath, and crawled up on the stage.

THUMP THUMP THUMP he could feel his heart nearly beating out of his chest. And just as he reached the curtain, he looked back... every boy who had dared him was in shock... he was really going to do it.

“What are you doing Max?” his mind screamed. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?”

But it was too late to turn back now. Max turned around and opened the curtain, then stepped into the darkness.

As the curtain fell back into place, it blocked out almost all the sound coming from the stage area. A pale blue light was all that illuminated the large room Max found himself in. And right in the center of the room was Chuckles and his “friends.”

Max could barely breathe, it felt like his stomach was pressing up into his lungs, his palms were wet with sweat, and he could feel the slight prickle of goosebumps erupting on his skin.

Chuckles and the other animatronics were standing upright, motionless, and slightly hunched over. Max knew they were just machines, but he couldn’t shake the feeling they were just waiting for him to get closer. Plus, they could turn back on at any moment.

“How long am I supposed to stay back here?” Max thought to himself. He took a few steps forward to get a better look at the machines. Their dead eyes were somehow even more creepy when not powered on.

Max looked at each of them, seeing if there was some small trinket he could take, a trophy of sorts to bring back to the boys and prove his courage. There were five characters total... a chicken, a rat, a gorilla, a strange-looking bear, and of course Chuckles standing right in the center, and that’s when Max decided... he was going to take that dumb clown’s nose.

Max slowly crept up to the lifeless robot and paused just a few feet away. It was much larger up close, and if it suddenly sprung to life it could no doubt crush him, or worse.

Max extended his arm, his hand visibly trembling. Fear was an understatement. His legs felt weak, sweat was pouring from his forehead, and there was a lump in his throat that felt like a rock. His fingers touched the large round ball. It was loose, a part that just popped onto the fiberglass molding of the head. Max wrapped his hand around it...

The machine's soulless eyes seemed to be peering right at him. Almost like a warning. He knew it wasn't real, but something inside his brain kept screaming that this thing was somehow alive.

Max gripped tightly onto the nose and pulled as hard as he could. The nose popped off easily. A brief hint of a smile crept across his lips as he looked down at his prize. But when he looked back up, a lightning bolt of terror shot down his spine. The eyes... the eyes had moved ever so slightly. Now they were *absolutely* looking at him.

Max stumbled backward and sprinted to the curtain opening. He bounded through it and fell hard on his stomach. Daniel and the rest of the boys were standing there with their mouths open, they then erupted into cheers!

"Hey! What are you doing up there? Get down now!" one of the employees yelled from the side of the room. Max quickly tucked the nose away in his pocket and jumped down, then rushed into the crowded arcade area.

The rest of the boys quickly caught up with him.

"I can't believe you actually did it!" Daniel yelled with a smile.

For a brief moment, Max forgot all about the fear, he was riding high on adrenaline and pride. "I took a little souvenir too." Max pulled out Chuckles' nose and the boys all gasped.

“Noooo way man! Awesome!” Daniel exclaimed.

Max spent the rest of the party playing games, eating bad pizza, and generally having a great time.

But just as it was time to leave, a familiar jingle started to play near the stage area.

“I’mmmm baaaack!!!” The clunky animatronic clown lumbered through the curtain and onto the stage. “Alright kiddos... Let’s have some fun.”

Max’s mom had pulled up in front of the entrance, and right before he exited the building, he briefly looked back at the stage on the other side of the building.

Chuckles was just standing there, motionless, glaring directly at him.

And although Max told himself it was just his mind playing tricks, he couldn’t help but notice Chuckles looked slightly different. Maybe it was just because he was missing his nose, but the clown’s expression seemed to have changed... and it looked angry.

“How was the party?” Max’s mom asked when he got in the car.

“Oh, it was great... I, uh, I had a lot of fun.”

“...And what about the clown?”

Max nervously grabbed the large red ball in his pocket, “It was fine. I barely even noticed it.”

...

Later that evening, Max was playing video games in his room, doing his best to forget about Chuckles and the big red nose that was sitting in the top drawer of his dresser.



Suddenly his mom knocked on the door and walked in holding the phone. “Daniel is on the line, he said he wanted to thank you again for the gift you brought.” Max’s mom handed him the phone and walked out of the room.

“Hey Daniel, what’s up?”

Silence... followed by the slightest crackle of static.

“Daniel?”

“You shouldn’t have done that Max...” Daniel’s voice was cold and monotone. “It’s not nice to take things that don’t belong to you.”

Max rolled his eyes, “Very funny Daniel.

“Give it back...” This time Daniel’s voice was slightly different, a bit scratchier and deeper.

“Dude I’m not falling for this. I know you’re messing with me.”

“Give... it... *BACK!*” The voice was raspy and low, with a slight reverberation that made it sound nearly inhuman.

Max could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, “Okay, you got me, I’m officially creeped out.”

Silence.

“Hello?”

A low, sinister laugh crept through the phone.

“... *I’m coming for you Max. Hehehe. I’m coming for what you took from me. Hahahaha.*”

“Daniel this isn’t funny!”

The static suddenly picked up and the voice on the other line became garbled and choppy.

“... *I’ll see you soon little Max...*”

The line then cut out and the call ended, leaving Max visibly shaken as sat on his bed.

Max tried to call Daniel's house but there was no answer. "That had to have been a joke," he thought to himself. "They're just trying to scare me. This isn't the first time Daniel has done something like this."

Max knew animatronic clowns didn't suddenly come to life and take revenge on misbehaving kids, but *juuust* in case, he barricaded his door shut with the dresser and grabbed a baseball bat from his closet. He then sat by his bedroom window and waited... and waited... and waited.

After a couple of hours, Max's eyelids were getting heavy. He told himself he'd just lie down and rest his eyes for a moment. But as soon as his head hit the pillow, he immediately drifted off to sleep.

...

Hehehehahahahaha

Max's eyes ripped open to the sound of cackling laughter outside.

He immediately shot up and groggily stumbled to the window. At that exact moment, he could barely comprehend what he was seeing. Chuckles the Clown was standing on the sidewalk illuminated by the moonlight, a wretched, uneven smile cut across its face, punctuated by a large red nose... the very one Max had taken. In its left hand, it held the string of a single red balloon, the Chuckles & Cheese logo visible as it floated ominously in the night air. There was something else in his right hand, but Max couldn't tell what it was.

Max could barely move, paralyzed with fear. Was this even real? Was it a nightmare? That's when he noticed a warm liquid running over his lips and dripping down his chin.

He reached up to touch his face, and as he pulled his hand away, he instantly recognized the dark red color of blood. His stomach twisted and dropped.

He rushed to the light switch, flipped it on, and immediately looked at his closet mirror... then he screamed. Max's nose was completely gone, and all that remained was a gaping bloody hole.

NOODLES

“We came here to try new things,” Jimmy’s mother insisted. Jimmy looked down at the bowl of pale grey noodles and curled his lip in disgust. It was the second week of their trip abroad and all he could think about was a big juicy cheeseburger from back home. “Just try it, you might really like it.”

He stuck his fork in the bowl and twisted a few noodles around. “Mom, what kind of noodles are these?”

“Just take a bite; they say it’s a local delicacy.”

Jimmy looked down at the wet, slimy dish and up to the villager who had brought them the food. He was just standing there watching them eat with a strange, crooked smile running across his face.

Jimmy raised the noodles to his mouth, took a deep breath, and slurped them up like spaghetti, the hearty taste immediately exploded on his tongue, “Wow! These are delicious!”

“See, I told you!” his mom exclaimed. “You have to be open to new types of food. You’ll never get this type of stuff back in the Midwest.”

Jimmy quickly gobbled up the rest of the noodles and even asked for a second bowl. After he devoured that, he sat back in his chair, completely satisfied. Maybe his mom was right all along. It was good to try new things.

Later that night, Jimmy went to bed still thinking about how good the meal was. Those delectable noodles weren’t much to look at, but they sure did taste good.

But as Jimmy crawled under the covers, his stomach began to rumble and turn.



At first, he thought it was just indigestion, but then his insides felt as though they were *moving*. He got up, rushed to the bathroom, and lifted his shirt, staring at his stomach in the mirror. The skin of his abdomen would bulge, shift, then move to the left and the right... something was *slithering* within his gut.

He rushed to his parents' room. But they were both on the bedroom floor clutching their stomachs and moaning in pain. Whatever it was, they had it too.

A traveling doctor who had been staying near the area came to examine the family in the middle of the night. After checking everyone thoroughly, the doctor asked what they had eaten.

"Noodles... just noodles from the village down the road," Jimmy's mother groaned.

The doctor's expression took a grave turn.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"The villagers there hate tourists and foreigners. Those weren't noodles..." the doctor explained. "They were *worms*. They gave you tapeworm soup."

FULL MOON GUESTS

The radio buzzed as John and Carrie drove through the woods. They were headed to their family's cabin for a quiet weekend alone.

"Reports of three murders in the last week... (static)... killers on the loose. Residents are urged to stay indoors tonight as the police search continues."

"You hear that?" Carrie's voice was full of apprehension and concern.

"I wouldn't worry about it... we're way up in the mountains. Nobody's going to come all the way up here."

John continued driving until they reached the old cabin built in the 1960s.

"It's just me and you," John smiled. "The perfect anniversary. Plus, there's supposed to be a full moon tonight."

After the two unpacked their belongings, John and Carrie lit the fireplace, beginning their romantic evening together. As the night set in, both of them poured a glass of wine and cozied up in the family room.

Suddenly there was a knock at the front entrance.

"Who could that be?" John got up and peered out the window and then opened the door. Nobody was there.

"Hello?" he called out into the darkened woods, but no answer came. He closed the door and walked back toward Carrie, but then another hard, wooden knock echoed through the room.

"John, this is scaring me," Carrie squirmed on the couch. John grabbed the steel fire poker and returned to the door. He slowly pulled it open. Again, nobody was there.



But as he started to close it, a figure emerged from the shadows and began to approach the cabin. The figure was tall and lanky – a man – wearing a cloth sack on his head. Upon the fabric, he had drawn a hollow, grinning face. The man was soon joined by two others. All three carried large blood-stained knives. The three figures then started running toward the cabin.

“Carrie, run!”

John and Carrie rushed for the back door, but it was too late. The three men crashed through the front entrance. Two of them tackled John; the other went for Carrie.

All three laughed hysterically as they quickly bound John and Carrie’s hands and feet.

“Please, you don’t have to do this...” John pleaded.

The leader of the three men knelt down to get closer, “Well of course we don’t have to... we *want* to.”

He then pulled the cloth sack off his head to reveal his face, a disheveled man in his 40s with sunken cheeks, rough skin, and dark circles around his pale blue eyes. He looked out the window as the dark clouds separated, allowing moonlight to fill the room. A rotting smile crept across the man’s chapped lips.

“Well look at that neighbor... a full moon... strange things always happen during a full moon. But I guess you’re finding that out the hard way.”

The man chuckled to himself, then turned back to John and raised his knife, ready to strike, but when he looked down, his confident smirk was immediately wiped away.

John was smiling ear to ear.

“You’re right... *strange things do happen...*” John’s voice suddenly devolved into a heavy growl. Fangs erupted from his mouth, his skin sprouted a thick fur, and his clothes tore as a hulking monster took form.

Carrie snapped the rope that bound her, claws forming from her perfectly painted nails.

The intruders backed away in terror as two gigantic wolf-like creatures arose in front of them. John and Carrie lumbered toward the three men, a rabid hunger blazing in their yellow eyes.

“You see, the police aren’t searching for you three...” John snarled. *“They’re searching for us.”*

THE HUNT

It was the coldest November anyone could remember, and a fresh blanket of snow covered the forest floor. Kyle was immersed in the wilderness, clutching tightly to his rifle. There was something relaxing about the quiet bustling of the woods; it was easily his favorite place.

It was the heart of deer season, and this year he was going to bag a monster buck like no one had ever seen. He just knew it. But the entire day went by and Kyle hadn't seen a thing. The sun would soon be setting and he needed to start making his way back home. Kyle grabbed his gear and started walking along the path, but something seemed off. The soothing hum of forest sounds had been replaced by a cold, dead silence. Kyle couldn't even hear the wind rustling against the last of the fall leaves.

That's when he saw it.

It was the largest buck he'd ever laid his eyes on. A monster, the one he had been waiting all these years for, and it was looking right at him.

At first, Kyle didn't move, but neither did the buck. It just gazed at him from 100 yards away, standing in an opening on a small hill.

He took a couple steps forward. Still the buck did not move. He took a couple more steps. Again, nothing.

As he got closer, he noticed a strangeness to the buck. It had thick black fur, and its gigantic antlers were curved in, almost like that of a large goat.

Nevertheless, Kyle wasn't going to let this opportunity pass by. He slowly raised his rifle and took aim.



The shot ripped through the forest with a thunderous echo. It was perfect - right in the heart.

But his smile soon faded; the buck barely moved. It simply cocked its head slightly and continued to stare directly into his eyes.

Kyle was in disbelief. He raised his rifle for another shot, but before he could pull the trigger, the buck started walking in Kyle's direction.

He couldn't breathe. This wasn't a deer – it was something *else*.

The creature's long ghostly strides started to quicken. Kyle's stomach knotted in fear; he had no choice but to run.

The blackness of the forest consumed him as he rushed through the bushes. He briefly looked behind him to see the silhouette of the creature quickly gaining ground. It was galloping toward him in an animalistic, yet human motion. Its hooves digging into the mud as it came closer and closer.

Kyle saw a small cabin-like structure up ahead. He sprinted as fast as he could hoping to reach it before the creature caught up to him.

He made it to the entrance and ripped open the door. He slammed it shut just before the creature could reach him.

Shaken and trembling with fear, he took a deep breath.

He slowly turned to see who or what was in the shelter he had found. It was dimly lit, with nothing but a few burning candles. Kyle grabbed one of them and took a few steps forward to get a better look.

The walls were splattered with dried blood... and decorated with human heads.

Before he could even scream, the door to the shelter slowly crept open, and he turned to see the creature standing at the entrance.

Kyle dropped the candle, paralyzed with fear. The creature then raised its large gangly hoof and pointed to an empty space on the wall of heads. Something was written there in crooked, uneven letters. It was Kyle's name scratched deep into the wood.

IMAGINARY FRIEND

“Mom, I didn’t do it. It was Charlie!” Ethan looked over at the antique mirror that had been shattered to pieces, and then back to his mother’s scowl.

“I don’t want to hear it Ethan, how many times have I told you not to kick the soccer ball in the house... First, it was your grandma’s vase, now the mirror. Do you know how old that was? It’s irreplaceable.”

“Mom, I’m telling you, it wasn’t me!”

Sharon was quickly growing impatient. “Stop lying to me. There is no Charlie. You’re too old for imaginary friends. You’re grounded for a week.”

“A week! That’s not fair!” Ethan whined.

“Go up to your room. I’ll call you down when dinner is ready. I’m telling your father when he gets home too.”

“No! Don’t tell Dad!”

“Up to your room!”

Sharon grabbed a broom and started sweeping up the mess as Ethan trudged upstairs. As she picked up the shards of mirrored glass, she looked around at the massive old house that she had quickly grown to hate. It had only been a few months since they moved in, but something seemed off about the whole thing. Luckily, her family didn’t plan on staying there. The house had been passed down to them from an estranged aunt, and as soon as it was renovated, they were going to sell it and move back to the city.



A half-hour later, as Sharon was preparing the dinner table, she heard a soccer ball bouncing in the living room.

“Ethan! I told you to go up to your room! And for goodness sake, no soccer in the house!”

She stomped into the family room, but nobody was there.

“Ethan?” Sharon slowly walked up the stairs, as she could hear a conversation happening in Ethan’s room.

Sharon put her ear to Ethan’s door to listen. “I told you, Charlie, we can’t play soccer in the house anymore, you keep breaking stuff and I’m the one who gets in trouble.”

Sharon kept listening, but she didn’t hear anyone talking back.

“Ethan who are you talking to?” Sharon opened the door to find Ethan staring into his closet.

“I told you, Mom. It’s Charlie. He lives in my closet.”

“Ethan that’s ridiculous. Nobody lives in your closet. I know there aren’t a lot of boys your age around here, but you’re 10 years old. It’s time to stop playing with fake, imaginary friends. When you do something wrong, you admit it and face the consequences. That’s what grownups do.”

Sharon walked back to the hallway “Dinner will be ready in five minutes.”

As she closed the door, she heard a low grumble, “*Why don’t you shut your mouth, Sharon.*”

She immediately burst back into the room, “What did you just say young man!”

“I didn’t say anything, Mom.” Ethan looked up at her with worried innocence.

“You, me, and your father are going to have a long talk when he gets home.”

The next day Sharon was cleaning Ethan's room while he was at school. Just as she was finishing up, she heard something move inside the closet.

Startled, she slowly walked to the handle and ripped open the door, but nothing was there. Just as she was about to turn away, however, something caught her eye. She crouched down to get a better look and discovered a large hole had been cut in the floor, covered by a flimsy piece of cardboard.

"What is this?" Sharon removed the cardboard and peered down into the darkness.

A slight draft of wind slithered from the hole like a whisper that made her skin go cold. Sharon hesitated for a moment, but curiosity got the best of her, and soon she found herself crawling into the beckoning void.

The air grew colder and heavier as she descended into a winding tunnel that quickly split into an expansive network of passageways, all crudely carved into the home's architecture. These weren't just tunnels; they were observational points, small holes cut out that gave views into various rooms of the house.

A chill ran down Sharon's spine as she explored further, each new discovery more disturbing than the last. Toys, photographs, and other family memorabilia lay scattered on the dimly lit dirt floor, all items that had mysteriously disappeared over the last few months.

Sharon continued crawling until she came into a larger opening where she could stand, there was trash and rotting food everywhere, creating a pungent odor that made her lip curl and stomach turn. Several other holes were visible from this small "room." Sharon assumed they led to other parts of the property like the garage and backyard shed.

A slight bouncing sound could be heard from the hole on the far right.

“Hello?” Sharon called out.

She cautiously walked towards the hole and peered inside.

“Charlie?” Sharon could barely believe that name was coming from her lips. “Is that you?”

A soccer ball slowly rolled into the makeshift room and stopped at Sharon’s feet.

When she looked back up at the hole, a pale expressionless face was peering at her from the darkness. Sharon’s stomach dropped as a figure lurched forward from the shadows ... it was her son, Ethan.

“Ethan? What are you doing down here? You’re supposed to be at school!”

“Sorry Mom, Charlie wanted to play hide and seek.” Ethan walked over and picked up the soccer ball, “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Sharon nervously looked around the dimly lit area filled with garbage, broken toys, and other oddities, “Is Charlie down here with us?”

Ethan paused for a moment, “Yeah, he’s still hiding.”

Sharon grabbed Ethan’s hand and led him toward the hole she had originally come from, “I don’t know what this place is, but we need to get out of here right now.”

Suddenly, the front door of the house could be heard loudly opening and closing, the sound vibrating through the tunnel walls. It was followed by a very familiar voice...

“Mom, I’m home!”

Sharon immediately let go of the hand she was holding as a chill ripped down her spine and a lump formed in her throat.

The young boy she thought was her son immediately darted into one of the holes, laughing as the darkness engulfed him.

Sharon couldn't move, her legs felt like a thousand pounds as fear completely paralyzed her. Her eyes were locked onto the void that the boy had disappeared into.

A low guttural voice soon replaced the childish laugh, *"I've been watching you Sharon... watching your family."*

Sharon could barely speak, "Wh... what are you? What do you want?"

"I'm a friend... a friend who wants to play a game."

A pair of glowing white eyes suddenly became visible from inside the black hole, followed by a wet, grotesque tearing sound, as if something was ripping away its disguise of human skin.

"If I win, I get your son... if you win, I will leave your family alone. The game is simple, make it out of the tunnels before I catch you. I'll give you a 10-second head start. Let's play."

Then the voice started counting.. *"1...2...3...4..."*

Sharon immediately broke through her crippling fear and dashed toward the hole that led back to the closet.

"5... 6... 7..."

She was crawling as fast as she could, her nails viciously digging into the dirt, propelling herself forward.

"8... 9... 10... "

Ready or not, here I come."

Sharon could feel her knees bleeding, her heart slamming against her chest as she pushed herself to the absolute limit. She could hear the ravenous scraping and scratching of something quickly gaining on her. But she could see the opening to Ethan's room. She was almost there! She was going to WIN.

But just as she reached out for the edge of the hole, a searing pain tore through her leg.

Sharon looked down to see long jagged fingernails digging into her ankle, pulling her backwards into the darkness of the tunnel.

...

Ethan never saw Charlie again, but his mom sure seemed different, she even looked kind of different. They played games all the time, and Ethan could play soccer in the house as much as he wanted.

STRANGE LIGHTS

Mike looked up to the sky as he drove along County Road 135. “That’s just a plane.”

“That’s not a plane.” Rachel shot back. “Keep following it.”

Mike and Rachel had been on their way home from dinner when an odd light caught Rachel’s attention. They had been following it for 15 minutes and were now deep into the back roads of their small country town.

“Rachel, I don’t even know where we are now; let’s just turn around and go home.”

She shook her head. “Look! It’s even lower than before. It’s headed into those woods over there.”

Mike sighed in frustration as he turned down an old gravel road. Tall evergreens now surrounded their car as they headed toward the light.

“Why are we doing this?” Mike’s eyes narrowed as he glared at Rachel.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?” Rachel’s gaze remained fixed on the object slowly moving a couple miles in front of them.

“I know what it is... it’s a plane.”

Suddenly the object disappeared, nowhere to be seen. Mike stopped the car and turned to Rachel, satisfied. “Good, now we can go home. This place creeps me out anyway.”

Then suddenly the radio started to buzz, the car’s lights flickered, and the engine died.

“What was that?” Mike looked over at Rachel. He tried to turn the car back on but it refused.



“Okay, very funny Mike, you got me.”

Mike continued to turn the key as the pitter-patter of the engine trying to turn over cut through the eerie silence of the woods. “It’s not a joke, the car won’t start.”

“Wait. Stop for a second...” Rachel leaned her head out of the open window. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The silence... not a single thing is making a sound...”

“Rachel it’s because we’re in the middle of the—”

WWWWHOOOOOOOAAAAAMMMM

A blinding blue light slammed into the car, erupting from deep in the forest. The intensity of the energy beam shook the car, causing it to violently shudder. Rachel could barely move. She forced her head to the side to look at Mike. It was a horrifying sight.

Mike’s eyes had rolled back into his head, and his jaw was open wider than what was natural, like his jaw had been broken. He was completely paralyzed.

As Rachel forced her gaze back to the front of the car, her stomach immediately twisted in knots. She tried to scream, but she had lost the ability to control her body. There stood a pale white being, its black oval eyes shining in the blue glow. Slowly, it walked around the side toward Rachel’s window.

Then a pulsing, thunderous noise rumbled from the woods, shaking the trees and causing everything in sight to vibrate and rumble.

BRAAHHM.... BRAAHHM.... BRAAHHM...

A massive spacecraft emerged from the darkness and hovered over to the car. Mike and Rachel were paralyzed. Rachel could feel her eyes slowly rolling backward and her jaw painfully dislocating. The last thing she remembered was the sound of the windshield

cracking, then exploding open as she was ripped from her seat and lifted into the air, floating towards the ship above.

Three days later a group of hunters found Rachel shivering against a large pine tree, a blank, distant expression on her face and strange burn marks all over her body. Mike was never found. Investigators tried to get Rachel to explain what happened, but all she could murmur was, “It’s not a plane...”

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

The following is based on a true story...

When Aunt Glenda was a little girl growing up in central Indiana, she experienced something that was utterly terrifying.

It was the middle of December. The winter chill had started to set in, and the windows glistened with fresh frost.

Glenda was snuggled up in her bed trying to get warm before falling into a blissful slumber. That's when she heard the "scratching."

She looked toward her bedroom window to see a ghostly hand scraping away at the ice with unusually long, crooked fingernails.

As the frost was shed from the glass, a woman peered into the room. She didn't say anything or make a sound. She just stood silently and stared towards the bed.

Glenda closed her eyes, hoping it was just a nightmare, but when she opened them, there was the woman, glaring at her. She was extremely skinny, almost emaciated. Her facial features were hollow and sunken. Her hair was long, stringy and black.

The woman visited Glenda every night for a week... then she left and never returned.

So when winter arrives and its icy breath starts to creep across your town, beware of the woman in the window.



BLOODY MARY FOREVER

“That’s the dumbest thing I have ever heard!” exclaimed Kevin.

“Okay then, if it’s so dumb then why don’t you do it?” Taylor stood with his arms folded, testing his brother’s bravery.

“Fine!” Kevin marched into the bathroom and turned on the light. “Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary!” he shouted. “I’ll even say it more! Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary... Bloody Mary times INFINITY! Bloody Mary FOREVER!”

Kevin paused for a moment, gazing into the bathroom mirror. He then turned to his brother with a confident smile. “See... I told you, dumbest thing ever.”

“I don’t think that was a good idea...”

“Taylor, Bloody Mary isn’t real, just like any other ghost or monster.”

“Okay, whatever you say Kev, but don’t come screaming for my help when she shows up.”

Kevin chuckled, “Well if she does, I’ll tell her you’re looking for a girlfriend.” He then put his brother in a playful headlock and pulled him out of the bathroom.

...

Later that night, Kevin was sleeping in bed when he heard a strange shuffling coming from the downstairs bathroom.

“Taylor? Is that you?” Kevin slowly got out of bed and approached the sound.

“*Keeeevvvinnnn....*” a low guttural whisper cut through the silence of the night. “*Keeeevvviiinnnn....*”

Kevin rolled his eyes, “Very funny, Taylor. I’m not falling for it. Good try though.”

“*Kevvviinn.. come down here so I can eat your souuuulllll*”

“Oh yeah Taylor? How about I dunk your head in the toilet?”

Silence.

Kevin took a few steps down the stairs and waited for a response. He looked down at the bathroom entrance. It was too dark to make anything out, but he thought he saw something move, the shadowy figure of a woman.

“Mom?”

Darkness obscured most of its face, but then it slowly shifted into the single beam of moonlight coming from the window. Kevin could see long black hair, pale white skin, and a giant ghastly smile. It was definitely not his mother.

Kevin froze, he was completely paralyzed, wondering if he was in the middle of a nightmare.

The figure then let out a brief screech, and quickly dropped to its hands and knees, furiously crawling up the stairs like a rabid animal.

Kevin snapped out of his trance and rushed toward his bedroom, but the creature grabbed his leg and pulled him down, causing his head to violently smack against the hardwood floor. It hovered over him, its stringy black hair brushing against his face, saliva dripping down onto his neck.

“*Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary! Bloody Mary!*” it screamed in a gargled, broken voice. “*Bloody Mary Forever!*”

It then grabbed Kevin’s foot and dragged him screaming down the stairs into the darkness of the bathroom. The door slammed shut... and Kevin’s screams suddenly went quiet.



TEETH

The dentist examined Sarah's mouth intently. He then looked up to her mother. "I've never seen anything like this... not in 25 years... Okay Sarah, say ahhh."

Sarah opened her mouth again, revealing a set of normal teeth, with two additional sets of jagged, uneven teeth behind them.

"We need to take an X-ray to see what's really going on here."

The dentist directed Sarah into the X-ray room where she sat and waited. The entire time she could hear the dental assistants quietly talking down the hall.

"Did you see that girl with the extra teeth?" one of the assistants whispered.

The other assistant responded, trying to keep her voice down. "Yeah, poor kid. Strangest thing I've ever seen." They had no idea Sarah could hear them.

Tears welled in her eyes as the assistants walked into the room and started prepping Sarah for the X-ray.

"Okay Sarah, open your mouth and bite down on this piece of plastic."

The X-ray machine whirled around Sarah's head, snapping images from the front and sides of her jaw. She was then directed back to the examination room while the dentist looked over the puzzling snapshots of her toothy mandibles.

"I'll be honest, this is out of my ballpark," the dentist sighed and scratched his head, "there's a specialist up north I can send you to. He deals with deformities of the jaw and mouth. The good thing is everything is working just fine. I'm not seeing anything

that would be an anatomical problem. Maybe you just have some extra teeth and it's as simple as that."

On the way home Sarah sat in the passenger seat with tears streaming down her cheeks. "Mom, why am I so different?"

"Oh honey, you're not. You have some extra teeth, so what? You heard the dentist, it's not negatively affecting you."

"But the other kids make fun of me. They call me 'Shark Girl.'"

"Sarah you're still so young. You're just in that weird awkward phase that everyone goes through. We'll get your teeth fixed, let's just see what the specialist says."

Sarah pulled the car visor down to look in the mirror, the extra teeth had popped up about six months ago, just after her 13th birthday, and nobody had any answers as to why or how that could occur. Even more alarming is they seemed to still be growing.

Eventually, the day came for Sarah and her mom to meet with the specialist. After a quick examination, the doctor said she had an advanced form of something called "hyperdontia," which is simply when someone grows extra teeth. The teeth could be removed, but the surgery would be painful and costly, so the doctor advised to wait just a bit longer to see how Sarah's condition progressed.

That night, as Sarah was examining her dental dilemma, she noticed a red bump on her forehead. "Oh great, now I have a giant pimple too?"

Taking her two index fingers, she squeezed the red lump, hoping for a glorious pop, and spritz of white pus. But the lump was incredibly hard, like a cyst, but even harder.

Determined as ever, Sarah grabbed a safety pin and tried to poke it, but it was like poking bone. She tried one more time with her index fingers, squeezing with all her might. She was squeezing

so hard that her fingernails were scraping away the top layer of skin... and that's when she saw it... a small sliver of white peeking out from her epidermis... it was a tooth.

"No, no, no... that can't be. This can't happen! Please, no!"

Sarah fell to the floor crying. "How is this possible!" she cried out. "How is a tooth growing on my forehead?" Her tears then suddenly stopped as another horrifying realization struck her... Where else could they be growing?

Sarah immediately started to examine every inch of her body. Her hands diligently searching for anything out of the ordinary. Then, as her fingers scanned the back of her shoulder, she felt something that made her stomach twist and drop... a large cluster of molars was growing out of her scapula. Then, as her shaking hands continued the examination, she found more sickening clusters of jagged misshapen teeth on her upper spine, lower back, and her left rib cage.

Sarah could barely breathe; her heart was pounding against her chest so hard it felt like it might explode. Panic was taking over her body.

"Mom!" she screamed. "Mom, please come here quick!"

Sarah's mom rushed to the bathroom to find Sarah lying on the tile, sobbing.

"What's wrong!"

Sarah could barely form words between her cries. "*Teeth...* teeth are growing all over my body!" She then pointed to the disgusting, gnarled molars on her shoulder.

Sarah's mom covered her mouth in concern and horror, "Oh Sarah..." She immediately knelt down on the floor and took her daughter in her arms. "We're going to fix this, I promise you."



...

A week later Sarah was lying on an operating table, completely sedated. She now had clusters of teeth growing on her arms, legs, and stomach. The doctors had started giving her a special medicine that was supposed to stop excess bone growth, but for the teeth that already existed, they were going to have to surgically remove them.

The surgeon looked at Sarah's tooth-covered body and decided on a game plan, "Okay let's start with the ones on the stomach, those are going to be the most difficult."

The surgical assistant started to prep the incision area with an iodine solution, but as soon as she passed over the site, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Um, there seems to be some type of large cavity or hollow pocket under the skin right here."

"What do you mean a hollow pocket?" the surgeon asked as his latex gloves snapped on.

"There's some type of large hole in her abdomen."

The surgeon placed his hand on the area and applied pressure. "That's incredibly strange, it almost feels like... no, that can't be..."

"What is it, doctor?"

"I'm going to make my first incision right here." The surgeon was handed a scalpel. He slowly lowered it down to the skin and let the blade sink in. "This is going to sound crazy, but it felt like there was a large, fully formed mou—AhhAhhhhhhhhh!

The small incision suddenly split open to reveal a huge gaping maw, a completely developed mouth, lined with jagged, grotesque teeth, and a long slithering tongue that quickly wrapped around the surgeon's wrist pulling it towards the gnarled, deformed fangs.

The surgeon tried to pull away. But as soon as his hand was close enough, the mouth clamped down hard causing a sickening crunch of bone. As the surgeon shook himself free, he looked down in horror to see his hand had been bitten clean off.

He fell to the floor in shock, as the surgical assistants and everyone in the room immediately backed away, screaming, and scrambling for the door.

The surgeon crawled to the wall and grabbed the edge of a table with his remaining hand. He pulled himself up and immediately looked at the gruesome scene in front of him.

Sarah was still lying there completely unconscious, as the blood-soaked tongue slowly retreated into the disgusting open mouth that had grown inside her abdomen.

The mouth then closed, clenched its jagged teeth, and contorted itself into a ghastly, crooked smile.



THE SHORTCUT

“We’re going to be late!” Jennifer sat in the passenger seat with her arms crossed.

“I swear we’re never on time for anything. It’s almost 8:30.”

Tommy jumped in the driver’s seat and quickly fired up the truck. “Don’t worry, I know a shortcut. We’ll get to the party on time. And who cares if we’re 5 or 10 minutes late.”

“It’s a surprise party, Tommy. It kind of defeats the purpose if we show up after the actual surprise.”

Tommy and Jennifer headed down the road. Tommy then took an unfamiliar turn.

“Where is this supposed shortcut?” Jennifer asked anxiously.

“Just past Joppa Road. It should cut our drive time by about 15 minutes.”

“Joppa? Seriously? That place creeps me out.”

Tommy smirked as he turned down the radio. “What’s the matter? You believe all those ridiculous stories... witches, black magic, all that nonsense?”

“It’s just a creepy place. Have you ever seen that old abandoned church? They haven’t even bothered to tear it down.”

Tommy laughed. “Okay, I’ll drive by it fast.”

The couple continued driving until they came to an old road just off the interstate. The pavement had long worn away, leaving nothing but dirt.

“Are you sure about this?” Jennifer was growing increasingly uncomfortable.

“Just trust me. If you want to get to the party on time, this is our only option.”

Tommy turned onto the road. The truck’s headlights illuminated the dead oaks that framed the path like a corridor. Beyond them, an increasing black void.

About two miles later, Tommy’s truck suddenly died.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Tommy. Please tell me the truck didn’t just die.” Jennifer glared at her boyfriend with a mix of annoyance and fear.

“Gotcha!” Tommy laughed. “Oh, you should have seen the look on your face! Priceless! I’m sorry babe, I had to.”

Jennifer scowled, “That’s not even the slightest bit funny. Please let’s just go.”

“Okay, okay... I’m sorry.” Tommy turned the keys, but the ignition wouldn’t turn over. “Come on, you piece of junk!”

“I told you this isn’t funny!”

Tommy continued trying to start the truck. “No, this isn’t a joke. The truck won’t start. Just hold on. Let me pop the hood and see what’s going on. It might be the battery.”

Tommy hopped out of the truck and opened the hood.

“You know this is exactly how horror movies start right?”

Jennifer was now more angry than scared.

But Tommy didn’t respond.

“Tommy?”

Again, no response, not a sound except the wind howling through the trees. Jennifer reluctantly opened the door, stuck her head out, and peered toward the front of the truck. Tommy wasn’t there.

“Tommy, please! You’re really scaring me. I’ve had enough of you messing around.” But she was met again with cold silence. She was beginning to get worried. With a deep breath, Jennifer placed her feet on the road and climbed out of the truck. She checked everywhere in the area for Tommy, but she saw no signs of him. She was sure he wouldn’t have just wandered off alone.

Jennifer continued to call Tommy’s name, but he was nowhere to be found. She reached into her pocket for her cell phone. No signal.

“Okay, stay calm, Jennifer,” she told herself. “Just stay with the truck until someone else comes along.”

Jennifer sat in the truck for half an hour, but no one ever came. She was all alone.

Her only option was to walk until she found a place with a cell phone signal. With great reluctance, she left the truck and walked down the pitch-black road on her way back to the interstate.

After 20 minutes, Jennifer saw the place that creeped her out the most. The old, abandoned church. She put her head down and

tried to quickly trek past it, but a glint of light from the window caught her eye.

She glared at the church. Its tattered wood panels and broken stained glass loomed in front of her.

She slowly walked up to the front gate, graffiti and other strange symbols littered the large wooden entrance.

She could hear something inside.

The rusted hinges screamed as she slowly opened the door.

“Hello?”

Silence. The room she had walked into was the worship area of the church. Beams of light from an unusually bright full moon flooded through the broken windows. They illuminated the rotting pews that led up to a large black altar, where the flame of a single red candle was flickering in the air.

In the corner of her eye, Jennifer spotted something moving quickly through the shadows, but before she could even turn her head, there was a brief, sharp pain, and then everything went black.

...

Blurred lights danced across Jennifer’s eyes as she slowly regained consciousness. As her vision cleared, she immediately recognized she was surrounded by burning candles, and even worse, she was hanging upside down with her arms tied behind her back, and thick duct tape covering her mouth so she couldn’t scream.

Cloaked figures were slowly moving about the dimly lit room. They seemed to be preparing for some type of feast or ritual...

One of the figures turned to Jennifer and slowly removed its hood. It was an old woman, her eyes sunken and black, her hair wispy and white.

“Looks like our guest of honor is awake,” she hissed. “You did well Tommy, she looks much tastier than the last one.”

Another figure immediately stopped and nodded; the outline of Tommy’s face visible in the candlelight.

Jennifer immediately started screaming through the tape, the muffled sound echoing through the underground lair.

The old woman smiled at Jennifer with black rotting teeth.

“You’re right on time, my dear. Surprise.”

NO SWIMMING

It was the middle of August, and the Midwestern heat was almost unbearable.

Luke wiped the sweat from his brow and took a big gulp of soda.

“I can’t take it anymore. It’s 97 degrees and feels even hotter than that. We have to go swimming or something.”

Isaac agreed. “What about that pond over by Mr. Riley’s house? It’s the closest thing around.”

Luke hesitated. “I don’t know, man. I heard he doesn’t let anyone near that pond. There’s a bunch of no trespassing signs and no swimming signs all over the property.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Fine, let’s go.” Luke finished his soda, and the two headed down the road.

The two took a little-known path through the woods and hopped the fence at the edge of Mr. Riley’s property.

Luke glared at the gigantic “No Swimming” sign posted next to the water’s entrance.

“Luke, let’s go,” Isaac beckoned.

The two jumped in the water. It was the perfect temperature, cool and refreshing.

Isaac floated blissfully on his back. “Ah, this is exactly what we needed.”

Suddenly the two heard screaming from the edge of the water. It was Mr. Riley. He looked more terrified than angry. “Boys! Get out of the water now! Swim! Hurry!”



Luke heard a loud splash about 50 feet away. A large, webbed fin was headed toward them, and giant tentacle-like whiskers protruded from the water.

“Isaac! Swim!”

The two boys kicked as hard and as fast as they possibly could, trying to reach the small dock where Mr. Riley was standing.

Luke was well ahead of Isaac. The fin grew closer and closer, and then it disappeared beneath the water.

“We’re almost there, swim faster!”

There was a loud splash and a blood-curdling scream. Isaac disappeared.

Mr. Riley continued to yell. Luke was almost to the dock, his heart pumping in panic.

Mr. Riley knelt down and reached out. “Grab my hand!”

Luke extended his arm, grasping for help. Just as he grabbed onto Mr. Riley another splash erupted next to the dock.

Mr. Riley fell backward and looked down in horror.

He was holding on to Luke’s arm, but the rest of him was gone.

PRETTY PUMPKINS

Splat!

The baseball bat smashed through the pumpkin with ease, sending orange and yellow chunks in every direction.

“That’s a home run.” Steve smiled in satisfaction.

It was just before midnight on Halloween. The streets were silent, and the trick-or-treaters had long gone home. But not Steve and his friends. They still had a few tricks to play. Every year they would meet up and cause havoc around the neighborhood, destroying mailboxes, egging houses, and tossing toilet paper all through the trees. But their favorite activity by far was smashing pumpkins.

The more time someone spent carving their pumpkin, the more Steve and his friends enjoyed disposing of it. It was a thrill to them, the same as destroying an expensive piece of art. And this year, Steve had his eyes set on the biggest prize of them all: the pumpkins of Mrs. Black.

Mrs. Black’s husband had died about 8 years ago, and ever since then people rarely saw her in public. In fact, many had forgotten what she even looked like. This of course had led to a myriad of neighborhood rumors and urban legends. People said she was a witch, that she accidentally killed her husband with black magic, and that she would lure children into her house and eat them. But these were all just stories.

The way her house looked was enough to keep most people away. It sat behind a large black gate, and its white paint had turned to a weathered, dirty grey, and many of the windows were covered in dust and grime.



But every Halloween, Mrs. Black would carve the most elaborate pumpkins anyone had ever seen. There would be tons of them lining her porch. Some took the shape of flowers, others looked like a field of stars scattered across the October sky. It was an amazing sight, and every evening people would walk by her house just to marvel at her masterpieces.

Steve and his friends never had the courage to destroy one of Mrs. Black's pumpkins, and it was almost an unwritten rule that they left them alone. But this year was different.

Steve had his eye on one right in the middle. A skull had been carved into it, but not a scary type of skull. This one had intricate patterns and symbols etched all over. It was oddly beautiful and looked almost real. It was the perfect target.

Steve and his friends walked up to the tall black gate. It stood over them as a warning.

"I don't know about this, Steve." one of the boys whispered. "This place gives me the creeps."

"You're not the one doing it, Gary. Just keep a lookout."

Steve quickly climbed to the top of the gate and then pulled himself up and over.

He dropped down onto Mrs. Black's property and instantly his heart started racing. There was no going back now. Steve took a few steps forward and looked in the windows. It was pitch black, almost as if there was nothing inside the house at all.

As Steve walked up to the porch, the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. There was no moonlight this Halloween, but the flicker of the candles inside the pumpkins cast a strange orange glow over the area.

Steve looked on in amazement. There had to be about 50 of them, and each one was a work of absolute perfection. His eyes then locked onto the one he came for.

He crept onto the porch and carefully lifted it. He gazed into its warm, luminous eyes. And with a quick breath he blew the candle out. The smoke slowly drifted from the pumpkin's mouth, almost as if its spirit had just been extinguished.

Steve smiled; his mission was almost complete. But as he walked back toward the gate, he paused. An odd sensation tingled on the back of his neck, his stomach knotted, and goosebumps erupted from his skin. Someone was watching him. He could *feel* it. But when he turned around, all he saw in the windows was darkness.

Steve climbed to the top of the fence and carefully handed the pumpkin down to the others.

"I've got something special for this one," he said with a grin.

Once Steve got over the fence the four boys ran back to the center of the neighborhood, where Steve pulled a glossy red object from his pocket.

"Is that an M-80?" Gary asked.

Steve smirked. "This is an M-1000. It's way more powerful, almost like dynamite. I took it from my dad's garage."

Steve sat the skull pumpkin on the ground. "Okay guys, you ready?"

The three other boys looked around apprehensively.

Steve pulled his lighter out and put the flame to the fuse. It started to burn and hiss. He quickly placed the M-1000 into the mouth of the pumpkin and sprinted away.

"RUN!"

The boys scattered as fast as they could. About 10 seconds later a thunderous CRACK echoed down the block. Chunks of orange and yellow rained down in every direction.

Knowing they probably woke up the entire neighborhood, the boys just kept running until they each got home. Halloween was officially over.

The next day Gary heard a knock at the door. He walked downstairs and peeked through the window. It was the Sheriff.

Gary's stomach dropped. Someone must have seen them last night. What were his parents going to say? How much trouble was he going to be in?

Gary slowly opened the door.

"Hey Gary, sorry to bother you, but were you hanging out with Steve last night? I know you two run around together."

He hesitated. "Uh...no. I haven't seen him. I stayed home last night. Not really into the whole trick or treat thing anymore."

The Sheriff surprisingly didn't question Gary's lie.

"Okay, well if you hear from him let me know. His parents are worried sick. He didn't come home last night."

"He didn't?"

"You kids are always running off somewhere, I'm sure he'll pop up."

The Sheriff started walking back to his car. "Tell your mom and dad I said hello."

"Okay, I will." Gary shut the door and immediately went to grab his jacket.

Gary ran out the back and hopped on his bike. First, he rode to where the pumpkin exploded, then to the creek, and to every spot he and Steve normally hung out. But Steve was nowhere to be found.

Gary spent all day and into the evening riding through the neighborhood thinking about where his friend could be. But when he was just about to give up, he remembered there was one more place to look.

Gary slowly rode up to Mrs. Black's house. He could barely see anything; yet again the moon was absent from the night sky. He walked up to the gate and looked across the front yard to the line of pumpkins still sitting on the porch.

Only one of them was illuminated. The flame of the candle danced from behind its jagged, hollowed-out facial features. But this pumpkin looked... different.

Gary strained his eyes trying to peer through the darkness, and that's when he realized it wasn't a pumpkin at all.

It was Steve's head, sitting in the same spot as the pumpkin they had stolen the night before.

HUNGRY CATS

“Cats are way better than dogs,” Jasmine said as she played with one of the kittens at the local animal shelter.

“No, they’re definitely not,” Emma quickly shot back as a small puppy was playfully biting at her hand.

“Cats are easier to take care of. They’re cleaner. They’re more independent. Dogs are almost like small children. It’s just too much responsibility.”

Jasmine started laughing as the kitten rolled on its back and pawed at her sleeve.

“Plus look at how cute they are! I think I’m going to adopt this one.”

Emma put the puppy back in its cage.

“Yeah well, have you heard that cats eat their owners?”

Jasmine scowled. “What? That’s ridiculous. They do not.”

“You didn’t hear that story?” Emma walked over and gazed down at all the cats looking at her from behind their cages.

“A few months back an old lady had a heart attack in her kitchen and died right there on the floor. About a week later, her son came to visit and when he opened the door, he was horrified to find her three cats feeding on her corpse. True story. I promise.”

Jasmine rolled her eyes, “I don’t believe it. Look at this cute little face. He would never do that. I think I’m going to name him Winston.”

Emma shrugged. “Okay, I’m just letting you know what I heard.”



Later that night, Jasmine was playing with Winston upstairs and introducing him to her other cat, Francis. They were getting along perfectly.

“Okay you two, time for dinner.”

Jasmine started toward the stairs, but just as she stepped down, Francis brushed against her leg and she tripped.

She screamed as she violently tumbled down the stairs. Her head cracked against the last step, gashing open her forehead and knocking her out cold.

Jasmine was unconscious for two whole days.

She finally awoke to the sound of purring next to her ear.

Her eyes slowly opened. Francis was licking the dried blood from her forehead wound. She then looked down to her hand. Winston was nibbling on her ring finger. Her thumb and pinky had been eaten down to the bone.

THE SEED

“This is the most delicious fruit I’ve ever eaten. What is it?” Blue juice erupted from the fruit’s skin as Zoey took another bite.

“I’m not sure.” Olivia grabbed one from the box they came in and examined it closely. “My mom sent them to me,” she said, “they’re from somewhere near the Congo River. I forget the exact place.”

Zoey took another juice-filled bite. “Your mom has the coolest job ever, traveling around the world doing medical research, seeing new places, eating new foods.”

“Yeah, I just wish she was home more often.”

Suddenly Zoey started to cough violently.

“Are you okay?” Olivia quickly filled a glass of water and handed it to Zoey.

“Yeah... I’m fine. It just went down the wrong pipe.” Zoey’s coughing subsided and was replaced with a slight chuckle. “I ate that fruit so fast I think I inhaled the big seed in the middle.”

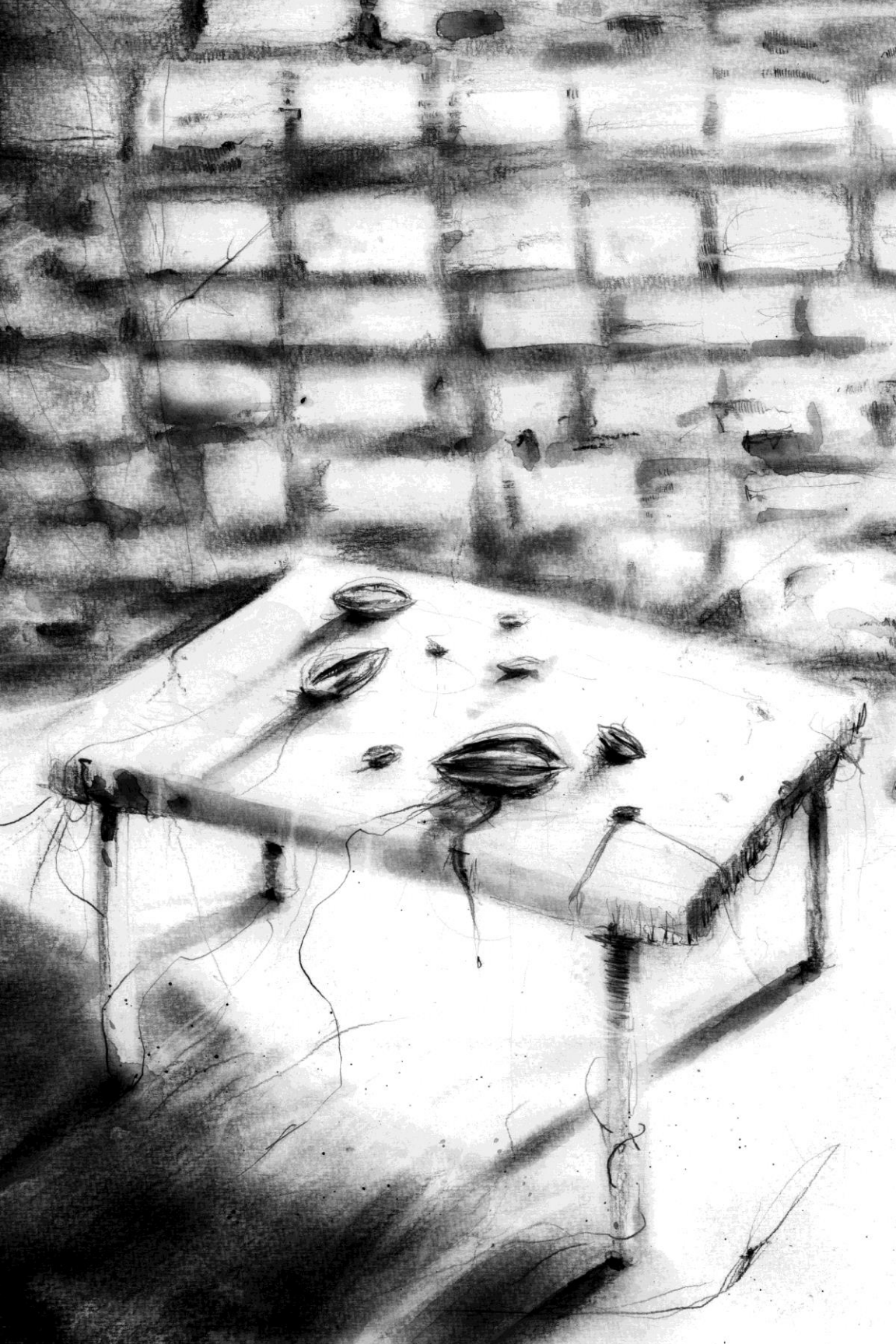
The next day Olivia was sitting on the couch watching TV when her cell phone started ringing. The number came up as “Unknown,” so she ignored it.

About two minutes later her phone started buzzing, and again, it came up as “Unknown.” Still, she ignored it.

A voicemail notification soon popped up, so Olivia pressed it and put the phone to her ear.

The voice on the recording was frantic, and fearful, but it was definitely her mom. Olivia had never heard her this panicked.

“Olivia it’s your mom. I’m calling from a hospital. Do not eat that fruit I sent you! Please answer. Again, DO NOT eat the fruit.



If you did, go immediately to the emergency room! Don't waste any time!"

Olivia almost dropped the phone. She hadn't tried the fruit yet, but Zoey had. Her friend had basically swallowed one whole.

She dialed Zoey's number. No answer.

Olivia quickly fired off a text message, "Please Zoey, call me back. It's an emergency."

She tried to call again. Still no answer.

Olivia rushed out the front door and sprinted toward Zoey's house. Her lungs burned as she ran, hoping her friend was okay.

When she reached Zoey's house, she burst into the entryway yelling Zoey's name.

"Zoey! Are you here?"

She ran up the stairs. "Zoey!"

Olivia ripped open the door to her bedroom.

Zoey was sitting on the bed casually looking at her computer, a pair of headphones pressed against her ears.

Olivia pulled them off. "Zoey! Are you okay?"

Zoey looked incredibly confused. "Uh yeah, what's going on?"

Olivia put her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. "My mom... she said there was something wrong with the fruit you ate... you need to go to the hospital right now."

"I feel absolutely fine."

"Let's go to the doctor anyway. Just in case. My mom sounded extremely worried."

Zoey shut her laptop and stood up from the bed. "Okay, I guess I'll go."

As Zoey turned to grab her jacket, Olivia noticed something on the side of her friend's neck.

"Zoey, what is that?"

"What?"

“That thing on your neck.”

Zoey walked over to the mirror. A large blueish boil was protruding from her skin.

Zoey screamed, “What is that!”

She slowly raised her hand and touched it with her index finger. The boil suddenly popped, making a disgusting gurgle.

Zoey then passed out and dropped to the floor.

Olivia rushed to her friend’s side, she looked down at her neck. A small green vine had sprouted from under her skin.

Olivia tried to wake Zoey up, but as she shook her, she heard more of those disgusting gurgles. She brushed back Zoey’s hair to see nearly a hundred blue boils scattered across her shoulders and back.

Something was growing underneath Zoey’s skin and she needed to get to the hospital before it was too late.

Author’s note: You may have heard that ingesting a seed can’t hurt you. But consider the 2010 case of a Massachusetts man who had carelessly eaten some peas. After going to the hospital several times complaining of chest pains and spurts of violent coughing, doctors eventually found a small growth inside his lungs. That growth turned out to be a small pea plant, sprouting from a pea that went down the wrong pipe. Be careful what you eat.

MR. SMILEY

It was just after 2 AM. Emily lowered her coffee cup and casually glanced out the window. She paused, then squinted her eyes trying to get a better look. “Do you see that man across the street?”

Her friend Hannah took another bite of her cheeseburger and looked over. All she saw was the glow of a lone streetlight in front of the 24-hour diner they were in. “What man? I don’t see anyone.”

Emily’s eyes were fixated on the road. “You don’t see the man out there? He’s wearing a yellow suit. You can’t really miss him.”

Hannah smirked. “Emily, there’s nobody out there. I promise.”

Emily looked back outside. Her eyes widened. “Hannah the man is *right* there. He’s under the streetlight now. He’s holding flowers or something in his hand!”

Hannah rolled her eyes, “Is this a joke? There is definitely *not* a man outside. Stop trying to scare me.”

Emily stood up. “I’m not trying to scare you!” She rushed over to the waitress standing next to the cash register.

“Ma’am, do you see a man standing outside? He’s in a yellow suit and holding flowers.”

The confused waitress looked over Emily’s shoulder towards the window. “I don’t see anyone hun.”

Emily turned around. The man was standing just outside the window glaring right at her. He was holding a bouquet of dead, yellowish tulips. His mouth was twisted into a hideous grin. “He’s right outside the window! How can you not see him!”

Emily started to tremble as tears welled in her eyes.



Hannah got up and grabbed her shoulders. “Emily! Calm down. You’re being delusional. What is wrong with you?”

Emily, shaking with fear, looked over Hannah’s shoulder and nearly fell to the floor. “Hannah! He’s inside the diner!”

Emily grabbed Hannah’s arm and pulled her towards the door. As she rushed outside she heard Hannah drop to the ground behind her.

Emily turned around to see Hannah’s lifeless body lying on the pavement. In her hand was a bouquet of dead, yellow tulips.

THE FLY

Mr. Anderson lifted a large display of dead insects onto his desk and pointed to the lower right-hand corner. His 7th grade science class loved his demonstrations.

“This one is called a botfly,” he began, “and it’s one of the nastiest insects on Earth. At least in my opinion.”

Logan leaned forward to get a better look. “It looks like a normal fly to me, just a bit bigger.”

His friend Drew was equally unimpressed. “Yeah, what’s the big deal?”

Mr. Anderson smiled. “Well boys, do you really want to know?”

Logan and Drew nodded together.

“Botfly larvae are parasites. And this particular species loves humans. See, the female deposits the eggs directly onto the skin, or in some cases, attaches them to a mosquito or tick for an even nastier delivery. Once the larvae hatch, they immediately start burrowing deep into the flesh, where they continue to feed on you from the inside.”

The thought alone turned Logan’s stomach. “That is absolutely disgusting.”

Mr. Anderson laughed. “You’re right. Now imagine 50 of these things creeping around in your skin. That’s a botfly infestation, and it happens all the time.”

The mental image caused Logan to turn a pale white.

Mr. Anderson quickly realized he may have gone too far with the story. “Okay class, that’s enough about the botfly. Logan, why don’t you get a drink of water.”



For weeks after that, Logan constantly checked himself for botflies. He was terrified of the thought, and any blemish or mark that showed up on his skin caused him to fly into paranoia.

Then one morning he woke up and found a large itchy bump on his arm. He instantly thought the worst. When he got to school, he immediately showed Drew, who only teased him.

“Yep, it’s a botfly all right, just think it’s probably eating your flesh right now.”

Logan looked down at his arm. “Seriously though, what if it is? I need to find Mr. Anderson right now.”

Mr. Anderson was alone in his classroom grading papers when Logan and Drew walked in.

Without saying a word, Logan stuck his arm right in Mr. Anderson’s face.

“Logan, for the last time, that’s not a botfly. It’s a mosquito bite. Botflies are mainly in South America. You’ve got to quit doing this.”

Logan peered down at the red bump, “Are you sure?”

Mr. Anderson sighed. “I’m 100% positive, now get to the class you’re supposed to be in.”

As Logan and Drew walked out the door, Mr. Anderson sat back in his chair and scratched the side of his head, wondering how two kids could be so strange.

But then he felt something... odd.

Mr. Anderson immediately got up and walked to the restroom across the hall. He looked in the mirror and brushed away some of his hair to reveal a massive red lump with a bloody hole in the middle.

His fingers trembling, Mr. Anderson lightly pressed on the fleshy crater. A small wormlike larva sprouted from his skin, and then quickly disappeared.

Author's note: Some may tell you the creatures mentioned in these stories are fictional, but I can tell you with 100% certainty that the botfly is real. So sleep tight, don't let the botflies bite.

THE CREEPER

Sarah quickly sat up in bed. A strange sound had awoken her, but she couldn't quite make out what it was. She looked over at her clock. 3:33 AM.

She sat there for a second, wondering if she had just imagined the noise, or if it was part of a dream. But then she heard it again: an odd scratching sound from near her window.

She rose in bed, trying to rationalize what it might be. Maybe a tree branch was brushing up against the glass? That had to be it. She slowly pulled open the blinds and peered outside. Nothing. She tried her best to put it out of her mind while she dozed back to sleep.

The next night, she was again woken by the scratching sound, but this time it seemed to be at her bedroom door. No way was that a tree branch. She again looked over at the clock. 3:33.

"Who's there!" she yelled. The scratching immediately stopped as if someone - or something - was listening. Wide-eyed and gripped by fear, Sarah sat completely motionless in bed, but after a while, she was able to lie back down and fall asleep.

On the third night, she tried to stay up, waiting to see if the noise returned. But at around 2:45 AM, her eyelids became heavy, and she could barely hold them open. Five minutes later she was fast asleep.

Once again, the noise roused her from slumber. This time it seemed closer than ever. Was it in her room? She looked to the clock. 3:33. She then heard it again. Even closer - it was right next to her.

Movement drew her eyes to the bedroom door, where a dark, ominous shadow was standing. It had large, empty black eyes, and two large fangs that seemed to be dripping with saliva. It quietly crept up to the bed where its nails scratched at the wooden bedpost, just like the sound she'd heard for the past three nights.

Sarah wanted to scream but couldn't. The creature slowly crawled up onto the mattress. It moved like a cat stalking its prey. Then, with a gurgling hiss, it lunged forward and sank its teeth into her neck.

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But... instead of the sweet taste of warm human blood, the creature tasted cotton and plastic. It tilted its head to the side, confused, then violently ripped off the sheets. The tasty snack it had been expecting was a makeshift body made of rolled-up clothes and a mannequin head.

The creature bared its jagged teeth and hissed in anger, it then noticed movement from the corner of its eye, but it couldn't react fast enough... a sickening squelch rang through the bedroom as Sarah smashed the creature's head with a baseball bat.

She had been sleeping *under* the bed that night, waiting for whatever was stalking her to make its move.

Sarah swung as hard as she could, over and over and over again, screaming at the top of her lungs. And by the time she was done, the creature's head was nothing but a disgusting pile of green mush.

"The Creeper," as the news later called it, had simply picked the wrong girl to creep.



FEEDING TIME

Dylan's leg was quickly swinging back and forth as he waited in the car, something he did when he was incredibly nervous.

It was Friday night, and Brooke Taylor had finally agreed to go on a date with him. She was easily the prettiest girl in school and never went out with anyone.

Dylan looked over to see Brooke walking down her driveway. She looked absolutely gorgeous.

She opened the door and hopped in. "Hey! Thanks for coming to get me."

Dylan smiled nervously. "No problem at all."

Brooke shut the door and the two started down the road. "Just so you know, I have to be home before 11:30 or my parents will kill me."

Dylan glanced down at his watch. "That's perfect. It's a pretty short movie, should have you back around 11. And speaking of the movie, are you ready for this?"

Brooke smiled with excitement. "Oh my gosh I heard it's terrifying. Abbie couldn't even make it all the way through and had to leave."

Dylan laughed, trying to hide the fact he hated horror movies, but everyone had been talking about it at school, and he thought it would be the perfect date.

He was right. All through the movie Brooke was grabbing onto his arm and hiding her eyes on his shoulder during the scariest parts.

The two left the theater hand in hand. The date couldn't have gone any better.



“You wanna go get some ice cream or something?”

Brooke looked down at her phone. 10:47 PM. “I would, but I really have to get home, you don’t know how crazy my parents can be.”

Dylan thought it was worth a try, but he was happy ending the night while he was ahead.

As the two drove back to Brooke’s house, Dylan heard a low growl coming from Brooke.

She put her hand on her stomach; her face turned red with embarrassment. “Sorry, I haven’t eaten much today, my stomach is rumbling big time.”

POP!

The car swerved hard to the right and Dylan slammed on the brakes. “Well... I don’t think *that* was your stomach.”

He got out of the car and walked to the passenger side.

“It’s the tire, must have run over a nail or something.” Dylan popped the trunk. “Don’t worry I’ll just throw on the spare.”

Brooke looked at her phone again, 11:13 PM. “Okay just hurry up, I absolutely have to be home by 11:30.”

Dylan put the tire iron on the first lug nut and twisted as hard as he could. It wouldn’t budge.

11:19 PM

Brooke was oddly panicked. “Dylan hurry please!”

Dylan finally got the lug nut off and moved on to the second, and the third.

11:26 PM

“We have to leave NOW!” Brooke screamed from the window.

Dylan finally lost his patience. “Calm down! I’m moving as fast as I can!”

A grizzled moan exploded from the passenger seat. The door swung open and Brooke dropped to the pavement, writhing in pain.

11:29 PM

Dylan rushed to her side, she was clutching onto her stomach, her legs kicking uncontrollably.

11:30 PM

Brooke went completely still, her body lying motionless on the pavement.

Dylan shook her arm. “Brooke... Brooke! Wake up!”

A horrific gurgle erupted from her stomach.

Dylan fell backward in terror.

Suddenly Brooke’s spine violently arched and her eyes rolled back into her head.

Her arms and legs raised her body off the pavement. She started lumbering towards Dylan in a mangled, crab-like walk.

Dylan pulled himself up into the passenger seat, frantically trying to get away. As he reached toward the steering wheel on the other side, a sharp pain pierced through his leg.

Dylan’s skin turned white as he looked down. Brooke’s stomach had ripped open, sprouting hundreds of razor-like teeth. The mouth dug its fangs deep into Dylan’s flesh and yanked him from the car.

Brooke’s gangly body hovered over him. Her head was turned completely backward.

Her cold, dead expression locked onto his eyes as a broken, garbled voice seeped from her lips. *“I told you I had to be home at 11:30. This is why I never go on dates.”*

I TOLD YOU SO

“Levi, that’s ridiculous.” Audrey rolled her eyes and walked down the stairs.

Her brother chased after her. “No, it’s not! Have you ever seen her out during the day?”

Audrey was barely paying attention to him. “She’s in the night school program.”

“Exactly! And have you ever seen anyone else at her house besides her parents?”

“She just moved to town and hasn’t made any friends yet.”

“What about her skin! It’s all pale and white!”

“So what? Maybe she’s just sensitive to the sun.”

Levi followed his sister into the kitchen. “I’m telling you Audrey, our neighbor is a vampire, and I’m going to prove it to you.”

Audrey grabbed her backpack and headed towards the door. “Well, if you’re going to prove it, you better do so soon. I’m staying over at her house tomorrow night.”

Levi nearly jumped out of his skin. “You can’t do that!”

“I can and I will. See you at school.”

Later that evening, Levi decided he was going to settle this once and for all. He bought a cake from the bakery down the street and covered it with garlic. He then added an extra layer of peanut butter and chocolate icing to hide his secret ingredient.

He then cautiously walked up to the neighbor’s house and rang the doorbell.

A 17-year-old girl soon answered. She had long jet-black hair, black lipstick, and black clothing from head to toe.



It contrasted sharply with her milky white skin. “Oh hey!” she said. “You’re Audrey’s little brother, right? I’m Victoria.”

Levi could barely speak, “Umm... yeah, my mom made this cake for you... as a welcome gift.”

Victoria smiled as Levi handed it to her.

“Well thank you very much! I love chocolate!” Victoria paused for a moment. “Hey, this doesn’t have anything else in it, right? Just chocolate? I have some really weird food allergies.”

Levi’s stomach dropped. “Uh, no... nothing but chocolate.”

“Okay great! Tell your sister I’ll see her tomorrow night.”

Levi started walking back towards the street, “Okay, I will.”

As soon as Victoria shut the door, Levi sprinted back to his house. He couldn’t believe his plan worked. Now all that was left to do was wait. No vampire could survive eating a cake full of garlic!

Levi sat in his room wondering what would happen, but after several hours he dozed off.

The next morning Levi awoke to the sound of crying.

He rushed downstairs to see what was wrong. Audrey was sitting on the couch with tears streaming down her face.

“What’s wrong?”

Audrey wiped her cheeks, barely able to speak.

“I just got a horrible phone call. Victoria *died* last night.”

Levi’s eyes widened. “Garlic poisoning?”

Audrey scowled, “What? No! Someone gave her a cake with peanut butter in it. She was deathly allergic to peanuts.”



THE SLOTH

The Sloth is coming for you...

It has razors for claws, sometimes three, sometimes two.

It lives in the trees and hunts at night,
Looking for children to mangle and bite.

It may be slow, but it's deadly quiet.
So don't go in the woods, don't even try it.

You won't hear it coming, not even a peep,
Because it doesn't run, and it doesn't leap.

It creeps from behind, stalking its prey,
It wants your flesh, your skin to flay.

When it finally grabs you, you'll pray for your mother,
Because the Sloth eats slowly, and you're going to suffer.

ZOO

Jack hated his job.

He was an overnight security guard at the city zoo, and while he loved animals, the zoo took on a completely different persona at night. Gone were the laughing children and smiling parents. Even the bright colors of the exhibits became grey and lifeless.

As one of two security guards on duty, Jack was often lonely. Even the animals were gone, tucked back into their after-hour enclosures.

The evening started out just like any other. Jack strolled around the park, pondering whether he would quit the next day. But as Jack walked by the gorilla exhibit, a rustling sound caught his attention.

He shined his flashlight into the enclosure and saw two females sitting on a large rock.

Jack immediately grabbed his radio. "Hey Stan, I've got two female gorillas out here. Is Joan working with them tonight? They should be inside."

Empty static was the only response.

"Stan, you there?"

Suddenly both females went crazy, beating their fists on the ground, screaming and hissing. Their eyes were fixated on the northeast corner of the exhibit.

Jack directed his flashlight toward that area. He thought he saw a silhouette standing there, but he couldn't be sure.

The gorillas continued going wild, moving further and further towards the opposite corner. Jack ran along the fence to get a better look at what had them so agitated.



The glint of his security light illuminated a pair of eyes. He could barely see it, but another gorilla must have gotten free.

Again, Jack tried his radio. "Stan, come in. We have three gorillas out here."

Finally, he received a response. "Jack, sorry about that I was taking lunch. I'll walk inside and check the pen, it's not the first time they've got out."

"Okay, thanks Stan. I'll keep an eye on them."

Jack continued to stare at the gorilla bathed in shadow. He could barely see it, but something about the animal's eyes just struck him as odd.

The radio buzzed. "Hey Jack, something's not right."

"What do you mean?"

"You say you have three gorillas out there right? Well there's two back here sitting in their pen."

"Okay, what's wrong with that?"

There was a long pause before Stan responded. "That's five. The zoo only has four gorillas."

Jack snapped his gaze to the northeast corner. Whatever was standing in the shadows was gone. "Hey Stan, you better get up here, we've got a situation."

A couple minutes later a loud crash echoed inside the food court about a hundred yards away. Jack drew his pistol and slowly walked towards the sound.

As he turned the corner, he saw Stan's body lying in a pool of blood.

"Stan!" Jack rushed over and gazed down. A large gash ran deep across Stan's forehead. He was alive, but barely.

A low growl rumbled from behind Jack's shoulder. He slowly turned to see a pair of yellow eyes glaring at him from the darkness.

The animal was deathly skinny; he could see its rib cage protruding from its skin. Its fur was patchy and uneven, and most of its teeth had rotted away, leaving a black, infected snarl.

It beat its fists into the ground and sprinted toward Jack, screeching as loud as it could.

Jack raised his gun and fired a bullet into the animal's chest, but it kept coming. Another shot went into its shoulder. It still didn't slow down. The creature leapt for Jack's throat. A third shot rang out, hitting the animal in the neck. It dropped lifelessly to the ground.

Jack could barely breathe, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He pulled out his phone and dialed 911.

The police arrived and the paramedics took Stan to the hospital. Jack sat off to the side, he could barely believe what just happened.

One of the officers walked over to him. "You okay?"

Jack's hands were still trembling. "Yeah... I'm fine. Just a little freaked out, I've never seen an animal like that before."

The police officer looked confused. "That wasn't an animal... it was a man."

Jack's eyes widened. "What do you mean it was a man?"

The police officer put his hand on Jack's shoulder. "It was a psych ward patient that went missing about three weeks ago. He'd been living in the zoo all along."

MR. WILSON

“He still hasn’t moved.” Jake peered over the wooden fence, looking at the brand-new baseball they had just knocked into Mr. Wilson’s yard.

Tim climbed up right next to him. “Are you sure? It’s been like two hours.”

“I’m telling you, he hasn’t even flinched. He just sits there staring at us.”

Old Man Wilson sat on his front porch glaring at the two boys. He wore dark glasses, a green, beat-up trucker hat, and tattered, worn overalls.

Another hour passed and Jake was growing impatient. “I’m just gonna go over there and ask for the ball.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “C’mon Jake, you know you can’t do that. Old Man Wilson has never let anyone in his yard. You remember Matt? He went over there and never came back. Danny said he was skinned alive.”

“That’s ridiculous. Matt moved to Mooresville. Danny doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Okay then, go ahead and go over there,” Tim dared.

“Fine, I will.” Jake started walking across the street, his eyes fixated on Old Man Wilson sitting in his chair. His skin was leathery, almost like wax, and his face was constantly crumpled into an angry scowl.

Jake suddenly turned around and walked back. “Let’s just wait until dark.”

Tim chuckled. “Yeah. That’s what I thought.”



A few more hours ticked away and night set in. The moon hung in the sky like a spotlight.

The two boys were still watching from across the street.

Tim squinted his eyes. “What if he’s asleep?”

Jake took a sip of soda. “What if he’s dead...”

“Okay here’s what we’re gonna do.” Jake pointed to the empty lot right next to Old Man Wilson’s property.

“He can’t watch both of us. You walk over to that empty lot, and I’ll head to the very end of the fence. You start making lots of noise, and that’s when I’ll jump over and grab the baseball. Got it?”

Tim stood up. “I got it.”

“Okay let’s do this.”

Jake snuck across the street to the edge of the fence. He crouched down waiting to hear Tim yelling and making a ruckus.

“Hey Old Man Wilson! Look over here!” Tim screamed at the top of his lungs.

Jake’s heart started racing. He pulled himself over the fence and dropped down into Old Man Wilson’s backyard.

He sprinted towards the baseball lying alone in the grass. Just as his hand touched it, a loud, raspy voice ripped through the air.

“Hey! Get out of my yard!”

Jake slowly turned his head expecting to see Old Man Wilson standing over him, but it was an old woman.

“Mrs. Wilson?”

The old woman took a few hobbled steps forward, aided by a large wooden cane. She was standing on the porch next to Old Man Wilson, who still hadn’t moved.

“You’ve got some nerve hopping that fence, boy.”

Jake didn’t know how to respond. “I... uh, I just wanted to get my baseball back.”

“Well grab it and get off my lawn.”

Jake picked the ball up and walked towards the front gate. He took a close look at Old Man Wilson as he passed the porch.

“Is Mr. Wilson okay? He hasn’t moved the entire day.”

The old woman took her cane and poked Old Man Wilson in the side.

“Who, him? He’s been dead for months. I just stuffed him and put him out here on the porch. Thought it would keep you kids off my property.”

THE FARM

Thunder cracked, and a bolt of lightning struck somewhere off in the distance. Earl's granddaughter, Jessie, peered through the window at the hogs trudging around in the mud. "Grandpa, did you know pigs are smarter than dogs?"

Earl put on his boots. "Do they look smarter than dogs?"

The hogs were just standing there like statues, not doing much of anything.

"Not really, but Mr. Anderson said pigs were just as intelligent as small children. They even tested them. That's why they make really good pets."

Earl chuckled. "You know what else they're good for? Bacon."

He opened the door and stepped out in the cold rain. The hogs were about a week from slaughter, and he still needed to fatten them up a bit.

He lifted the slop buckets one by one and poured them into the trough, but none of the hogs came running as they normally do. They were simply walking around and sniffing the air as if they suspected something.

"Come and eat, you dumb pigs. You've got a date with the butcher next week."

The hogs still didn't come forward.

He went to grab another bucket of slop, but as he reached down, a sharp pain shot through his left shoulder and into his chest. He dropped to his knees. Earl clutched onto the fence post and slowly pulled himself up, his body trembling. He was having a heart attack.



“Jessie! Anybody... help!” But the storm drowned out any sound he made.

He soon collapsed onto the fence and fell into the pig pen, unconscious.

After thirty minutes, Jessie started to wonder where her grandpa was. She put on her jacket and ran outside.

“Grandpa, are you out here?”

The hogs were in a violent frenzy, squealing and screeching in the rain.

“Grandpa?”

Jessie looked down at one of the pigs and screamed, it was clutching a bloody, severed hand in its mouth. All that was left of Grandpa Earl was a set of white dentures lying in the mud.

MONSTERS AREN'T REAL

Monsters aren't real.
There's nothing under your bed.
Not a goblin, nor the undead.

Monsters aren't real.
There are no vampires or ghouls.
Those stories are fake, made for fools.

Monsters aren't real.
But you're not safe from danger.
You could fall from a cliff, meet a murderous stranger.

Monsters aren't real.
But people are still eaten by beasts.
Wolves for instance, have had many human feasts.

Monsters aren't real.
But eventually everyone dies.
Maybe tomorrow, it's always a surprise.



THE LONELY TROLL

Once upon a time, there was a troll who lived under a bridge, which shouldn't be surprising, as all trolls live under some type of bridge.

All day and all night, the troll would wait for people to come his way, and then like clockwork, he would pop out and devour them. He didn't even ask a riddle like most trolls do. He just skipped right to the eating part.

Week after week, year after year, it went on like this. And while the troll loved the taste of human flesh, he couldn't fight the fact that he was lonely and depressed.

Then one day the troll saw a little boy walking toward the bridge. He rolled his eyes and started climbing up. He wasn't even hungry.

The troll jumped in front of the little boy and unleashed a thunderous roar, but the boy didn't even flinch.

"Wait, you're not scared of me?"

The boy shrugged. "Not really. You're just a troll."

The troll looked around. Was this some type of joke, or worse, a trap by the villagers?

"You know I eat humans, right?"

"Don't you get tired of eating the same thing every day?" the boy asked.

The troll paused. "Come to think of it, you're right! I never try anything new."

The boy opened his leather satchel and pulled out a freshly baked blueberry muffin.



He handed it over, and the troll popped it into his mouth.

“This is the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted. It’s even better than that fat man who accidentally fell into a tub of butter!”

The boy handed the troll another muffin. “I can bring you more if you’d like.”

“Yes! Please do!”

Every day after that the boy would bring the troll fresh muffins. They would sit and talk, and play games. They became great friends.

Then one day the boy arrived and the troll greeted him at the edge of the bridge.

“Any muffins today?”

The boy shook his head, “Unfortunately, no. The baker is sick. But I’ll bring you some extra muffins tomorrow.”

The troll was incredibly disappointed and even worse, his stomach was grumbling with a ravenous hunger. So, he ate the boy. After all, he’s a troll. What did you expect him to do?

THE TOOTH FAIRY

Jenna was watching TV when her 7-year-old son rushed to her side.

“Look Mom!” One of Brady’s front teeth was lying in his palm.

Jenna smiled. “Looks like the Tooth Fairy is coming to visit tonight!”

Brady’s eyes lit up. He immediately rushed upstairs and placed the tooth under his pillow.

Jenna soon followed, ready to tuck him into bed.

“Mom, what does the Tooth Fairy do with all the teeth she collects?”

“You know, that’s a good question. I’m not sure. Maybe she builds houses with them or something.”

“Ew, that’s kind of gross.”

Jenna laughed. “Yeah, I guess that would be gross wouldn’t it... Okay, you better get to sleep if you want her to show up. That’s a big tooth, you might get something special.”

The next morning Brady ran into Jenna’s room.

“Mom! Wake up!” He shook her arm until her eyes opened. “Look what the Tooth Fairy gave me.” Brady was holding a large gold coin.

Jenna quickly sat up. She certainly didn’t put that under his pillow. “Where did you get that?”

Brady smiled. “I told you! The Tooth Fairy gave it to me. She said I have special teeth and she wants more of them.”

“She talked to you?”

“Yeah, I told her to come back tonight.”



Jenna snatched the coin from Brady's hand. "Brady, seriously, where did you get this?"

"I just told you, the Tooth Fairy."

"You know it's not okay to make up lies."

Brady took the coin back. "I'm not lying, I'll show you tonight when she brings me another coin."

Later that evening, when Brady was asleep, Jenna thought she heard something coming from his room. She muted the TV and could clearly hear a strange buzzing, like that of a hornet or wasp, only much louder. Jenna walked up the stairs. The sound intensified with each step she took. But by the time she reached Brady's room, it had stopped.

She quietly opened the door and peeked in, all she saw was Brady snuggled up in his blankets, sleeping peacefully. Jenna laughed to herself. "Tooth Fairy... yeah right."

The next morning Jenna was again shaken awake by her son. "Mom! Look at this!"

Brady was holding a small leather bag filled to the brim with coins. "I'm rich!"

But as Jenna sat up, her lip started to quiver. The metallic taste of blood was immediate and jolting. Her trembling hand reached up to her mouth. All her teeth had been ripped out.

Brady poured the coins onto the bed, "The Tooth Fairy changed her mind. She said she wanted your teeth instead."

TONGUE

“Hey, you wanna see something gross?” Logan pushed his science book over to Drew and pointed to the picture. It depicted a tuna fish with a disgusting, yellowish creature clamped to its tongue, like a mix between a cockroach and a crab.

Drew cringed. “What is that?”

“It’s a tongue-eating louse. It’s a parasite that crawls in the mouth of a fish, devours the tongue, then stays there, acting as a new tongue.”

Drew shut the book. “That’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen.”

Logan opened the book again. “I think it’s cool.”

“Yeah, well ever since Mr. Anderson told us about the botfly, you’ve been obsessed with stuff like that.”

Logan laughed, “I just think it’s interesting how disgusting nature can be.”

The bell rang and the two boys walked into the hallway.

“Speaking of fish,” Logan began, “you wanna sneak back to Mr. Riley’s pond tonight and toss out a few lines? I heard there’s some monster catfish in there.”

Drew didn’t have anything better going on, so he agreed.

Later that night, the boys were sitting by the edge of the water, both holding fishing poles.

Logan sat back and yawned when suddenly a June bug flew into his mouth. “Ah yuck!” He spit and coughed. “I hate those things. Always flying in everyone’s face and getting in everyone’s business.”

Logan walked down to the bank.



Drew started reeling in his line. “You’re not going to wash your mouth out with pond water are you? That’s gross.”

“I don’t care! I think I have a bug leg stuck in my teeth.”

Logan knelt down and started cupping water into his mouth and spitting it out.

Drew cast his line out again and looked up to the moon. “You ever hear that rumor about two kids drowning in this pond a while back? I wonder if that’s true.”

Suddenly Logan started to violently cough and gag.

“Hey, are you okay?”

No answer.

“Logan, you all right, man?”

Logan started crawling back towards Drew.

“Blah!” Logan continued to cough. “I’m okay... I’m fine. Something swam in my mouth... I literally swallowed it.”

Drew chuckled, “All the critters are trying to give you a kiss around here, huh?”

Logan continued to spit out pond scum and algae, “Oh shut up. But I think I’ve had enough fishing for tonight.”

The two boys then packed up their things and headed home.

...

The next morning, Logan’s mom started pounding on his door, “Logan, wake up. You’re going to be late for school.” But as she walked away, she heard a panicked mumbling sound. Like someone was trying to scream with their mouth full.

“Mmmm....mmmy...tttnnnnnnggg!”

“What?”

“Mmmmmmy... ta..ta... ttnnnnggg!”

“Logan I can’t tell what you’re saying!”

“Myyyyyy tooongggguue!”

Logan’s mom rushed back to the door and ripped it open to see her son lying on the floor, gripping his jaw in pain. “Logan!” She ran to his side and quickly turned on the lamp next to his bed.

Logan slowly looked up and opened his blood-filled mouth. A crab-like creature was writhing inside. It hissed and screeched, and then continued to eat what was left of Logan’s tongue.

Authors note: Cymothoa Exigua, that’s the official name of the tongue-eating louse, and it is very real. If you want to sleep tonight, I don’t suggest looking it up on the internet.

FROZEN

Beth looked up in the rear-view mirror. “You know, if you keep making faces like that, it’ll get stuck that way.”

Austin continued to contort his mouth and eyes as other drivers passed by. “Mom, I know that’s not true.”

“Well, you’re going to scare somebody and cause a wreck.”

Austin finally sat back in the seat.

But a few minutes later an old woman was driving next to them and Austin couldn’t help himself.

He smooshed his nose against the window, opened his eyes as wide as possible, and pulled his lips back so his teeth looked extra big.

The old lady looked over. The sight of his face caused her to swerve right into the car. The impact tossed him back into his seat. Austin’s mom tried her best to keep the car straight, but it glided into the next lane. Austin peered out the window just in time to see a pickup truck careening toward him. The last thing he remembered was the sound of twisting metal, shattered glass, and screeching tires...

Austin woke up to nothing but black. He had bandages on his eyes, and could hear nurses and doctors working in the background.

“Austin, can you hear me?”

“Mom?”

“You’re in the hospital, honey. You’ve been out for a couple days.”

Austin tried to remove the bandages from his eyes, but his mom stopped him.



“You need to keep those on. The doctor will remove them.”

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“Yes, I’m fine, just fractured my hand.”

The doctor walked in and put a hand on Austin’s shoulder. “Hi, Austin, I’m Dr. Carter. You had quite the accident.” Dr. Carter pulled a stool next to Austin’s bed and sat down. “We had to put you in a coma for a few days and let the swelling go down in your brain. But it looks like you’re doing just fine now.”

The doctor started removing the bandages from Austin’s head. “I have to prepare you, son, you arrived in pretty bad shape. There’s going to be some - changes - that you’re probably not going to like.

Austin started shifting nervously in the bed. “Changes? What do you mean?”

The doctor slowly unraveled the bandages from Austin’s eyes. “We’re going to do everything we can to make you look normal again.”

As the bandages fell to the floor, he looked to Dr. Carter, and then to the mirror next to the bed. His nose was smashed to the side, his eyes bulged from his head, and his lips were peeled back, causing a permanent, ghastly smile.

It was the exact same expression he was making before the wreck, and now his face was frozen that way.

THE PYRE

They say you can smell it before it comes, the putrid scent of burning flesh. Some say it's a man. Others claim it's a demon or a ghost.

They call it, "The Pyre."

There are thousands of unexplained fires that occur around the world. House fires, wildfires, infernos that seemingly start from nothing. But its victims know the truth; they're started by the Pyre.

Those who have survived its wrath often tell the tale. The creature is tall, lanky, and black, and its skin is completely charred. It doesn't have eyes, or a nose, or even lips, just a mouth filled with perfect, human-like teeth.

The Pyre won't appear until the flames start to lick your skin. Then, just as your flesh starts to blacken and boil, the Pyre descends from the smoke. It likes to watch. It likes to hear your screams as you burn.

It waits until you are perfectly cooked to eat you. Then it crawls up to your burning corpse like a spider. It opens its mouth, unhinges its jaw, and starts to swallow you whole.

When it's done feasting, it regurgitates the teeth and bone, which is often the only thing left for firefighters or the police to identify.

So next time you see smoke in the distance, or see a fire engine rushing past you with its siren blaring, just remember, the Pyre isn't far away.



THE END

It can't be stopped, you cannot hide.
It has no emotion, no feelings inside.

Some call it The Reaper, The Man in Black.
Once you meet it, there's no coming back.

It never loses, it's always the winner.
It comes for everyone, the angel, the sinner.

It will put you in the ground, six feet deep.
Your family, your friends, will gather and weep.

The worms and maggots, they certainly approve.
They devour your flesh, through your bowels they move.

But don't be afraid, or cause anger and strife.
For each day is special. Smile. Enjoy your life.



DRIP, DRIP

When Adam and Alexa got to the movie theater, they found that they were the only two people in a room full of empty seats. “Great!” they thought, “A whole movie just to ourselves.” They sat down in the middle row, right in the center.

The lights dimmed, and they braced themselves for the new slasher flick that had just come out, *Hillbilly Cannibals 3*. They knew it was going to be ridiculous, but they were looking forward to 90 minutes of campy, over-the-top, entertainment.

But a half hour into the movie, a man entered the theater holding a giant bucket of popcorn. He stopped along the bottom row and scanned the seats as if they were all taken. He slowly ascended the stairs and sat right next to Alexa. She glanced over at Adam, who gave her an uneasy look.

The man was heavier set, wore a black windbreaker jacket, and reeked of melted butter. As the movie went on, whenever the killer was on screen or someone became a victim, the man went hysterical, wheezing between laughs, loudly munching on his popcorn, and smacking his butter-covered lips.

Adam leaned over Alexa and asked if the man could please keep it down. But the man went on laughing and said, “Look at all that blood, I love it!”

“Let’s move somewhere else,” Alexa whispered, but Adam instead leaned over again. “Look buddy, you gotta be quiet, you’re ruining the movie.”

Once again, the man ignored them. “It’s mesmerizing,” he said. “The splatter and dripping effects are so realistic.”



The man then started making an odd noise with his mouth, mimicking the sound of blood dripping onto a concrete floor.

“Drip, drip, drip”

“Drip...drip...drip”

“Let’s get out of here. This guy is creeping me out.” Alexa said, and the two got up to leave.

The man’s dripping sound sped up as they passed him, but slowed by the time they got to the bottom row and exited the theater. Alexa flagged down an employee and complained. The three of them headed back to the theater and found the man, still making the same sound. But when the theater employee shined his flashlight on him, Alexa screamed. The man’s throat had been slashed, and the slow dripping sound was his own blood as it fell to the floor. Although the wound looked fresh, there wasn’t a knife to be found... just a bloody message crudely written on the man’s giant popcorn bucket... *“No Talking.”*

WHEN THEY COME

“Desiree, stop messing with the channels!” Nathan yelled. He and his little sister were staying at their grandparents for the weekend, and Desiree kept fiddling with their antique television set.

“The antenna is only picking up static,” she replied.

“Well, it’s giving me a headache!” Nathan threw her stuffed bear at her.

“Nana!” She screamed.

Their grandmother stormed into the room. “Ok you two, time for bed!”

They both ran to the guest room and soon fell asleep. At around 2 am, the clock radio turned on and woke up Nathan. As soon as his eyes opened, his head filled with excruciating pain.

“Desiree, shut that off!” he demanded.

But he soon discovered he was alone in the room. Nathan sat up and shut the radio off, thinking his sister was playing a trick. He got out of bed and checked the hallway, but no one was there.

Maybe she went to Nana and Papa’s room, he thought, and crept down the hall to check.

The room was empty, but he did find Desiree’s pajamas folded neatly on the bed. Nathan got worried and searched the entire house. When he finally made it to the garage, he noticed some boxes moved away from a wall, exposing a door he’d never known was there. Shuffling past, he saw what looked like a wig attached to a leathery cape stuffed in one of the boxes. The doorway led to a long hall, the walls littered with newspaper clippings, blueprints, and photocopies of UFOs and alien encounters.



When Nathan got to the end of the hall, he found himself in a makeshift operating room. Nana and Papa were there dressed in lab coats, standing over an unconscious Desiree.

“What are you doing?” Nathan shouted.

Only Nana looked up. “She’ll be better soon.”

“What is going on?” Nathan screamed.

Papa picked up a long blade. “It’s for her own good,” he said. “When they come, they’ll take us over with their telepathic powers.”

“And you can’t mind control a machine,” Nana added.

Nathan looked around for a weapon and reached for an empty glass on the shelf next to the entrance. “This is insane! Let her go!”

Papa glanced up at Nathan and backed away from the table. He reached into his lab coat and produced a remote control. “Nana mentioned the radio waves were interfering with your antenna,” he said, clicking down on the remote.

Radio static blared through the built-in speakers on the ceiling. Nathan collapsed to his knees as a shooting pain took over his head. “This...isn’t possible,” he cried.

“We saved all your parts from before your operation,” Nana said. “We have them in boxes in the garage.”

The static grew louder, and the screaming pain in Nathan’s head increased. He opened his eyes to see the glass he was holding shattered on the floor. He had a large cut on his hand, but instead of blood, black oil seeped from the wound.

THE RABBIT

Sami loved rabbits. Every time her mom drove to town, she would ask to stop at the pet store. "Please!" she would beg. "Just for a minute, Mom!"

Her mother would usually take her in, but would always remind her that she wasn't old enough to care for an animal yet. "Next year, honey," she'd say.

One Sunday afternoon, Sami came across a white rabbit in her backyard. She yelled for her mother. "Mom, can we keep it? It looks lost!"

"I don't know Sami," she said. "It might belong to someone. It doesn't look wild, so how about we take it inside and give it some food. It can spend the night, and in the morning we'll post flyers around the neighborhood to find the owner."

Sami enthusiastically agreed, and helped her mom build a nest for the rabbit inside a cardboard box.

That night, Sami snuck out of bed and took the box from the living room back to her bedroom. "I don't want to give you back," she told the rabbit. "After my mom hangs up flyers tomorrow, I'm going to ride my bike around and tear every last one of them down."

The rabbit looked up at her with its deep red eyes. "She knows," it spoke. Sami looked down in complete shock. "Five houses away," it said, "in a long black dress."

Sami ran to her window and peered down the street. There was a figure standing in the middle of the road. It was wearing what looked like a tattered black dress, and it coldly stared at her.



The rabbit began to whistle a tune. Sami turned back to see its red eyes glowing in the dark.

“At the end of the driveway,” the rabbit said. “And she’ll wave three times.”

When Sami looked out her window, the figure had moved from the end of her street to the driveway. It looked up at her and waved three times. She could see its featureless face, like the skin was pulled back tightly underneath its brimmed hat. It didn’t look like a woman or a man.

“Make it stop!” Sami pleaded. “Make it go away!”

The rabbit began to whistle again, louder than the last time. Sami ran to lock her bedroom door. When she returned to the window, the figure was gone.

“The front door is locked,” said the rabbit, “but she’ll still come in.”

Sami heard the handle of the front door jiggle back and forth, and then open and close.

“I promise I won’t tear down the flyers tomorrow,” she cried to the rabbit. “Please, make it leave!”

The rabbit started running in circles around its box, knocking over the food bowl. It was whistling again, louder than ever. Sami jumped into her bed, scared out of her wits.

“She’s going to knock three times,” said the rabbit, and from outside her bedroom door, Sami heard three wooden knocks.

“Your bedroom door is locked,” said the rabbit, “but she’ll still come in.”

Sami was so terrified that when she tried to call out for her mother, only a whisper came from her mouth. The rabbit was still running in circles around its box and whistling the same tune at an ear-piercing decibel. The bedroom doorknob began to twist back and forth.

Sami, paralyzed with fear, watched the lock finally give and the door slowly open. The faceless woman crept into her room. It extended its arm, reaching for the rabbit. Sami finally forced out a scream.

“Mom!”

Her mother rushed to her bedroom and turned on the lights. Sami’s hair had turned perfectly white, and the rabbit was gone.

FREE PIZZA

“We interrupt this broadcast to bring you breaking news.”

Tommy looked up from his homework to the TV.

“Seemingly overnight, a restaurant chain called Pluto’s Pizza has popped up in thousands of towns across America. Citizens cannot remember the construction of these restaurants, and even more amazingly, Pluto’s Pizza is offering unlimited free pizza for an entire week.”

“Awesome!” Tommy tossed his pencil onto the table and grabbed his jacket.

He hopped on his bike and rode into town. Along the way, hundreds of other people joined him, all making their way to the brand-new Pluto’s Pizza located next to city hall.

He saw his friend Andy on the other side of the street. “Hey Andy, can you believe this? Unlimited free pizza?”

“I know! I wonder if it’s any good.”

When the two arrived, the line was nearly a quarter mile long. People were walking out of the restaurant with truckloads of pizza boxes.

The boys waited and waited, and when they finally arrived at the door, they were surprised to find there were no employees, no seats, no kitchen, just a massive room filled to the ceiling with pizzas of every topping and flavor.

Tommy stacked eight in his arms; he couldn’t ride home with any more. When he got back to his house, he sat the boxes on the table and opened the one on top. It was his favorite, plain cheese.

He took a bite. It was the most delicious pizza he had ever tasted. He stuffed his face until he could barely move.

He trudged over to the couch, plopped down, and soon drifted to sleep.

Bwwwoooooooooommmm

A thunderous sound shook the house.

Bwwwoooooooooommmm...

Bwwwoooooooooommmm...

Tommy jumped up from the couch and opened the front door. The sound was blaring all over town.

One of the pizza boxes was shaken off the table. Then it moved.

Tommy's eyes were fixed on the box. It moved again. There was something inside. He walked over to the box and lifted the top with his shoe.

A piece of pizza slithered out like a slug. It flipped over, revealing tiny black eyes and a mouth full of small, needle-like teeth. It hissed at Tommy and bit his foot.

Tommy screamed and fell to the floor as more pizza slices crawled out of the box. He got up and ran to the door. Utter chaos had spread through the neighborhood like a pizza plague. People were running through the streets in droves. Pizza slices were latched onto them, feeding on their flesh.

The emergency broadcast system buzzed on the TV.

"This is not a drill. Take shelter immediately. Citizens are urged to stay away from all pizza or pizza-related items. We repeat, this is not a drill."

Tommy felt another slice crawl on his back and slither up his neck. It hissed into his ear and then devoured it like a piece of pepperoni.



THE TASTE

“Have you ever wondered what human meat tastes like?”

The question caught Nicole off guard. “Uh... no, I haven’t, have you?”

Megan was glaring at her cheeseburger, watching the grease drip from the bun.

“Kind of. I mean, does it taste like chicken? Maybe roast beef?”

“Megan that’s disgusting.”

“What? I’m just curious.”

Megan took another bite of her burger. “So you’re telling me if it was right in front of you, and nobody would *ever* find out, you wouldn’t at least think about taking a nibble?”

“Considering I’m not a cannibal, no I wouldn’t.”

Megan shrugged her shoulders and finished the rest of her lunch.

Later that night, Megan opened a can of baked beans and started cooking them on the stove.

Once they were ready, she poured them out onto her plate. It was the perfect side dish for the leftover barbecue in the fridge.

Just as she took the first bite, she looked down and saw something strange. She used her fork to brush back some of the beans.

It was a human finger...

Megan dropped her fork and backed away from the table.

Was this real? She had heard stories in the news about severed fingers being found in food items, but she never thought she would find one in *HER* food.

She picked up the phone, wondering if this was something you call 911 for. But she paused.

She looked at the finger; it was fat and pudgy, and it was cooked perfectly in the beans, much like a sausage or hot dog.

Nobody would know, and she had always wondered.

Megan sat back down, stuck her fork into the finger, and took a big fleshy bite.

It was absolutely delicious.



BLARD'S BURGERS

“Wow, this is the best cheeseburger I’ve ever had! Mr. Blard, you’re a true chef.” Tom took another gigantic bite, the grease of the burger running down his chin.

“Thanks Tom, it’s our secret recipe.” Mr. Blard then grabbed another chunk of hamburger meat and formed it into a perfect patty for the next customer.

Mr. Blard was a jolly fat man who had just opened his new restaurant, “Blard’s Burgers,” in a small Illinois town. It was an immediate success; everyone raved about how good the cheeseburgers were.

The burgers were so good that the town soon became addicted. They just couldn’t get enough of whatever Blard’s secret recipe was.

But the town had a problem. People had begun to disappear, and the more popular Blard’s Burgers became, the faster people went missing.

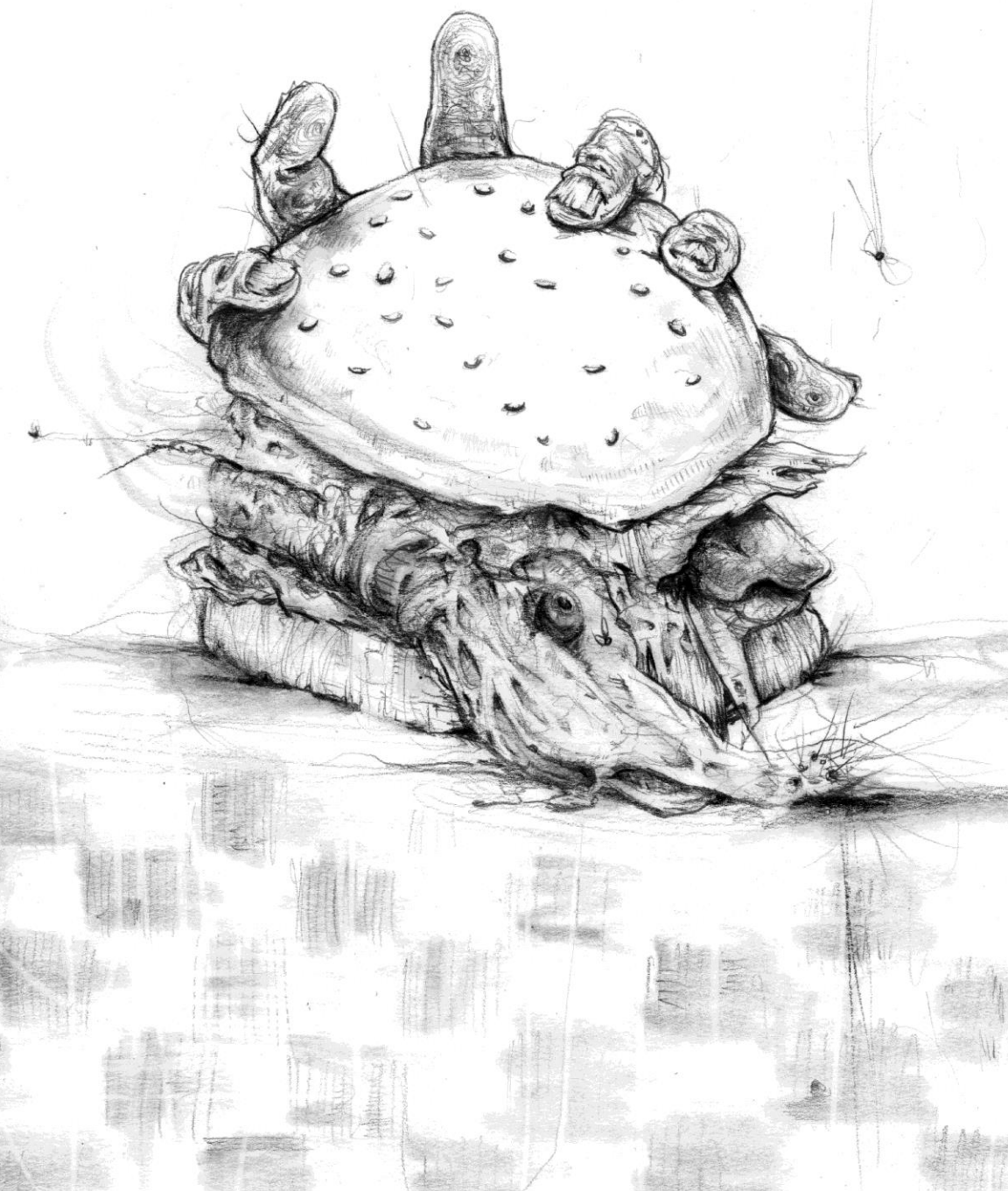
Then one day, a plump little boy by the name of Larry had been playing basketball outside the restaurant. Incredibly thirsty, Larry walked in and ordered a tall glass of lemonade.

“Hey Larry, would you mind coming back here and helping me with something?”

“Sure Mr. Blard.”

Larry walked to the back of the restaurant and into a large room. Standing before him was a gigantic meat grinder. Mr. Blard walked in behind him and locked the door.

“What are you doing?” Larry asked, his voice trembling with fear.



“Well Larry,” an evil grin appeared across Blard’s face, “I need some more hamburger meat, and a fat little boy like you will be perfect.” Mr. Blard then flipped a switch and the giant meat grinder roared to a start. Blard lunged forward to grab Larry, but as Larry jumped out of the way, he tripped Mr. Blard. The not-so-jolly fat man fell headfirst into the meat grinder. Mr. Blard made a wretched sound as he was ground up, bones and all.

When the police came to investigate, they soon realized Blard was the one responsible for all the missing people.

“What do we do now?” the deputy asked the Sheriff.

“Well... there’s no reason all this hamburger meat should go to waste.”

The townspeople all gathered at the restaurant. They made cheeseburgers out of Mr. Blard and ate him up. It was the best burger any of them had ever eaten.

THE VENTRILOQUIST

Brandon walked out of the show with his jaw practically on the floor. He beamed up at his dad. "That was the best ventriloquist I've ever seen."

His dad agreed. "Usually, I don't like those types of performances, but I have to admit, it was amazing. He must have been using some type of electronics or hidden audio."

"He was whistling while the dummy was talking, how is that even possible?"

"I have no idea, but it was certainly impressive."

Brandon had been fascinated by ventriloquists for the past 6 months. His dad kept trying to convince him that it was just a phase, but Brandon was sure that he only wanted to be one thing when he grew up, a ventriloquist.

His dad eventually gave in and bought him a cheap dummy; Brandon practiced day and night. After about a month of work, he was getting pretty good, but he wanted to be better. He decided to go back to the performance and find the ventriloquist. He wanted to ask him for some tips.

The show concluded and the ventriloquist took a bow. He then disappeared behind the curtain. Brandon waited until theater security wasn't looking, and then snuck to the back.

He heard two angry voices coming from the dressing room.

"We need to come up with another act. I'm so sick of this one."

"Well, what do you suggest Jerry? You're supposedly the creative one."

Brandon peeked through a crack in the door and saw the ventriloquist talking to his dummy.

He took a step back and stepped on a discarded can.

“Who’s there?” The ventriloquist burst through the door and glared down at Brandon. “What are you doing here, kid? Don’t you know it’s not right to spy on people?”

“I... I’m sorry, sir. I just heard voices back here.” Brandon held up his dummy. “I just wanted to ask for some tips.”

The ventriloquist paused, humbled that the kid had such interest and just wanted advice. “Well kid, I have to be honest... this whole thing isn’t what it seems.”

The dummy suddenly sprung to life. “He’s right kid. It’s kind of a scam.”

The ventriloquist removed his shirt. The dummy wasn’t a dummy at all. It was a small person. A huge mass of mangled flesh and bone fused the two at the shoulder.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you. I’m no ventriloquist. And this isn’t a dummy, it’s my twin brother. Please don’t tell anyone.”

The malformed twin slowly leaned forward and squinted his beady misshapen eyes at Brandon, “Maybe we should get rid of him. Besides, if only one of us commits a crime, how can they put us both in jail?”

The ventriloquist immediately smacked his brother in the face, “Shut up, Jerry... Sorry about that kid. But our little secret, okay?”

“Yes... yes, sir.” Brandon stumbled over his words as he slowly backed away from the dressing room door. He then turned and sprinted home as fast as he could.

Brandon never touched a dummy again. He grew up and became a dentist.



SOON

It's all too real, that heavy sense of dread.
Something is watching, something wants you dead.

When you go to the mailbox, alone in the dark,
When you walk down the street, or go to the park.

Is it behind you? A monster? A clown?
Maybe it's a killer that wants to take you down.

You can't describe it, you just kind of know.
That feeling you get, peering through a dark window.

What is it? That chill. That fear of death.
It churns your stomach, it stops your breath.

It's always in the air, on the eve of a full moon.
You can't escape it... it's coming, soon.



THE SANDMAN

“For the last time Tyler. *Go to sleep!*”

Tyler stomped on the floor. “I’m not tired! How can I sleep if I’m not tired?”

His mom stood firm, arms crossed. “It’s almost one in the morning. You know what happens if you don’t fall asleep soon? The Sandman will come and scrape your eyes out.”

“I’m not three, Mom. I know you’re just trying to scare me.”

“Okay, how about this? If you don’t get to bed now, no video games for a week.”

“Mom!”

“Bed... right now.”

Tyler trudged to his room and slammed the door. She may have forced him to go to bed, but she couldn’t force him to go to sleep. Tyler pulled his tablet computer out and started playing his favorite game.

After a few seconds, the shadow of his mom blotted out the light from underneath his door. “Turn it off Tyler...”

Tyler rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay.”

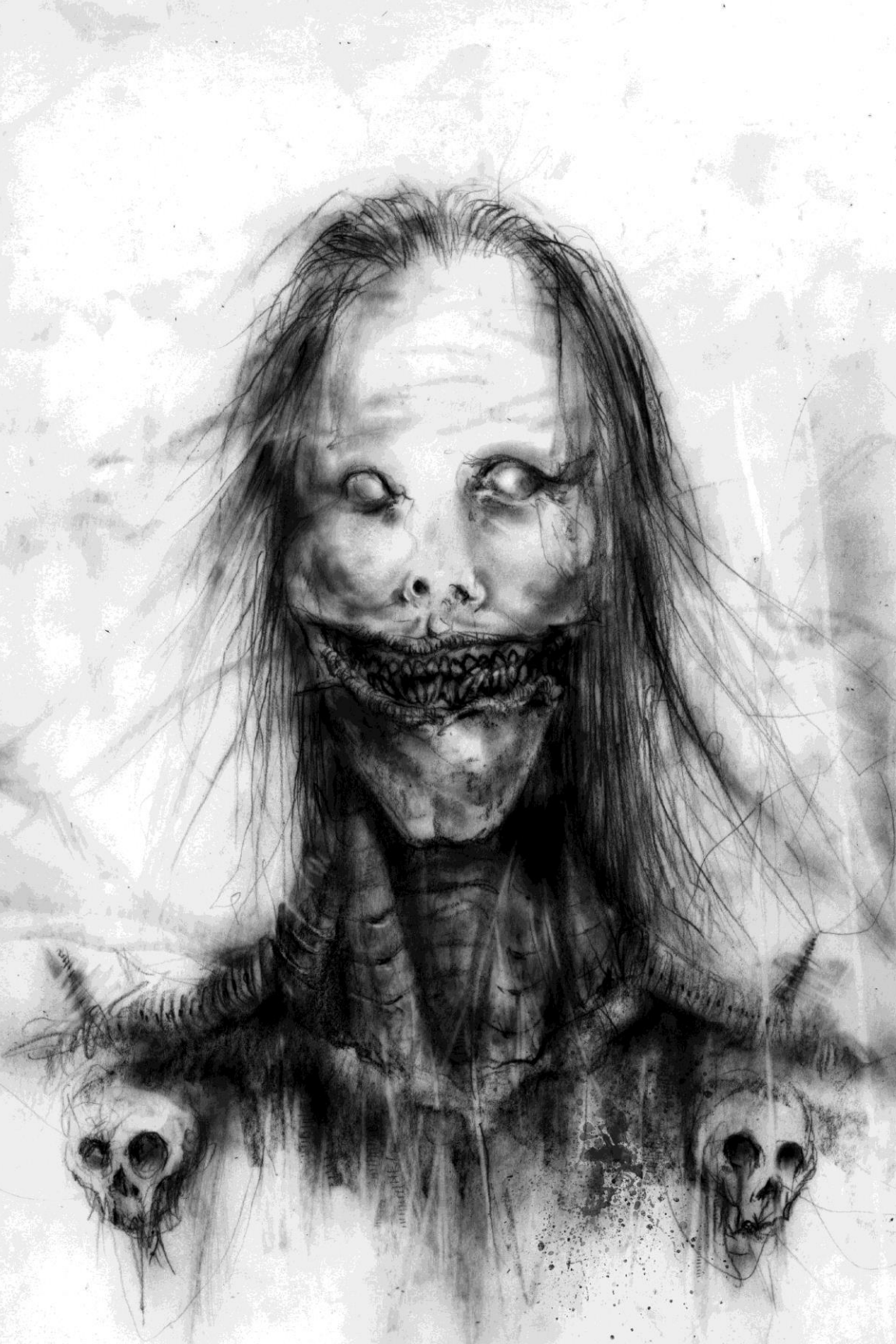
But Tyler simply turned the volume off and went under the covers.

About an hour passed, and Tyler still wasn’t the least bit sleepy.

“Tyler... Go to sleep.”

Tyler didn’t answer, pretending to snooze. Unless his mom came in the room, how could she actually know?

“Go to sleep.”



His mom sounded kind of different this time. Like she had something caught in her throat.

“Tyler... go to *sleeeeep*.”

“Mom, is that you?”

The voice was closer.

“*Go to sleeeeeeeep*.”

“Mom... this isn’t funny.”

“*Sleeeeeeeeeeep*.”

The voice was right outside Tyler’s covers. He was too terrified to look. But then it stopped. Tyler slowly lowered the blanket. Nothing was there. A half hour later, Tyler finally dozed off...

7:30 am rolled around and Tyler’s mom opened the door.

“Time to get up! No excuses, kiddo. You wanted to stay up so late and now you’re going to pay for it.”

She ripped the bed covers off Tyler.

“Rise and shine!”

Tyler yawned, and tried to open his eyes. His voice started trembling.

“Mom.... *MOM!* I can’t open my eyes!

“Tyler, hold still, let me see.”

She used her fingers to force open his eyelids.

Black, powdery sand started gushing out. When it was all gone, there was nothing left but two gaping holes.

HOT DOGS

Carl's friends were all cheering him on. "Come on Carl! You can do it! 30 seconds left!"

He looked down at the monstrous plate of greasy, brown meat in front of him. The score was tied at the county hot dog eating contest. He was sweating profusely, his bloated stomach protruded from his shirt, and he was in absolute agony.

Carl looked over at the last competitor still eating. They had both put down 42 hot dogs.

"Just one more! 20 seconds left!" one of his friends yelled.

Carl picked up another quivering piece of meat. His hands trembled as he brought it close to his mouth. He took a bite. The crowd roared.

"10 seconds! Come on Carl!"

Another bite.

Carl thought he was going to pass out. The other competitor had quit, all he had to do was swallow one more chunk.

"5 seconds!"

He popped the last bite in his mouth and swallowed without chewing. The buzzer went off. Carl was victorious.

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

The announcer came over and patted Carl on the back. "Ladies and Gentleman, I present to you this year's Morgan County Hot Dog Eating Champion!"

As the announcer raised Carl's hand in victory, Carl bellowed in agony. His shirt ripped open, and his stomach exploded all over the crowd.



NIGHTMARE SOUP

TALES THAT WILL TURN YOUR STOMACH



NIGHTMARE SOUP

II

THE SECOND HELPING



NIGHTMARE SOUP

II

THE SECOND HELPING



THE DANCING CORPSE

“Grab your bike and follow me...” Tim’s eyes were wide and fiery as he stood on Jimmy’s front porch, his breathing heavy and quick as he beckoned his friend to come outside.

Jimmy was standing in the entryway. “What’s going on?” He had seen this look many times before; it usually meant they were going to do something they shouldn’t.

“You just have to see. Come on, hurry, before someone else finds it.”

Jimmy took a deep breath. How many times had he gone on one of these adventures only to end up grounded for two weeks or in some other kind of trouble?

“Are you just going to stand there or what?” Tim asked, “I’m telling you, this is something you *need* to see.”

“Just tell me what it is.”

“No, you won’t believe me. Just come on.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Fine... but I swear, Tim, if we get in trouble this time, you’re taking all the blame. Remember who had to wash Mr. Spencer’s car for two weeks because *you* threw those eggs. Yeah, it was me.”

“This isn’t anything like that!” Tim shot back, his movements and voice filled with impatience.

“Okay, okay, let’s go.”

Jimmy hopped on his bike and followed Tim down the street towards the “The Court,” a cul-de-sac where all the neighborhood kids gathered to play capture the flag, or have water balloon fights. Jimmy could barely keep up as Tim blazed down the street, his legs peddling frantically.

“Hey! Slow down! Jimmy yelled.

“Peddle faster!” Tim responded.

As they reached the end of the street where the pavement opened to a large circle, Tim dumped his bike at the curb and dashed around to the back of Danny Fletcher’s house. Jimmy was right behind him. Everyone knew this was the best way to the train tracks, an area Jimmy was specifically told never to go, but parental warnings had never stopped their adventures before, and this time was no different.

The path to the tracks was almost mystical, something straight from the pages of Huckleberry Finn. A sprawling, golden wheat field pushed up against a thick wooded area. Right in between was a slim trail of flattened grass that would lead them to their destination. The last time the two boys had been back here, they stumbled upon an old junkyard, and to a 12-year-old boy, that’s nearly the same thing as finding buried treasure.

“You know how we wanted to build a go-cart? Well I came back here earlier to find a steering wheel.” Jimmy grabbed a large stick and started knocking down the brush at the entrance of the woods. “When I was headed back, I took a wrong turn that led to an old bridge by the train tracks. That’s where I found it... under that bridge.”

“Found what?”

“You’ll see... I’m going to warn you though, think of the worst thing you’ve ever seen, and this is worse than that.”

Jimmy stopped in his tracks. “Wait... worse than the *worst* thing I’ve ever seen in my life? Worse than the time Matt Morrison broke his leg and the bone was sticking out of the skin?

“Way worse.”

“What if I don’t want to see this...*thing*?”

“It’s not going to hurt you. Quit being a wuss.”

Tim continued to knock down wild brush and tree limbs as they followed the path. They soon came to a split, one way leading to the junkyard, and the other to the train tracks.

“Come on, it’s this way.”

The grassy pathway soon turned to dirt as the woods started to thin. Jimmy’s stomach knotted up—what could be worse than a bone sticking out of someone’s leg?

A large maple tree stood at the end of the path, almost like a guardian protecting something. A large “X” was carved into the trunk. Jimmy didn’t know what that meant, but it made the knot in his stomach tighten even more.

As they passed the maple tree and exited the woods, the dirt path ran right into the train tracks. Jimmy raised his hand to shield his eyes from the baking August sun, and as he looked down the line of rusted steel, he saw an old abandoned bridge about 50 yards away.

The concrete was cracked and covered in faded graffiti. Even out here the bridge couldn’t escape the nocturnal hooligans and their spray paint.

“You ready for this?” A bead of sweat dripped from Tim’s forehead as the same wide-eyed glare returned to his face.

“Let’s just get this over with.”

Jimmy took a couple steps forward, and that’s when the smell stung his nostrils. It was absolutely putrid, so vile and rank that his gag impulse kicked in, forcing him to cough and spit on the ground. It was like road kill mixed with fresh sewage. “What is that smell!”

Tim just covered his nose with his shirt and continued forward.

The area under the bridge was bathed in shadow—it seemed unusually dark for how bright it was outside, almost like the bridge

was trying to hide a secret. But as the boys stepped closer, that secret slowly revealed itself.

A shoe was the first thing Jimmy saw, a black dress shoe, scuffed and faded from the dirt and sun. It was the only thing sticking out of the shadows. As he got closer, his gaze followed the shoe to a pant leg, dress pants, blue... maybe black, he couldn't tell. Jimmy's eyes adjusted to make out a figure hunched over in the darkness, propped up against the wall. He could see a white dress shirt covered in dark, reddish-brown splotches. Was that dried blood? His mind started piecing together the grizzly image before him. It was blood... lots of blood.

There was a tie, it was striped and ugly—a stale yellow and dull blue—which led up to a face... a horrifying, nightmare-inducing face.

The skin was leathery and pale, almost greyish in tint, but with splatters of yellow, and a specific shade of green that only shows up in thick mucus. Rotting flesh gave way to deep red holes and dried crusty boils.

The area around the lips was jagged and torn, revealing a gruesome, permanent smile, and its eyes were half eaten away, set deep into their nearly hollow sockets.

The full image of the corpse finally hit Jimmy, and he immediately fell to his knees and threw up his lunch. "That's a dead body..."

"Yeah, I know." Tim still had his shirt up to his nose.

"We need to call the police, or tell our parents, like right now!"

Jimmy stood up and wiped his mouth. Tim was right, this was by far the worst thing he had ever seen.

"We will... we will. But I have to show you something first."

“What else could you possibly show me! It’s a dead guy just sitting there rotting. There’s blood. He was probably murdered or something.”

“Just watch...”

Tim pulled out his cell phone and started scrolling through it. “I was scared just like you when I first saw this, so I pulled out my phone to take a picture, but my hands were shaking so bad that I dropped it on the ground. Somehow my ringtone went off, and when that happened, I swear, Jimmy, it moved.”

“What do you mean it moved?”

“I mean it *moved*!”

“That’s... that’s impossible.”

Tim pressed a button on his phone and a light-hearted jingle started playing. The two boys immediately looked over to the corpse. Nothing happened.

“See, I told you, now let’s get out of here and go tell the cops.”

Tim moved closer to the corpse, slowly turning up the volume as the jingle continued to play. Suddenly one of the legs started to slightly wiggle. “There it was! Did you see that! It moved!”

Jimmy immediately backed away. “How can that happen. Could he still be alive?”

“Jimmy, look at him. Does it *look* like he could still be alive?

Jimmy again gazed into the cold, dead stare of the corpse. “No, he’s definitely dead.”

The terror gripping both boys soon turned to a frightened curiosity.

“I’m going to try playing something else.” Tim opened his music app and selected a heavy metal song. The guitars and wailing of the lead singer echoed off the concrete walls.

Both legs of the corpse immediately sprang to life, violently jerking and flailing around; its arms soon followed. The boys ran to the other side of the bridge in sheer panic.

Tim turned the music off and the corpse's arms and legs flopped to the ground, lifeless as they should have been.

Jimmy had played this game long enough. "This is insane! We need to get out of here right now!"

"Just one more time. I need to get this on video so people will believe us."

"Fine, then we are going straight to our parents."

Tim nodded in agreement and walked back up to the corpse, he turned the phone's volume up as loud as it could go and selected a hard-hitting rap song with heavy bass. As soon as the music started, the corpse began to "dance" again. It was jerking, vibrating, pulsating, convulsing. Its arms and legs jumped off the ground like it was being electrocuted.

Tim started moving closer and the movements became more violent.

"Tim, that's close enough."

But Tim ignored Jimmy's warning, again stepping closer with his phone held out in front of him.

"Tim! That thing is going to touch you!"

But Tim kept moving, his gruesome curiosity propelling him forward.

Tim put the phone up to the corpse's ear, or what was left of it. At this point the corpse was shaking so violently that its body nearly danced away from the wall. Every inch was now vibrating and pulsing.

Suddenly the stomach of the corpse started to rapidly expand. Tim knelt down to get a better look as Jimmy screamed at him

from the other side of the bridge. “Tim get away from that thing now!”

But it was too late. The stomach erupted like a volcano, spewing thousands of squirming maggots all over Tim’s face and body. More maggots exploded from the corpse’s legs and arms, and finally from the eye sockets.

The maggots writhed and jittered; their bodies pulsed and jerked as the music blared. Tim screamed in horror as they slithered through his hair and under his shirt.

Jimmy ran over to Tim and grabbed his phone, the music wouldn’t turn off, so he threw it against the wall as hard as he could, shattering it to pieces. As soon as the music cut off, the maggots stopped squirming. Tim was still screaming as he ripped his shirt off and shook the excess maggots from his skin.

The boys backed away in disgust, the taste of vomit filling their mouths, as they watched the maggots slowly crawl back into the corpse and continue feeding on its rotting flesh.

THE TOOTHACHE

“It really hurts, Doc. I’ve had cavities before, but this one is something else.” Gary applied steady pressure to the left side of his mouth with his hand. “Even talking hurts.”

Dr. Stevenson pulled Gary’s medical and dental history from an overstuffed cream folder and flipped through the information. His grey eyebrows were steady and straight, the wrinkled corners of his mouth showing zero signs of emotion. He’d been doing this for such a long time that this was just another run-of-the-mill patient... or so he thought.

“Well, let’s make sure there isn’t an abscess or something in there. You’re probably right, though, just a nasty cavity. Lie back and let’s take a look.”

Gary sat back as the seat automatically reclined. He was a younger guy, early 20s, but he looked a bit older. His mouth was already full of silver and gold fillings because as much as he tried, he just couldn’t put down the soda and junk food.

Dr. Stevenson snapped on his white latex gloves and turned on that annoyingly bright light that hovers just above the patient’s face. Soon, the dental assistants and their rolling chairs wheeled over to Gary’s side, ready to start the exam.

Gary hated this part. They would soon be prodding around his mouth, poking, scraping, and digging with their little metal tools. They would drill his teeth with that gross, crunchy toothpaste, then use that little suction mechanism to slurp up the spit coming out of his mouth. And eventually he would get lectured about how he didn’t floss enough or how he should stop eating junk food.

But first, they had to address this horrific pain. It seemed to originate in one of the back-left molars, and whenever Gary moved his mouth, it sent a wave of pain radiating through his jaw and upper neck, like a pulsating electric shock.

“Okay Gary, let’s see what’s going on. Say ‘Ah.’” Dr. Stevenson leaned in with his little magnifying tool. Immediately he saw a gaping hole inside Gary’s second to last molar. It looked like the tooth had decayed far into the gum line and went deep down to the root.

“Yep, there she is. That’s a big-time cavity... looks like it’s starting to form an abscess as well. That probably explains the radiating pain and swelling; to be honest we might have to pull the tooth.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s a possibility. Let’s get you over to the x-ray machine, and that will give us a better answer.”

Gary got up and trudged over to the x-ray room like he had several times before. It was the same old song and dance: Put the heavy plastic bib on, bite down on those plastic things, and let the x-ray machine do its work.

After about 15 minutes, Dr. Stevenson walked back in with the x-rays. The stoic, emotionless expression on his face had just a hint of curiosity. You could tell because his eyebrows were ever so slightly turned up.

“Okay Gary, hop back into the exam chair for me.”

“What did the x-ray show?”

“Well... I’m not exactly sure. I need to check inside the cavity, so I’m going to numb the area before I start digging around in there.”

“Wonderful...” Gary rolled his eyes sarcastically.

Again, the dental assistants wheeled over, and Gary reclined back and opened his mouth.

“Okay you’re going to feel a slight pinch... here it comes.” Dr. Stevenson injected the surrounding area with numbing agent and then grabbed a small, needle-like tool to insert into the rotting area of the tooth.

“So, when we checked the x-ray, it looked like there was something lodged inside the cavity.”

“Like what?” Gary mumbled.

“That’s what we’re getting ready to find out.”

Dr. Stevenson carefully stuck the instrument into the rotting hole and slowly moved it around.

Almost immediately, Gary felt a strange vibrating sensation. He then looked down to see something that startled him: Dr. Stevenson’s eyes were as wide as could be, his grey eyebrows pointed up to his forehead, and his nose was wrinkled in disgust.

“I think I’m going to be sick!” One of the assistants immediately stood up and ran away.

“What’s wrong?” Gary asked.

“Umm... I’m not sure how to tell you this Gary, but there’s a—”

“Ouch!” Gary screamed. The vibrating inside the tooth suddenly morphed into a sharp pain, cutting right through the numbing agent.

“Ow...ah... ahhhhhh!” Gary began screaming; the pain was like razor blades in his mouth. Something was crawling out of his cavity. He could feel it squirming and writhing as it pulled itself from the rotting hole. Pus and blood started squirting out as Gary felt little legs grasping onto his tongue.



Dr. Stevenson sat back in horror. As Gary continued screaming, a six-inch centipede, soaked in blood, emerged from the cavity where it had been living. It quickly scurried onto Gary's chin and down the side of his face, it then dropped down to the floor and in the blink of an eye darted into a small crack in the wall.

Gary never ate junk food again after that day.

Author's note: Centipedes, millipedes, and other creepy crawlies love dark, moist areas, so it's no surprise they have been found living in human ear canals, nasal passages, and other body cavities. Some even burrow inside your skin and lay eggs, a fact that is sure to make your skin crawl, quite literally.

SKIN SOUP

“Hey... Excuse me. Miss! I’m talking to you,” said a greasy, heavy set man.

Katie rolled her eyes as she walked past the booth, then she took a breath, forced a smile, and turned around. “Yes, what can I do for you this time?”

“I’m sorry, but this chicken noodle soup is just unacceptable. It’s not hot enough, and it tastes like the cheap stuff you buy at the value market. I thought this was supposed to be home-made?”

“It is, Sir.”

“Well can you have the cook try again? Surely he can do better than whatever this is.”

“Sure thing. We’ll get another bowl out to you as soon as possible.”

“Tell them not to use as much salt. My dog wouldn’t even eat this.”

Katie grabbed the bowl and walked back to the kitchen.

“I hate to do this to you, Johnny, but the guy says he wants another bowl of soup. He says this one is too salty, or not hot enough, it doesn’t taste right... something like that.

“What? This will be the third one!” Johnny threw his arms up in the air, frustrated and tired. He was a skinny, middle-aged man with a quick temper. He was also the owner of the struggling diner. “You and I both know there is nothing wrong with that soup. Everyone loves my soup. I swear, some people make it their mission in life to be jerks.”

“I’ve been serving this guy for over an hour. Can you give it one more try? I really need the tip money... even though I doubt this guy is much of a tipper.”

Katie was a college student who needed every dollar she could make. She was pretty, but always looked a little run-down from being overworked, studying too much, and not getting enough sleep.

“Yeah, I’ll give him one more... Guy thinks he can come in here and insult my food. It’s almost closing time; I’m tired and ready to go home. Here you go Mr. Food Critic...” Johnny poured another bowl of broth and noodles, and then added some different spices and some vegetables. It smelled and looked fantastic.

“And one more ingredient...” Johnny peeled a large sliver of dry, dead skin off his nose and dropped it into the soup.

“You’re not seriously going to serve that, right?”

“I certainly am. I’m the boss, and I’m not making another bowl. The guy deserves it. He’s one of those people who thinks servers and cooks are just slaves that can be ordered around.”

Katie looked at the soup for a good ten seconds trying to decide what to do.

“Fine... just because I’m ready to go home.”

Katie walked out to the front of the diner where the man was waiting. He was the only customer left in the place.

“Finally! Took you long enough.”

Katie bit her lip, fighting back the urge to say something in response.

The man grabbed a spoon with his pudgy fingers, holding it like a caveman, and then slurped up some soup in a disgustingly loud fashion. By the way he was devouring it, Katie could tell he was finally satisfied.

“This is absolutely delicious! Well worth the wait. The herbs and spices, they are delightful.”

Soup was spilling from the bowl onto the table as the man lapped it up like a hungry animal.

Once he was finished, he got up, paid with a ridiculously large tip, and left without saying a word. It was one of the oddest customer experiences Katie ever had.

The next night the man returned. He promptly sat in the same booth and waited for Katie to take his order.

“Not this guy again,” she mumbled to herself. “Hey, good to see you again, what can I get you tonight?”

The man tapped his fingers together in anticipation. “I’ll take the chicken noodle soup again, please tell the chef to make it exactly like he did last night.”

“Alrighty, we’ll get that out to you here in a bit.”

Katie walked backed to the kitchen and leaned up against the wall. “You’ll never guess who’s back. Chicken noodle soup guy.”

Johnny threw his head back in disgust. “Seriously?”

“He says he wants the chicken noodle soup just like you made it last night.”

“Has he been less of a jerk so far?”

“Yeah, not too bad.”

“Okay we will spare him the skin soup this time,” he said, laughing.

Johnny whipped up a batch of chicken noodle soup, minus the dead skin flakes, and served it up. Katie delivered it to the anxious man. In fact, he was sweating with excitement.

“One bowl of chicken noodle soup, here you go, enjoy.”

The man quickly slurped up a spoonful right as Katie placed it on the table.

“Wait... this is wrong. It’s missing something. This is not exactly as it was last night. I want the *exact* same recipe.”

“Um... okay, I’ll tell the kitchen.”

Katie placed the uneaten bowl of soup in front of Johnny, unsure of what to say.

“Seriously! He is sending this back again?”

“He says he wants it *exactly* like it was at the end of the night.”

Frustrated and insulted, Johnny nodded his head slowly. “This guy wants the *exact* same thing, huh? That’s fine. I’ll give him exactly what he wants.”

Johnny scraped some dead skin from his forehead and sprinkled it into the soup like it was table salt. “There you go, serve it up.”

Katie brought the bowl to the man in the booth. He quickly tasted it, looked at Katie with a large, jagged smile, and drank down the soup in a matter of seconds. “Yes! Delicious! Marvelous!”

He then immediately got up, paid with another extremely large tip, and left without saying a word.

The man came back every night for two weeks, and each time he brought along a friend who was just as odd and equally as rude. Soon the diner was packed every evening with these strange customers, all demanding the “special” chicken noodle soup.

Something was seriously off about these people, but business was better than ever, so Johnny gave them exactly what they wanted. Katie knew it was wrong, but the tips were so incredibly good that she just ignored her conscience.

Then one night, Katie walked back into the kitchen and noticed Johnny rubbing some lotion on himself. His arms, face, and neck were raw from peeling off skin. He was using himself like a human cheese grater.



“Johnny, this is insane. Look at what you’re doing to yourself.”

Johnny hung his head for a moment. “I know... this is crazy. But the business was so good... I ... I just couldn’t stop.”

Katie walked towards the door. “I’m going to tell them the soup is no longer available. They can order something else or leave.”

Katie walked out into the crowded diner where all of the strange characters were anxiously waiting.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you all, but we will no longer be serving the chicken noodle soup. I’m very sorry. We’re... umm... out of the special ingredients.”

The customers started yelling and screaming. The original chicken soup man stood up, his eyes fiery and intense. “You don’t understand, we need our soup. We need it now!”

The other customers continued to scream and yell. Johnny could hear everything from the kitchen. His temper started to rise, and a couple seconds later he completely lost it.

He burst through the door and yelled at the top of his lungs. “It was SKIN! My skin! The secret ingredient you loved so much was my gross, dead skin sprinkled into your soup. How do you like that, huh? You come in here every night, rude and demanding, treating my waitress horribly. Yeah, you tip her well, so what! That doesn’t mean you can be complete jerks. No more soup... no more SKIN soup. You can all leave now. Goodbye!”

But all the customers just sat there silently. The chicken soup man stood up again, his stare was cold and unnatural. “Wait... It was your skin that tasted so good? So delectable?”

Johnny looked around in confusion. “Uh, yeah, I guess so. You can all leave now. Sue me, do whatever you like. I’m done with the restaurant business. Please leave.”

The man took a step forward and started to drool. “It made the soup so savory, like a rare spice. It was delicious, magnificent, a wondrous journey for the taste buds... I must have more, and look everyone... look at all that delicious skin he still has.”

Johnny took a step back. “You’re creeping me out, man. I know what I did was horrible, but the restaurant is closed. There is the door.”

The chicken soup man took another step forward as all the other customers silently stood up. Each one of them salivating and biting their lips.

“But we can’t leave. Oh no. We’re still hungry, and there is so much of that succulent, tasty skin to go around, enough for all of us.”

Katie realized something horrible was about to happen as the diners lumbered toward Johnny like zombies.

Suddenly the chicken soup man rushed forward with a ravenous, gut-wrenching scream. The other customers sprinted right behind him.

Johnny tried to go for the back door but there were just too many of them. Katie stumbled out of the front entrance, screaming so loudly she almost popped her own eardrums. She fell hard on the concrete of the parking lot and looked back to see the diners devouring Johnny, feasting on his skin like a rare delicacy, and smiling like it was the best meal of their lives.

She sprinted down the road looking for help, the sound of Johnny’s horrific screams fresh in her mind, as well as the stench of hot, savory, chicken noodle soup.

THE HUNTING TROPHY

Carly hated going to her grandparent's house, which was extremely odd for a 12-year-old. It wasn't because she disliked them, or because they treated her badly. She loved them. It was because her grandpa was an avid hunter, and he loved to display his trophies all over the house. Deer, wild boars, birds, badgers, bobcats... If an animal lived in the Midwest, there was a good chance one of its kind was stuffed and displayed at ole Grandpa Pete's house.

There was one "trophy" that Carly particularly hated; it was the head of a large buck. "The biggest deer you could ever imagine," according to Grandpa Pete. It was mounted right above the fireplace in the family room, and impossible to miss.

Something about it just made Carly's skin crawl. It looked angry that its life had been cut short just to become some old man's wall decoration. And then there was that time about 3 years ago when Carly was sleeping over. She got up in the middle of the night for a glass of water, and as she passed the family room, a chill ran up her spine. Goosebumps exploded all over her body and her stomach twisted into a tight knot, it was the exact feeling you get when you know someone or *something* is watching you.

She slowly turned her head toward the fire place and looked up... and the deer head moved. At least that's what she swore up and down to her parents and grandparents, who only laughed.

But Carly was convinced she really did see that... *thing*... move, and ever since that night, she hated visiting that house. So she wasn't too happy when her parents told her they were leaving

for a weekend trip, and she would be staying with her grandma and grandpa.

“Dad, no! Please! Isn’t there anyone else I can stay with?”

Her dad simply folded his arms in disapproval. “Carly, come on now, you know this fear of yours is a bit ridiculous. Yes, I admit those hunting trophies can be a bit creepy, but you haven’t seen your grandparents in months. You’re 12 years old; you can suck it up for a weekend.”

And just like that it was settled.

...

When Carly and her parents walked through the door, the smell of freshly baked brownies flowed through the air like a delicious haze. It was that type of pleasant aroma that only comes from “grandma’s house.” And something even more amazing: All the stuffed, dead animal trophies were gone, nowhere to be found. In fact, the whole house had been re-done.

“Well hello dear!” Carly’s grandma and grandpa rushed to greet them, and swooped Carly up into a big hug.

“You’ve gotten so big, it seems like forever since I saw you last.”

“It’s only been like 4 months, Grandma.”

“Well that *is* forever to a grandparent.”

Carly looked around again, wondering if this was too good to be true. “So where are the...uh... animals.”

Grandpa Pete chuckled to himself. “Well, I built a space for all those critters down in the basement, and that’s where they’ll stay from now on. Your Grandma said it was time, and we knew you didn’t like coming here because of it. So down they went.

Carly gave her grandpa another big hug.

“Well come on in to the kitchen and eat up some of these brownies your grandma made.”

Carly was smiling from ear to ear as her grandpa grabbed her bags and they started walking through the house. But that smile was short lived as they walked passed the family room. Grandpa Pete had moved all the animal trophies except one... the deer head above the fireplace, and it looked angrier than ever.

“Hope you don’t mind I kept ole Gus up there. Your grandma said I could keep one up here, and he’s my pride and joy, so he got to keep his spot above the fireplace.”

Carly’s stomach was queasy at the sight of it, but she forced a smile as best she could.

“It’s... uh... it’s okay Grandpa, I don’t mind it as much as I used to.”

But she did mind it, very much so. She just told herself she would do her best not to go into the family room. It was a big house, and there were plenty of other areas to hang out.

Later that night, Carly was reading a book on the front porch when her grandma called her in. “Carly, come look at this.”

“Be right there, Grandma.”

She found her grandparents sitting in the family room looking at an old photo album. Carly slowly approached, her eyes locked on the deer head above the fireplace.

“Look at your mom back when she was in college. You’re going to be the spitting image of her. I can already see it.”

Carly took her gaze off the deer head and looked down. She really did look like her mom, but that realization was soon replaced by another one. In the photo, her mom was standing in the living room, and right behind her was the deer head. Carly moved closer to get a better look... its face, its eyes, its mouth... they were different.

The hair on the back of Carly's neck stood up as she backed away.

"What is it, honey?" Her grandma's eyebrows were raised in concern. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"The deer... its face... it's different in that picture. How can that be?"

"Oh Carly, not that deer stuff again, I thought you were over that." Grandpa Pete stood up and walked toward the fireplace.

"You hear that, Gus? Carly is still afraid of you after all these years. Can you believe that?"

Grandpa Pete chuckled to himself and reached up to jokingly pat the side of the deer's neck. But as he looked toward his wife, he immediately noticed something was wrong. She had the same petrified expression as his granddaughter. The color had run out of her face, her lips were trembling, and her eyes were frozen in absolute horror.

Pete then felt a burst of warm air on his hand, like something was breathing on it. He slowly turned his head, forcing himself to look at what he knew would be an impossible sight. The deer head had moved, it was breathing, and its cold black eyes were staring right at him, shaking with anger. It had been waiting years for ole Pete to get this close.

Its quivering lips peeled back, revealing a set of jagged, misshapen teeth. It then opened its mouth wider than any normal animal could, its jaw cracking and snapping. It let out a sickening scream that shook the room, and then it bit down into Pete's hand, ripping the flesh from the bone.

Grandpa Pete fell to the floor, screaming in agony as blood gushed all over the carpet. Carly was frozen in terror, completely unable to move. She could only sit there and tremble violently.



The deer head started to shake back and forth, continuing to scream in a horrific, ear-piercing tone that was gut-wrenching and unnatural. Then the bolts and screws that held it in place started to come out of the wall.

“Get my shotgun!” Grandpa Pete yelled. But before Carly or her grandma could react, the deer head screamed once more, so loudly the windows shook. It then ripped itself from the wall and tumbled down, antlers first into Grandpa Pete, goring him through the stomach.

Grandpa Pete was lying motionless on the floor as a pool of blood collected around him. Then the deer head stopped moving, its deep black eyes now dull and lifeless, its rabid expression of anger wiped away. Whatever spirit that had resided there was now gone... and its revenge was finally complete.



THE OWL MAN

I shouldn't say this, as there's nothing one can do.
But it comes at night, and it comes for you.
You can lock the windows, you can lock the door,
It will still get in, and that's for sure.

They call it "The Owl Man," and it comes from the sky.
It's not of this world, and has large, black eyes.
It watches you sleep as it stands by your bed.
Then it takes you away, to experiment on your head.

You never remember, as it can alter your mind.
But it comes every night, like a tape on rewind.
You can run away or move to a new town,
But it doesn't matter, it will still track you down.

This isn't just a story, many swear it's the truth.
It comes for all types, starting in their youth.
It never stops, and there's no way to fight.
So I shouldn't have told you. Forget it. Sleep tight.

THE DEATH CLOCK

“Well, looks like I’m going to die in about 70 years from a heart attack. I’ll be 87 then.” Ryan looked up from his phone and smirked.

“Mine says 94 from natural causes. I can live with that.” Kate smiled then looked to her friend Chris. “What does yours say?”

Chris definitely wasn’t smiling. He hesitated for a moment, making sure what he read was correct. “It says I’m going to die tomorrow—that someone named Jack is going to kill me.”

There was an obvious fear in Chris’s eyes as he stared at “The Death Clock,” a popular new app that was making its way around school.

“Oh Chris, it’s just a dumb, novelty phone app. It can’t actually tell the future.”

“I know... I just wasn’t expecting it to say I was going to die *tomorrow*.”

“Like I said, it’s just a stupid app. They make this stuff so people will click on the ads that pop up.”

“I’m not actually worried. It just kind of creeped me out a bit. That’s all.”

“Is that why your skin is all pale?” Ryan nudged Chris’s shoulder, teasing him.

“Whatever man. Seriously, I’m not worried. Like Kate said, it’s just a dumb app.”

But Chris did worry about it. He knew it was completely ridiculous, but as every minute ticked towards the next day, he couldn’t help but feel a palpable sense of dread.



That night he couldn't sleep at all. He was just lying in bed watching the hands of the clock slowly inch towards 12:00 am.

"What if someone named Jack breaks in and murders me in my sleep?" he thought to himself.

But as midnight finally arrived, five minutes passed, then ten, then twenty... and Chris started to relax a bit. "What am I doing? This is stupid. It's a cheap phone app."

He then closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, as he was driving to school, Chris felt a violent jolt and a loud *thud* coming from the right side of his car. "Did I just hit something?"

He pulled over to the side of the road and put on his hazard lights. A truck soon pulled up behind him and the driver stepped out.

"Hey kid, you need some help?"

A rough looking, middle-aged man with a dirty, ragged baseball cap walked up to Chris's car. "You hit that pot hole pretty hard back there; I was right behind you. The town really needs to fix that."

"Yeah I just didn't see it. I think I may have popped my—" Chris's voice trailed off as he glanced at the man's shirt. It was a maintenance uniform with the name tag "Jack" sewn on.

Chris's stomach dropped and twisted, "I uh... I think I'm fine. I don't need any help. Thank you."

"You sure? Looks like you might've bent the rim on the passenger side."

"No, I'm good, thank you anyway."

"Okay, kid. Well, have a nice day." The man walked back to his truck, got in and drove on down the road. Chris immediately let out a sigh of relief.

He stepped outside the car and walked around to the passenger side. The tire was torn to shreds. “You’ve got to be kidding me. What a great way to start the morning.”

Chris walked to the back of the car and popped the trunk. He grabbed the tire iron, a couple other tools, and the spare, and then immediately got to work.

As he propped the car up, he noticed a piece of asphalt lodged into the undercarriage. He tried to reach it from the side but his arm just couldn’t reach all the way, so he crawled under just a little bit to try and wedge it loose.

Right as he touched the chunk of rock and pavement, a loud *SNAP* erupted next to the shredded tire. Chris looked over his shoulder in horror. It happened so fast he only had time for one final thought before the vehicle completely crushed him...

“It was the car jack...”

SPORE

“Alright everyone, today we have a new student in class. Please welcome Mariana from Brazil.” Mr. Anderson motioned towards the back row, causing everyone to turn in their seats. A shy, timid girl wearing a beanie sat quietly at her desk.

She brushed the jet-black hair away from her eyes and awkwardly raised her hand in acknowledgement. “Hello...”

Even with only one word spoken, her accent was easy to pick up.

“It’s incredibly tough moving to a new place, let alone a new high school in a new country, so let’s make Mariana feel right at home.” Mr. Anderson then went right into the day’s lesson.

“Dude, she’s really cute,” Logan leaned over and whispered to his friend Drew.

“You don’t have to tell me. I have eyes too.”

“Something you want to share with the class, Drew?”

Drew snapped forward and straightened his posture. “No, Mr. Anderson, I’m good.”

“Okay then... As I was saying, zombies are in fact real.”

Drew’s attention immediately went back to the lecture. “What? No they aren’t.”

Mr. Anderson smiled. “Well, maybe not the zombies you think of when you watch *Night of the Living Dead*, but in the insect world, zombies absolutely exist.”

Mr. Anderson pulled out a large glass ant farm from behind his desk.

“Look at this ant; it is infected with a fungus called *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*.”

“Ophicordo what?” asked Drew as he and the other curious students walked up to look.

“The spores from the fungus attach to the ant and start eating through its exoskeleton. The fungus then spreads throughout the ant’s body and even to its brain, where it takes complete control. It then forces the ant to move to a location where the fungus can grow. After that, something really gross happens: A fungus stalk erupts from the ant’s head and releases more spores into the air, thereby continuing the process all over. If you look closely, you can see the stalk I’m talking about. Pretty soon the fungus will spread, creating more zombie ants.”

“Remember the whole ordeal with the bot fly, Mr. Anderson? Why do you keep bringing stuff like this in?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Logan, this can’t infect humans. And I bring it in because I think it’s fascinating.” Mr. Anderson gestured towards the back of the group. “Mariana, did you know this type of fungus is found primarily in Brazil?”

Mariana slowly nodded. “Yes, it made a young girl sick.”

Everyone in the class immediately backed away from the ant farm.

“Now Mariana, I’m pretty sure that’s impossible. This fungus only infects carpenter ants.”

“No, the girl was from my village, I remember.”

Mr. Anderson didn’t quite know how to respond. But before he could say anything, the bell rang and the students quickly grabbed their books and exited.

...

“Hey Mr. Anderson, let’s see what those ants look like now.” A week had passed and Drew was eager to see if the ant farm had transformed into a micro zombie apocalypse.

“You guys really want to see?” Mr. Anderson grinned. The whole class nodded and walked to the front of the room. This type of experiment was exactly why everyone loved his class.

As soon as Mr. Anderson pulled out the ant farm, every corner of the room gasped. The fungus had completely taken over, turning the glass display into a grotesque collection of ant corpses covered in mold-like spores. It was disgusting.

Logan piped up from the side of the room. “You’re sure this stuff is safe, right?”

“Yes Logan, I did my research. It can’t hurt you.”

...

The next day, however, Mr. Anderson found that five students were out sick. Then on Wednesday, that number increased to twelve, and on Thursday, it was twenty.

By Friday, Mariana was the only student in class, and by this time, even Mr. Anderson wasn’t feeling well.

“Mariana... that girl from your village. Are you sure the fungus is what made her ill?”

She raised her head from her desk. “I am sure.”

“How is that possible? It’s only supposed to infect ants.”

Mariana adjusted her beanie and stood up. She walked over to Mr. Anderson and examined his pale, sweating skin. “In Brazil, it has evolved to infect humans.”

“What? How do you know this?”

“The ant farm did not make everyone sick—I did.”

“I...I don’t understand.”



Mariana slowly removed the beanie. As her black hair fell, Mr. Anderson stumbled out of his chair and backed away in terror.

A large, cauliflower-shaped stalk jutted out of Mariana's skull like a grotesque tumor. It glistened under the classroom lights, covered in a dark brown mucus. It throbbed and pulsated as it expanded in size, all the while shooting tiny spores into the air around her.

"The girl from the village was me." Mariana sat down next to Mr. Anderson as he trembled on the floor, his skin burning as more spores burrowed into his flesh.

"Don't worry, Mr. Anderson. You and the others will be part of the colony soon."

DINNER TIME

“Hey Mom! Wow, that smells great!” Tommy hung his jacket on the coat rack and dropped his backpack to the floor. He walked into the kitchen, but his mom wasn’t there. “Where are you?”

A voice called up from the basement, “I’m down here, honey. Just looking for my old blender. The new one is already broken.”

“What are we having for dinner?”

“It’s a surprise. You’ll really love it. Why don’t you take your backpack up to your room and play video games or something until it’s ready?”

Tommy wasn’t going to argue with that. Usually the first thing his mom told him to do was take out the trash, fold the laundry, or worst of all—dust the furniture.

As Tommy sat upstairs and played his game, a loud crash and muffled scream came from downstairs. He dropped the controller and rushed to the top of the stairs.

“Mom? Are you okay?”

She immediately called back from the kitchen, “I’m fine, sorry, just dropped some pots and pans on my foot. I’m okay.”

Tommy stepped down a couple steps. “Do you want me to come help you?”

“*No, don’t come down here!*” his mom screamed, her shrill tone startled Tommy.

“Geeze, Mom. Fine, I’ll stay up here.”

Twenty minutes later, Tommy heard another scream. This time it sounded like a man. Again, Tommy ran to the stairs. “Mom?”

“*Stay upstairs!*”

“Why do you keep yelling at me!”

A much cooler voice responded, “I’m sorry, honey. I just really want this to be a surprise. I’ve been working on it all day.”

Tommy walked to his room, but then stopped, something odd was going on.

He tiptoed back to the top of the stairs, trying to listen in on the kitchen. *Chop... Chop...Chop.* The sound of a large cleaver hitting the cutting board rang out.

Tommy slowly crept down a couple stairs. Regardless of the strange situation, whatever was cooking smelled absolutely delicious.

He descended five more stairs, quiet as a mouse. *Chop... Chop... Chop*, the cleaver continued.

As Tommy reached the bottom of the stairs, he pressed against the wall and slid toward the kitchen so he wouldn’t be seen. Once he got to the edge of the wall, he peeked his head around just enough to see what was going on.

Chop...Chop...Chop.

The floral pattern of his mom’s favorite cooking blouse was immediately recognizable. He could see the back of her as she violently slammed the cleaver into a flesh-colored mass, causing spurts of red to squirt out.

Chop...Chop...Chop.

Tommy looked down to the kitchen floor and saw another shirt he recognized. It was his dad’s—and it was covered in blood.

Suddenly, Tommy’s cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He quickly grabbed it before it made too much noise. He had a new text message:



Hey Tommy, it's mom. Working late tonight, won't be home for another hour. Just have your dad order you guys a pizza or something. Love you.

Tommy's gut twisted and turned, as he nearly dropped the phone.

The figure wearing the blouse turned its head ever so slightly, its face still mostly out of view. Tommy couldn't tell if it was a man or woman, but the corner of its mouth stretched into a wide, unnatural smile that was physically cut into its cheekbones. Long, greasy hair clung to the side of its face, held there by sweat and spatters of blood.

"I told you to stay upstairs, young man. You didn't listen. *Now you're in trouble.*"

BAD SKIN

“I’m not going to Amy’s pool party.” Jerry folded his arms and stared at the ground. He obviously didn’t like talking about the subject.

“Why not, man? Everyone is gonna be there, including Mandy, and I know for a fact you have a crush on her.” Bill was dumbfounded as to why his best friend would want to skip out on the biggest social event of the summer. “Come on, man. I just got my license—I can drive us there. I can’t go if you don’t go.”

Jerry ran his hands through his auburn hair and sighed. “I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to help Mom with something that day.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “Oh, yeah? What does she need help with?”

“I don’t know... stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah... stuff.”

Bill sat down on the porch steps of Jerry’s house. He brushed the long, shaggy hair from his eyes and took a drink of soda.

“Look, man, I’m your best friend. There’s obviously a reason you don’t want to go to this party. Why won’t you just tell me what it is.”

Jerry sat down next to him. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Just tell me, dude. I won’t give you a hard time about it.”

Jerry sighed. “It’s my skin; I have horrible bacne.”

“Bacne?”

“Yeah, really bad acne, but instead of on my face, it’s on my back.”

“So what? I get zits on my shoulders and stuff all the time.”

“You don’t understand, Bill. This is really, really bad. I’m super self-conscious about it. As soon as one pimple goes away, another massive one pops up in its place. And they hurt; I can feel them. I can’t even look at my back in the mirror anymore because it makes me feel bad.”

“Look, man, I had that same problem.”

“You did?”

“Yep, got set up with a really good dermatologist and he cleared me right up. All I had to do was use this special cream and watch my diet a bit. You know, stay away from sugary drinks and greasy stuff.” Bill looked at the soda in his hand, shrugged, and then took another sip.

“How fast did it work?”

“Couple weeks. If you get an appointment this week, I bet your skin will look a lot better come party time.”

“Thanks a lot, man. I’ll have my mom give them a call.”

“No problem.”

Bill finished the last of his soda, then stood up and brushed his jeans off. Suddenly a high-pitched shriek echoed through the woods surrounding Jerry’s house. It sounded like a large bird. Bill just shook his head. “These woods have always creeped me out, I don’t know how you live back here.”

Jerry laughed, “I guess I’m just used to it.”

Bill crunched up his soda can and tossed it in the trash by the driveway. “Alright, I gotta get home and cut the grass or my dad is gonna kill me. Make sure you get to the dermatologist. Dr. Skinner is his name; seriously, a dermatologist named Dr. Skinner, it’s impossible to forget.” Bill chuckled to himself as he got in his car. “We’re going to that party!”

Jerry waved as Bill took off down the road. His thoughts immediately turned to his skin problem. Hopefully this “Dr. Skinner” could help him.

...

A friendly looking, silver-haired man in his late 50s opened the door and walked into the exam room. “Hi, Jerry, I’m Dr. Skinner. Nice to meet you.” He shook Jerry’s hand. “So what can we do for ya?”

Jerry again folded his arms and looked down. He was self-conscious even at the doctor’s office. “Well, I’m having a real problem with acne on my back. It’s so bad I can’t even look at it, and I almost never take off my shirt. I can feel new pimples pop up every day, and they actually hurt a lot of the time.”

“I see. You’re right at the age where this can be a tough problem. A lot of the time it’s just hormone-related and will calm down once you get a bit older.”

Dr. Skinner jotted down a few notes and took a seat next to the exam chair. “What about your diet? Do you eat a lot of greasy foods, or drink a lot of soda?”

“Not really.”

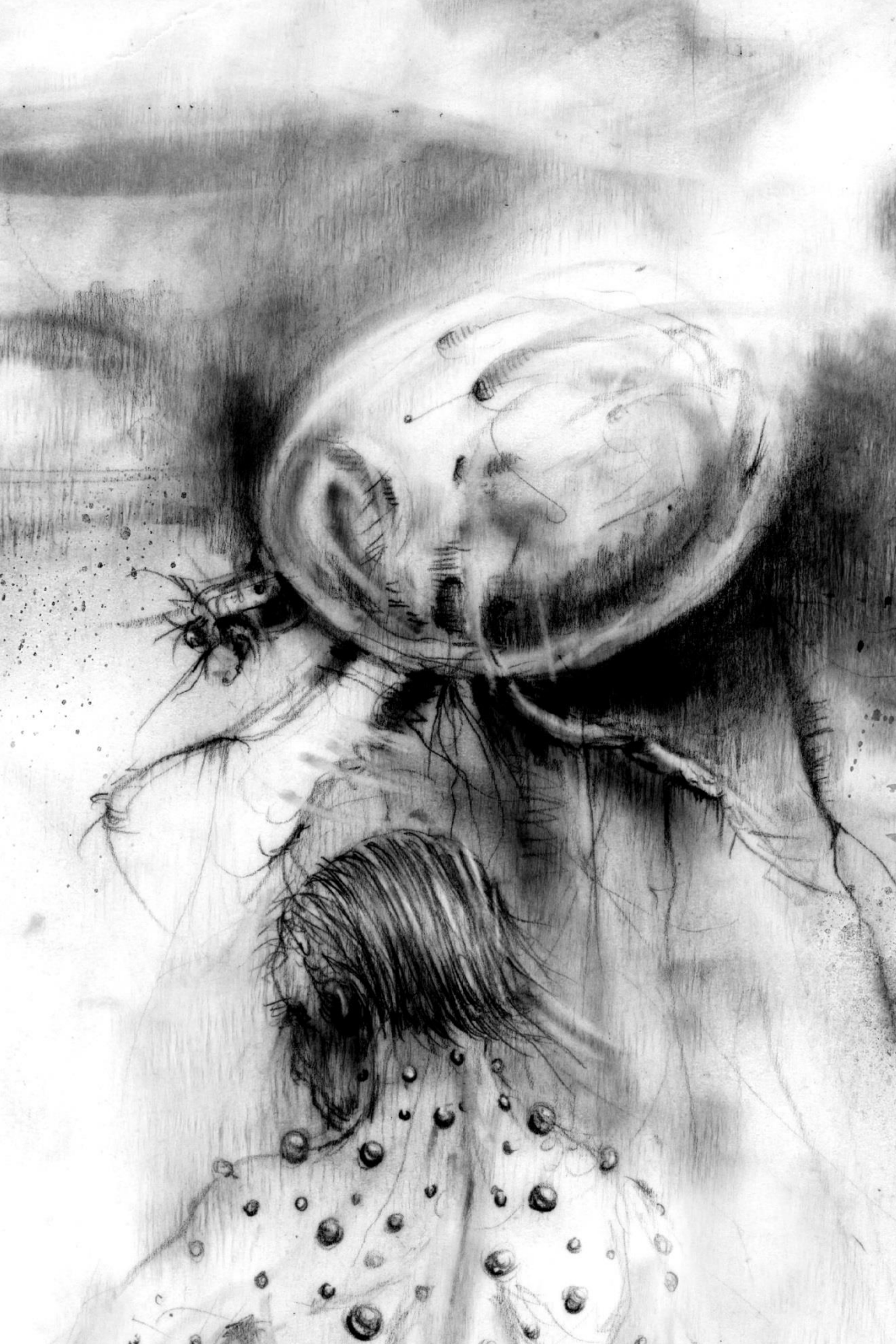
“Are you on any medications right now?”

“Nope. Just a multivitamin every day.”

“Hmm, well, let’s take a quick look and see what we’re dealing with. Go ahead and take off your shirt for me.”

Jerry took a deep breath and hesitated for a moment. Then he slowly lifted his shirt over his head.

“Okay, turn around.”



Jerry took another deep breath and turned his back to Dr. Skinner.

His notepad and pen immediately dropped to the floor. “*Oh my... how did you not know?*”

Jerry could hear the trembling in Dr. Skinner’s voice. “What is it? What’s wrong!”

Jerry spun around to see the shock engraved into Dr. Skinner’s eyes. His friendly smile had twisted into an upturned lip of disgust. He tried to be professional and hide his revolt, but Jerry could still see it all over his face.

“Son, you don’t have acne, and those aren’t pimples on your back... *they’re ticks... hundreds of ticks.*”

THE WATCHER

I am The Watcher. The shadows are my home.
I emerge at night. The dark is where I roam.

I creep up to your house and I scratch at your door.
I'm the sound in your basement, the creak of your floor.

I watch from your window, while you sleep in your bed.
I'm the phantom that stalks you, filling you with dread.

When you walk alone, I follow with glee.
There's nowhere to hide. There's nowhere to flee.

One day I'll strike, and the game will be done.
But for now, I just watch... It's so much more fun.

I'm watching you now. Go ahead, take a look.
You'll never see me... so just keep reading that book.



THE HITCHHIKER

Amanda was a crazed serial killer. There was really no other way to put it. She was slashing her way across America, hitching rides with truck drivers and then hacking them to pieces once she reached her destination.

She was a pretty girl, early twenties, blonde with striking blue eyes. This always made getting the next ride easy. Plus, she was 5'3" and 110 pounds; who would have ever suspected her?

She found herself drifting around central Indiana. The early August air was making her skin sticky and wet. The west coast wasn't supposed to be so humid—maybe she'd head that way.

When she was finally ready to leave, she simply walked out to the highway and stuck her thumb into the air. After about ten minutes, she saw a dark red semi-truck with a large eagle painted on the side. Despite the time of night, she didn't have to wait long.

"Hey there! You need a ride?" said an older woman in her early 60s. She had leathery, coarse skin and a kind, warm smile. Amanda was taken a bit off guard.

"Um, yeah. I do. I'm headed west."

"Perfect! I'm headed to Sacramento. Could always use someone to talk to."

Amanda hesitated—maybe she could give this nice woman a pass and just accept the ride without making her the next victim.

"Okay, Sacramento it is."

Amanda climbed into the passenger side and put her seat belt on.

"I'm Charlotte."

"I'm Amanda. Nice to meet you."



“So where you from, Amanda?” The woman took a long sip of coffee. It was the largest cup Amanda had ever seen.

“Uh, all over the place, I guess. I was born in Tennessee but I moved a lot as a kid.”

“Tennessee, huh? Nashville. I love that city. With all those lights and music, it’s like Midwest Las Vegas. You like country music?”

“Yeah, it’s okay I guess.”

“Good.” Charlotte turned on the radio and switched it to her favorite country station. “So, what’s waitin’ for you out west? Boyfriend? Husband?”

“To be honest? I’m just looking for a change and thought California sounded like a nice place.”

Amanda had to quietly adjust the knife in her pocket. The handle was starting to dig into her hip.

“Yeah, I hear ya. Sometimes you just need something different. That’s why I like being on the road. The scenery is always changing.”

Charlotte continued to talk as Amanda stared out the window. “*This woman never shuts up,*” she thought to herself. “*Maybe I won’t give her a pass after all. This nonstop talking is going to drive me insane... well... even **more** insane than I already am.*”

After three hours of driving, Charlotte was still chatting up a storm, and Amanda couldn’t take it anymore.

“Hey, can you stop at the next rest station? I really need to use the bathroom.”

“Sure thing, hon. Probably a good idea for me as well.”

Amanda didn’t really have to use the bathroom. She had just decided that this would be Charlotte’s “last stop,” so to speak.

As they pulled into the rest area, the parking lot was completely empty. Nobody else was there.

"Perfect," Amanda thought.

She slowly wrapped her fingers around the knife's handle, but suddenly the music on the radio cut off and was replaced by some type of public announcement.

"Attention: Illinois state police have reason to believe a wanted killer is traveling on I-70 West. The person of interest was last seen near Plainfield, Indiana and—"

Static cut the station off as Amanda sat tensely in her seat, fingers still gripping the knife in her pocket. Her heart began to race. *"How did they find out? How could they have known! I was always so careful never to leave evidence!"* Her eyes were wide and her lips started to quiver.

"Is something wrong, Amanda?" Charlotte had noticed her panic-stricken demeanor,

"Uh, no it's just, um... Did you hear the radio? People are crazy these days. Just scary to think that person is so close to us."

"You're tellin' me. But after being on the road for 20 years, I've just about seen it all."

Charlotte popped her door open, climbed down from the driver's seat, and headed into the bathroom.

As soon as she was out of sight, Amanda frantically turned the dial on the radio, searching for a better signal to hear if there were more details. *"How much information do they have? Do they know what I look like?"*

After about five minutes, she finally found a clear signal that was repeating the announcement.

"Attention: Illinois state police have reason to believe a wanted killer is traveling on I-70 West. The person of interest was last seen near Plainfield, Indiana and is considered armed and

extremely dangerous. The suspect is female, early 60s, driving a dark red semi with an eagle on the side.”

“What?”

Amanda then jolted forward violently as a sharp object plunged into her back again and again. Her mind was so shocked the pain didn’t even register, then she briefly turned her head to look in the passenger mirror. Charlotte was standing just outside the window holding a large, blood-soaked knife.

“Sorry, hon, looks like this is your last stop.”

DUMB DOG

“Hey Jake, can you do me a *huge* favor and watch Lucy over the weekend?”

Jake briefly lowered the phone, rolled his eyes, and sighed. “Seriously, Brianna, the entire weekend?”

“We can’t find anyone else. Mom and Dad are out of town, and the last time we took her to that doggy boarding place she got sick, so I’m not doing that again. Please?”

“Ugh... fine. But you owe me.”

“Oh thank you! You’re really saving us.”

“You know you treat that dog like a human child, right?”

“Well, she’s my fur-baby, which makes you her fur-uncle.”

“The sad part is you’re being serious.”

“You know you love her. How can you not? She’s so cute.”

“Okay, well, just bring her over. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Jake hung up the phone and plopped back on his bed. His carefree weekend just got filled with dog walks and poop scooping. Lucy was a good dog, and fun to play with, but she was a handful and needed attention twenty-four-seven. She also had to be at your side for every waking moment. It *really* was like taking care of a human kid.

About twenty minutes later, Jake’s sister Brianna arrived at his house. The little white puffball known as Lucy immediately sprinted in, excited to see her “fur-uncle.”

“Well hey there, Lucy. Looks like it’s me and you for the weekend.”



“Thank so much for doing this. I know she can sometimes be a pain. Just remember to take her out every three or four hours and she’ll be fine.”

Brianna set a large cloth tote bag onto the table. “Here’s her toys, food, jacket, all that stuff.”

“Her jacket?”

“Yeah, it’s cold outside, so she has a little doggy jacket. Isn’t that cute?”

“You’ve passed the point of insanity.”

“Oh, be quiet, lots of people buy clothes for their dogs.”

“Whatever you say, Sis.”

“Okay, hate to run, but Kyle and I have to hit the road. We have to be in Cincinnati by 7 pm.”

Brianna walked over to Lucy and picked her up, letting the little white dog lick all over her face. “Bye Lucy! We’ll see you in a couple days. I love you. See you on Sunday, Jake. Thanks again.”

“See ya, drive careful.”

“We will.”

As Brianna went out the front door, Jake just looked down at Lucy, who was smiling and wagging her tail.

“I guess you’re not so bad.”

...

Later that night, Jake was sitting on the couch watching TV when suddenly Lucy jumped from his lap and started barking. She rushed over to the large sliding glass door facing the backyard and growled at the darkness.

Jake stood up and peered out into the yard, wondering if Lucy had seen something, but the only movement he saw was from the trees swaying in the cold November wind.

“There’s nothing out there, Lucy, chill out.”

About an hour later, Jake was comfortably wrapped in a warm blanket. Just as he was about to doze off, his eyes ripped open to the sound of high-pitched yapping.

“Lucy! Stop!”

Again, Jake stood up and looked out into the backyard.

“There’s still nothing there. Stop barking and lie down. Seriously, you’re being annoying.”

Jake grabbed a treat from the tote bag. “Here, eat this and be quiet.”

It hadn’t even been 10 minutes when, again, Lucy went off like a fire alarm.

Yap! Yap! Yap!

“That’s it!” Jake picked Lucy up and walked outside. The brisk air felt like tiny needles on his skin.

“Look, you dumb dog, there is nothing out here.”

Lucy peered ahead towards the darkest corner of the yard where the tree line began and started to growl.

“Oh how ferocious the little puff ball is. I’m sure the raccoons out there are absolutely terrified.”

When Jake walked back in the house, he brought Lucy into the bedroom. “We’re going to sleep now. No more freaking out okay?”

Jake shut the door and turned off the lights. When he got under the covers, Lucy immediately moved to the edge of the mattress and started growling at the bedroom entrance.

“Now you don’t like doors, either? Please go to sleep, Lucy.”

After a couple more minutes of growling, Lucy finally calmed down and curled up by Jake's feet.

The next day, Lucy was happy and playful, but as soon as the sun went down, she started growling and barking at the glass door again.

"Not this again! Lucy, for the last time, there is nothing out there. Are you seeing your reflection in the glass or something?"

Jake picked her up, walked to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

"Here, I know you like peanut butter. This should shut you up for a while."

Jake spread a light coat of peanut butter all over a paper plate so Lucy couldn't just lick it up all at once. Hopefully she'd forget about whatever she was barking at.

Jake walked back to the family room and sat down.

"Finally, some quiet."

But as soon as he spoke those words, a shrill, high-pitched bark pierced the silence.

"Yap! Yap! Yap!"

"That is it! I've had it! I'm putting you in your cage, and leaving you in the bedroom until you shut up."

Jake walked over and grabbed Lucy as her barking and growling intensified. He glanced up at the glass door and paused. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and goosebumps erupted over his body.

There *was* something out there.

Jake moved closer to try and peer through the darkness. It was a tall, skinny figure, emaciated and skeleton-like. It resembled a man, but its arms and legs were unnaturally long and gangly. It just stood there—watching him.

What was even more unbelievable was it seemed to be floating in the air, and was nearly transparent. But then Jake's stomach dropped as he made a horrifying realization: He was looking at a reflection in the glass, which meant it was already in the house, standing behind him.

TASTY CHICKEN

“Wow, this looks absolutely amazing!”

It was the largest feast Maggie had ever seen, and it had all her favorite foods. Macaroni and cheese, baked beans, corn on the cobb—and best of all, her grandma’s famous fried chicken.

She couldn’t exactly remember what the occasion was, but everyone in her family was there. Maybe it was someone’s birthday, or an anniversary. She didn’t know. In fact, Maggie couldn’t even remember how she got there. Did she come with her parents? Maybe her sister? She had no idea, and the weird thing was she didn’t care. She’d worry about that after she ate all this delicious food.

Maggie picked up her fork and took a bite of the macaroni and cheese. Her taste buds exploded. It was creamy and warm, the best mac and cheese she’d ever had.

But then her mom immediately walked over and snatched the utensil from her hand. “Maggie, wake up!”

Maggie’s eyes snapped open. It took her a few seconds to adjust to the darkness, but she soon realized she was in the kitchen with her mom standing over her.

“You’ve got to stop doing this. It’s the second time this week.”

Maggie tilted her head, confused, then the realization hit her: She had been sleepwalking.

She looked down to see leftover mac and cheese from the week before spilled all over the kitchen floor. It was spoiled and moldy.

“Why do you always go for the refrigerator?”

“I...uh... I’m not sure.”



Maggie was still groggy and hadn't fully snapped out of her trance.

"We've got to get you to a sleep specialist so they can figure out how to stop this. I'm afraid you're going to hurt yourself one of these nights."

Maggie finally started to come out of her haze.

"I'm sorry Mom. It only happens when I have that dream I keep telling you about."

"The one with the family dinner?"

"Yeah, and every single time I end up right here."

Maggie's mom yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Okay, well I'm going to call Dr. Steinberg in the morning and get you scheduled for a sleep study later this week. Until then, I'm putting a lock on the fridge."

...

The next night, Maggie was lying in bed fighting her heavy eyelids. The fact that she just got up and walked around while sleeping terrified her. What if she fell down the stairs? What if she walked outside in the cold? She fought for as long as she could, but eventually her eyelids won the struggle and she dozed off.

Maggie was instantly transported back to the dining room. As usual, her favorite foods were sprawled out in front of her.

She grabbed a piece of fried chicken this time, a nice fat drumstick. It was seasoned to perfection; the aroma alone was enough to make her salivate.

Maggie brought the chicken leg to her lips, but when she tried to take a bite, an excruciating pain radiated through her right arm.

"Ow!"

“What’s wrong? Don’t you like my fried chicken?”

Maggie looked over to see her grandma standing next to the table. “It’s not that, Grandma, it’s just that my arm hurts.”

“Nonsense! You don’t like it!”

Maggie tried again to sink her teeth into the chicken leg, but the pain shot through her arm like a lightning bolt. “Ahhh, it really hurts!”

“I can’t believe you, young lady. I spent all afternoon making that chicken and now you won’t even eat it.”

The rest of the family turned around and stared at Maggie. Her dad suddenly appeared in the corner of the room and started yelling at her.

“Maggie, you’re being disrespectful!”

“Dad, something is wrong with my arm!”

“Excuses... typical from a teenage girl.”

Tears started to well up in Maggie’s eyes as she looked back to her grandma.

“Just take one bite, Maggie. It will really make me happy.”

Maggie again picked up the chicken leg. She took a deep breath and then bit down as hard as she could. The pain was like a knife ripping into her flesh. She tore a big chunk of meat off, chewed it a few times, and then swallowed. Other than the excruciating pain, it really was delicious.

“Maggie! Wake up right now!”

Suddenly the dining room went pitch black and everyone disappeared. Maggie blinked a few times letting her eyes adjust, then she realized she was back in the kitchen.

She looked up to see a huge padlock on the refrigerator, then she turned to see her mom. She didn’t look tired this time. Instead, she looked horrified. Her eyes were wide and teary, and her hand was pressed to her trembling lips.

“What have you done to yourself...”

The distinct metallic taste of blood filled Maggie’s mouth, then a sickening jolt of pain forced her to look down at her right arm.

Maggie started screaming hysterically.

She had eaten the flesh of her forearm down to the bone.



FISHING BUDDIES

“It sure is a perfect day for some fishing.”

Stan looked over at his friend Bob and nodded, then pushed a hook through a large, juicy worm. “It sure is.”

Stan and Bob were both older gentlemen who had been best friends since high school. On the first Sunday of every month, it was tradition that they would pack a lunch, grab their tackleboxes, and head out to the lake. Bob had an old boat they always used. It wasn’t anything fancy, but it was reliable, and that’s all that mattered.

On this particular Sunday, the weather was crisp and cool. Fall was just beginning, so the lake looked especially scenic as the trees showed different shades of red, orange, and yellow.

The atmosphere was about as relaxing as it could possibly be.

Stan and Bob never said much on these fishing trips. They just enjoyed the silence together. The sound most often heard was a bird chirping on a nearby tree branch, or the winding and clicking of a fishing rod.

As they floated along near the north side of the lake, Bob was reeling in his line when suddenly the end of his pole plunged down and bent sharply. “Got me a bite!” He jerked the pole up and started cranking the reel. “Oh, she’s a big one.”

Stan smiled as he looked on from the other side of the boat. “Well, don’t let her get away!”

Bob continued to reel the line in, but started to struggle a bit. “I’m tellin’ ya, Stan, this might be the biggest one I’ve ever hooked!”

“You sure you didn’t just snag a log down there?”

“No way. It’s coming up, just slowly.”

Stan edged his way over to get a better look. He grabbed the net, ready to help haul the fish in. “Look! I think I see something.” A large object started to emerge just below the surface. “Bob—that doesn’t look like any fish I’ve ever seen.”

“Well what is it?”

“Not sure, keep bringing it up.”

Little by little, the object was revealed.

Black hair started to twirl in the water as it floated to the top. It contrasted sharply to the pale, rotting flesh of a forehead, then deep hollow eye sockets, and finally, cold, blueish tinted lips that had been partially eaten away.

Stan stumbled back into the boat.

“What is it?” Bob yelled.

“It’s... it’s a dead body.”

“What?”

Bob looked over the edge to see the grisly face staring right at him. Fish were gathered all around, biting off little pieces of skin as it floated in the murky water.

Bob didn't say a word; he just kept looking at it while he held his hand over his mouth in disgust.

"What should we do?" Stan finally asked.

"Well, we should probably call the police."

"Yeah, sounds like the right thing to do."

Bob sighed. "Shame though, I was really looking forward to fishing today."

Stan looked around. "Yeah, it sure was a perfect day."

Bob looked at the dead body as it floated to the side of the boat, its head lightly bouncing off the metal.

"I mean, this fella is dead. We can't really help him any."

Stan looked over. "Nope, deader than a door nail."

There was long pause as Stan and Bob looked at each other.

"Well... what should we do?"

Bob looked out at the lake. The water was smooth and calm, the wind was light and refreshing, and the golden leaves on the trees were softly swaying back and forth. It really was the perfect day.

"Cut him loose... we've got some fishing to do."

GREMLINS

They're in your home now, like an unwanted guest.
They live in your walls, like a nasty house pest.

They prefer the dark, and they despise the light.
So keep the lamp on, and they'll stay out of sight.

When you go to sleep, that's when they come out to play.
They'll mess with your stuff, to ruin the next day.

See they're tricksters at heart, they torment and tease.
So they'll hide the remote, your shoes, and your keys.

If you can't find an item, it's them you should blame.
They'll laugh as you search, as you play their game.

These gremlins, these goblins, just don't make them mad.
If these creatures get angry, then things can get bad.

They'll forget about your wallet, your watch, or your phone.
And they'll come for your flesh, your blood, and your bones.



THE BIRD

James was enjoying the winding roads of County Road 613. It was the first week of October. The weather was still warm, the sky was crystal clear, and the leaves were showing just a hint of color. It was the perfect day for a drive.

James was going to visit his parents who lived in what many would call the “middle of nowhere.” There were cornfields for as far as the eye could see, and the closest neighbors were miles down the road. It didn’t bother James, though. He was coming from the city, and it was a welcome break from the noise, smog, and never-ending concrete.

He had about three hours of driving left before he arrived, but with the fresh air blowing through his open windows, he kind of wished it was longer.

But as he passed through a particularly sharp curve, his eyes locked in on something that didn’t quite fit the tranquil surroundings.

Blood stained the grass on the edge of the road, which was littered with chunks of flesh and fur. A large deer had been hit by a car, and its decomposing body was lying mangled near the pavement.

James had seen plenty of dead animals on the side of the road, but this one struck him differently for some reason, maybe it was how the body was contorted, maybe it was the smell; he didn’t know.

As he continued to gaze at what was left of the deer, a large black bird emerged from behind the carcass. It looked like a crow, or a raven, but it was much bigger—and much more intimidating.

It looked up at James as he passed by, then sank its beak into the deer's eye and started pulling, causing the deer's lifeless head to jerk violently.

Something about that visual was deeply unsettling to James. It made his stomach turn, and it kept playing back in his mind. It was a harsh reminder of how brutal nature could be.

Eventually his thoughts returned to more pleasant things as he continued driving. He was almost hypnotized by the road, so much so that he nearly didn't see the low fuel light blinking near the dash.

Luckily, a one stoplight town was just a couple miles ahead. As he pulled into the lone gas station, he got out of the car and took a long, deep breath of fresh air. It felt so much cleaner than the air he was used to breathing.

He stretched his arms and legs as he filled up the car, but as he stood there pumping gas, he saw a streak of black out of the corner of his eye.

He looked over and his stomach dropped.

It was the bird.

It was perched on top of the gas station sign, ruffling its feathers and squawking in James' direction. Its face and beak were still stained red from the deer blood.

"Did that thing follow me?" James mumbled to himself. Each time he looked in the bird's direction, he had flashbacks of the deer's head violently jerking as its eyeball was being ripped out. It made James shudder.

As soon as the tank was full, James hopped back in his car and sped off.



After about a half hour, James started to enjoy the drive again. It was getting to be late afternoon, and the sun was illuminating everything in a warm glow you only find in the country.

He soon passed a small farmhouse that had an old, dilapidated barn sitting next to it. The wood was rotted and cracked. It seemed as if one strong gust of wind would be enough to blow it over.

As James looked to the top of the barn, he gasped out loud. There was the bird, sitting on the edge of the roof, staring at James with its black eyes as he drove passed.

James immediately sped the car up. He wanted to get as far away from that thing as possible.

As he pressed down on the gas pedal, he weaved around a sharp turn, causing him to drift into the next lane.

He wasn't expecting another car to be there.

James ripped the wheel to the right, just barely missing a head on collision; the horn from the other car echoed through the quiet country air. But James couldn't keep control of the car. He went careening off the road and slammed into a large oak tree, knocking him unconscious.

When James finally woke up, the sun was just about to dip below the horizon. Blood was gushing from a wound on his forehead down into his eyes. He wiped it away to see his car wrapped around the tree, twisted metal and smoke everywhere.

He nudged the door open with his shoulder and collapsed to the ground. He could barely move. It felt like his back was broken.

He moaned in pain as he looked up to the sky, now a mixture of orange and yellow due to the sunset. Then a hint of black emerged in the middle of those colors. As it got closer, James knew exactly what it was: the bird.

It landed a few yards away and slowly crept up to his side. James screamed and yelled trying to scare it away, but it just twitched its head and crept closer.

The bird hopped onto his chest. Its talons digging into his skin as it inched closer to his face.

James knew what was going to happen next. He shifted his eyes toward the horizon. It was stunning, the most beautiful sunset he had ever witnessed. Then a loud, shrill squawk pierced the silence, and everything went black.

DEAD DAD

“Shut up, Mom, you don’t know anything!”

Nathan’s mom clinched her jaw and her eyes got wide.

“What did you just say, young man?”

“I said, ‘shut up.’ Are you deaf?”

Nathan started walking towards the stairs. His mom stomped right after him.

“Where do you think you’re going? I’m not done talking to you.”

“I’m going to my room. Leave me alone.”

“I will NOT leave you alone. A police officer just dropped you off at the door for stealing a stupid t-shirt of all things. You’re grounded for a month, maybe two.”

“Whatever, Mom, like I care.”

“What is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this?”

“I don’t know... I do what I want. Deal with it.”

Nathan’s Mom was nearly shaking. Her skin was red and her fists were clenched. Her blood was boiling with anger.

“I swear, Nathan, if your father were here, I’d have him whip you with a belt like my dad used to.”

Nathan smirked as he walked up the stairs. “Yeah, well, parents can’t do that anymore.”

“Your father would have been so disappointed.” Nathan’s mom covered her mouth and started sobbing. “You wouldn’t be acting like this if he were here.”

Guilt started to seep into Nathan’s stomach. He felt like he had a lump in his throat as he fought back every emotion except anger.

He knew he was wrong, but ever since his dad died, he was filled with nothing but rage.

“Yeah, well, he’s not here. He’s dead.”

Nathan’s mom continued to cry as he marched up to his room and slammed the door.

He flopped down on his bed and just stared at the ceiling, feeling sorry, feeling angry, and feeling tired.

About twenty minutes later, there was a knock at his bedroom door.

“Go away, Mom. I don’t want to talk to you.”

Three more knocks tapped at the door.

Knock... knock... knock.

“Mom! Did you hear me? I said I don’t want to talk to you!”

Then there was silence.

“Thank you. Leave me alone.”

KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK

The door vibrated and shook as it was pounded from the outside.

“Mom! You’re going to break the door! Stop!”

BAM... BAM... BAM

The door was being hit with such force, the hinges started to give. The books and games Nathan had on his shelf crashed to the floor.

“Okay! Geez!”

Nathan got up from the bed and unlocked the door. When he opened it, he immediately fell to his knees.

His dad was standing in front of him—his skin rotting and pale. The features of his face were worn down to the bone, his lips and nose completely eaten away.

He was wearing the same thing he had been buried in: a dress shirt and tie, slacks, black shoes, and finally, a large leather belt that he was now holding in his maggot covered hand.



THE CORNFIELD

“This is the best corn on the cobb I’ve ever tasted.”

Alice took another big bite, crunching into the juicy kernels. The fruit and vegetables she got from the local farmer’s market were always better than the grocery store, so she went every Sunday to stock up for the week.

“What makes the corn red? I’ve never seen this before.”

The old man sitting by the vegetable stand adjusted the bill of his cap and looked up. “It’s a hybrid seed, a special type of sweet corn. I call it the Red Queen.”

He was a grizzled fellow, his skin leathery and dark from years in the sun.

“It’s delicious; I can’t get enough of it.”

Alice wasn’t alone, everyone at the market was raving about the “Red Queen” sweet corn.

“Any chance I can come by your farm and take a few pictures? I’m a photographer for the local newspaper.”

The old man took a deep breath and looked towards the ground, contemplating the decision. “Yeah that would be fine.”

He took out a crumpled old business card with directions and handed it to her. “Come on by tomorrow afternoon.”

Alice smiled. “Thanks! I’ll be there.”

...

The next day, Alice drove deep into the country. She immediately knew she was in the right place when she saw a vast, red cornfield sprawling across the horizon.



She'd never seen anything like it in her life.

As she pulled up to the farmhouse, the grizzled old farmer walked outside and met her at the gravel drive.

"Hey there!" Alice beamed. "Thanks again for letting me come out here."

The old man would barely look her in the eye. "Well, go on and get to it."

Alice was a bit taken back by how inhospitable the man seemed. "Um... okay."

Alice grabbed her camera gear and headed straight towards the ocean of deep red corn. The stalks were twice as tall as any normal corn stalks she'd seen.

Snap... Snap... Snap

Her camera clicked as she rattled off shot after shot.

The cornfield loomed above her, almost beckoning her to step inside. She continued forward, letting the sea of red surround her. With each step, the husks brushed against her skin, the sunlight scattering through the stalks towering above.

She lifted her camera for another shot, focusing in on a particularly bright ear of corn bursting out of its leafy encasement.

As the camera focused in, Alice noticed something odd. A red liquid was dripping from the husk. She reached her hand out and touched it, rubbing it between her fingers.

"Blood?" she whispered to herself.

She grabbed the ear of corn and ripped it open, more red liquid spurted all over her hands.

Alice inspected the corn closely, then her stomach turned and the air in her lungs seemed to evaporate.

There was a human tooth lodged inside.

"I'm so sorry. You must understand."

Alice whipped around to see the old farmer standing just outside the field, his face solemn, his eyes welling up with tears.

“The Red Queen must eat. If she doesn’t, she will spread. I’m so sorry...”

Alice felt something wrap around her legs, her arms, and her neck. It was coarse and fibrous—the corn stalks.

She struggled and cried out for help, but it didn’t matter. She was pulled deeper and deeper into the field until the sound of her screams could no longer be heard.

VOODOO

“What in the world could this be?” Jenna wondered.

A small package was sitting just outside the front door of her house. There was no address written on it, no postage, no markings whatsoever.

She lightly bit her lip, apprehensive at the thought of bringing a mystery package into her house. But that only lasted a few seconds, as her curiosity soon took over.

Was this an early birthday present? Maybe a surprise from one of her friends?

She picked the package up and brought it inside, shaking it a bit before placing it on the kitchen table. It wasn't heavy and didn't seem that fragile, maybe it was that magnetic desk ornament she had ordered months ago that never showed up.

As she tore away the brown paper covering, a small wooden box was revealed. It was fashioned into the shape of an old coffin, like something a vampire would sleep in.

“This is a bit creepy,” she mumbled to herself.

Jenna slowly cracked it open revealing a faded brown doll. It was crudely stitched together and had buttons for eyes. Even stranger, it had a little hat that oddly resembled one Jenna liked to wear.

“Okay, now it's really creepy.”

She immediately picked up her phone and fired off a text message to her best friend.

“Very funny Julie, was the voodoo doll supposed to be an early Halloween prank or something?”

Julie responded almost immediately.



“Voodoo doll? What are you talking about? I didn’t send you anything.”

Jenna looked back at the doll with its stitched in smile lying on the table. Someone was playing a trick on her, she just had to figure out who.

She poured a glass of ice water and sat down to send more text messages. But with her eyes locked on her cell phone instead of the glass, she accidently tipped it over, spilling cold liquid all over the place.

One of the ice cubes slid over to the right arm of the voodoo doll. As soon as it touched the fabric, an instant freezing sensation shocked Jenna’s skin.

Jenna backed away from the table in disbelief.

“That’s not possible...”

Her lips were trembling as she watched the ice cube melt next to the doll.

She grabbed another ice cube from the freezer, her hand trembling from fear and the cold. She slowly walked up to the doll and touched its left arm with the ice, again a frigid chill burned on her skin.

Jenna stumbled backwards, catching herself on the kitchen counter. Her entire body was shaking with terror as her mind tried to comprehend what was happening.

She walked over to the doll and placed it inside the box it came in. She needed to put it somewhere safe until she figured out what to do.

As she walked out of the kitchen and turned the corner, she tripped on her dog, Zeus, a large German Shepherd who was lying in the family room.

Jenna crashed to the floor sending the box with the voodoo doll flying across the room. The box hit a bookshelf, snapping open the wooden lid and causing the doll to tumble down violently.

As soon as it hit the hardwood flooring a sharp pain erupted from Jenna's lower back, causing her to cry out in agony.

She got to her knees and took several deep breaths, then tried to crawl towards the doll. But when she looked up, she saw Zeus standing over it.

"No! Zeus, please, come here! Leave the doll alone!"

But Zeus didn't listen. He sniffed the doll a few times and wagged his tail.

It had been a long time since he got a new chew toy.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

You've caused someone's death; the probability is high.
But it wasn't on purpose, you didn't know they would die.

It was likely a stranger, someone you've never even met.
Maybe it was a John, a Bill, or a girl named Annette.

You didn't kill them with a knife, a gun, or a bat.
You killed them with a choice, it's as simple as that.

That choice was a link, in a long chain of events.
Listen to this closely, or it won't make any sense.

One day you went left, instead of going right.
And you stopped at yellow, instead of the red light.

A man was behind you, and your choice made him late.
Little did you know, you had sealed his fate.

You turned off the road, and continued your day.
The man went straight, heading his own way.

As he drove down the road, he looked over with dread.
He was hit by a bus, and then he was dead.

Two seconds earlier, it would have stopped on a dime.
But the bus never saw him, it was the wrong place, wrong time.

If it wasn't for you, the man wouldn't have wrecked.
Because every choice matters, it's called the butterfly effect.





THE LONELY HIGHWAY

Amanda was driving down Highway 67 in absolute silence. At 3 a.m. she was pretty much the only person on the road. The quiet of night calmed her, a small retreat from the hustle and bustle that occurred during the day.

As she passed a rest stop, a lone semi-truck pulled onto the highway. Amanda sighed, a bit disappointed she now had to share the road. She decided she would let it pass.

The semi switched lanes to move ahead, but it slowed down a bit once it was parallel to Amanda's car. It then slowed down even further, and re-entered the lane right behind her.

"What is this guy doing?" Amanda mumbled as she stared in the rear-view mirror.

Suddenly the semi's lights started flickering on and off. Then its horn blasted through the cool night air like a freight train.

Amanda's stomach started to knot as adrenaline pulsed through her veins. She pushed down on the gas to try and pull away, but the semi stayed right on her tail, the lights continued to flash, and the horn continued to shake her tiny little car. She couldn't get away.

If she didn't stop, the semi was going to run her off the road.

She slowed down and pulled over into the gravel. The semi did the same.

Amanda's heart was beating like a jackhammer. She opened the glove box and pulled out the first aid kit, she knew there was a knife in there.

She opened the car door and stepped out into the blinding headlights of the semi, holding the knife behind her back.

The semi driver opened his door and dropped down onto the pavement. It was an older man wearing a cowboy hat, blue jeans, and boots.

"Ma'am, I know I probably scared you to death, but you need to get away from that car right now."

Amanda's breathing intensified, she apprehensively took a few steps toward the truck driver.

"Seriously, Ma'am, I'm not going to hurt you. Just come on over here, away from that car."

Amanda took a few more steps and finally spoke up.

"What's wrong with my car?"

The truck driver raised his hands to show he didn't have a weapon or anything dangerous.

Amanda continued walking toward him and stopped about ten yards from where he was standing.

"Ma'am, I'm just gonna come right out and say it. There's a man in your backseat, it looked like he was covered in blood."

Amanda stumbled back, her entire body started to tremble.

“What?”

The truck driver took a few steps forward, hands still raised.

“When I was about to pass you, I looked down and saw him behind the driver’s seat.”

Amanda looked back to her car. It was just sitting there, bathed in an ominous glow from the truck lights.

“Will you come look in the car for me?”

The truck driver nodded his head, and grabbed a revolver from the cab.

He slowly approached Amanda’s car, as she followed behind him.

He stopped along the side, crouched down and reached for the handle. He then ripped the door open and pointed his gun inside.

Indeed, there was a man in the back covered in blood. But he wasn’t alive.

“This man is dead...”

Suddenly the truck driver jolted forward violently as a sharp object plunged into his back again and again. His mind was so shocked the pain didn’t even register, then he briefly turned his head to look in the driver side mirror. Amanda was standing behind him holding a large, blood-soaked knife.

“I know, I’m the one who killed him.”

Soon the truck driver dropped to the pavement, lifeless.

Amanda looked around at the carnage of the scene. Two dead bodies, an old beat up car, and a semi-truck... she needed to leave immediately, but where would she go?

“Indiana might be nice,” she thought. “Maybe I’ll go there.”

DO NOT READ THIS

DO NOT READ THIS!

Seriously, stop reading right now. Skip this story...

I said STOP. Why are you continuing to read?

Do you not understand what “stop reading” means?

STOP! Something bad is going to happen if you keep going!

IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE, STOP READING!

...

DO NOT KEEP READING

DO NOT KEEP READING

DO NOT KEEP READING

DO NOT KEEP READING

DO NOT KEEP READING

...

This is my last warning. If you keep going, I can't help you.

Please, I'm begging you, don't let the cycle continue.

This is your final chance. Don't turn the page.

STOP NOW!



If you're reading this, it's too late. You've seen it, and it has seen you... it never forgets a face.

We don't know how it got inside the book. The illustration just randomly showed up in the first print, and we definitely didn't put it there. It seems to be some type of spirit, or demon, we're not exactly sure.

All we know is that once you've seen it, you have 24 hours to show its face to someone else... or it will come for you.

It might show up the second after the 24-hour period has passed, or it might wait months, even years, before it decides you're next. It loves to create fear and anxiety, to have you looking over your shoulder waiting for it to finally arrive.

Again, if you're reading this, you have two options. You can either stop the cycle and accept your fate, or you can show the illustration to someone else within 24 hours. This works digitally as well, so whether it's right or wrong, many have decided to share the image on social media.

We're trying to track this activity as best we can, like a virus that's rapidly spreading. So if you decide to go that route, you can help us by tagging your post with #thebookdemon or something similar.

If you show someone else the image, please make sure they know the rules. It will save their life.

We're so sorry this happened (but we did warn you beforehand). We're doing everything we can to stop this thing.

But until we do... you have 24 hours.

TOE-EATERS

Termites, cockroaches, ants, mice... none of them are as bad as *toe-eaters*.

Nobody knows where they originated from, but they're almost impossible to get rid of. In fact, one man was so frustrated with his toe-eater infestation, that he burned his entire house down to try and kill them. It still didn't work.

They're nocturnal creatures that live underground, only coming out when it's time to feed. But if they make their way into your house, they become much more active, living inside the walls, crawl spaces, and other dark, cool places.

The first thing you'll notice if you have a toe-eater infestation is all the other house pests will suddenly disappear. The reason is simple, the toe-eaters eat them... they eat almost anything. But their favorite food of all is 100% cotton, tinged with the scent of feet. For this reason, old socks are like a delicacy to them. Ever have an old sock go missing, even though you looked absolutely *everywhere*? A toe-eater is most likely to blame. And just like most pests, if there's one, that means there are many, many more.

As far as appearance goes, they're nasty little monsters. They're about the size and shape of a golf ball, except covered in dark brown fur. Their eyes are almost non-existent, but they have a large mouth filled with needle-like teeth. They're like a nightmarish mix between a small rat and Pac-man.

Most of the time, they move using four spider-like legs, but if they're threatened or need to move quickly, they ball themselves up and roll away at a surprising speed. If you've ever seen one, you probably just thought it was a mouse scurrying away.



As mentioned before, if you find yourself with a toe-eater infestation, there's not much you can do other than move out of the house. But if you decide to stay, there's an important piece of advice you should follow no matter what.

They're called "toe-eaters" for a reason... so don't ever...*ever*... fall asleep with your foot off the bed.

HIDE AND SEEK

“Ready or not, here I come!” Marci uncovered her eyes and started creeping down the stairs.

Whenever she babysat little Jessica, she knew the evening would involve a few games of hide and seek. And for a 5-year-old, Jessica was pretty good at it.

Marci tip-toed into the family room. She looked behind the TV and under the coffee table. No Jessica.

She moved to the kitchen and looked inside the large bottom cabinets, one by one. Again, no Jessica.

Marci walked to the master bedroom. She looked under the bed, in the closet, in the adjoining bathroom shower. Still, no Jessica.

She went through every room on the first floor, and every spot she could think of, but Jessica remained hidden.

“Okay Jessica, I give up. Come on out now.”

A tiny little voice peeped up from the adjacent room.

“You’re so close! I’m in here.”

Marci walked over to the room and searched all around.

“Jessica, you win. I can’t find you.”

Jessica’s voice again shouted out, only this time from the hallway near the garage entrance. Marci walked over there, it was nothing but empty space.

“Seriously, Jessica, come out right now or I’m going to tell your mom.”

The voice was back in the family room. It seemed to come from behind the sofa, “Aw, don’t be a tattletale. That’s not very nice.”



Marci stomped toward the sound and pulled the love seat back, again Jessica was nowhere to be found, and Marci was getting agitated.

“Jessica, you have until the count of three to tell me where you are, or you are going to bed immediately.”

The voice shouted from near the basement door on the other side of the house.

“But it’s only 8 o’clock!”

Marci folded her arms, “Exactly my point.”

“Okay fine! I’m down in the basement.”

Marci rolled her eyes, “That’s cheating. You know the rules. First floor of the house only.”

Marci walked to the basement door and opened it, the stairs seemed to fade into a pitch-black void that dissipated as soon as she flipped the light switch on.

“Jessica, are you trying to scare me or something?”

“No, I need you to come down here though, I think I hurt myself running in the dark.”

Marci sighed and shook her head, then descended down the wooden steps one by one.

“See, that’s what you get when you break the ru—”

Jessica wasn’t in the basement.

“Marci, what are you doing down there?”

Marci looked up to see Jessica standing at the top of the stairs.

“But you just said you were down here?”

Jessica crinkled her little brow, “Why would I be down there, that’s against the rules. I was under all the towels in the laundry room.”

Marci’s stomach dropped as goosebumps exploded across her skin.

“Then who was I talking to?”

Suddenly the lights cut off and the basement door slammed shut.

Marci was in absolute darkness.

She could feel the warmth of something breathing on the back of her neck. And when it finally spoke, it still mimicked the sound of Jessica’s voice.

“You were talking to me. I’m right behind you.”

BEDTIME

Check the garage.
Check the door locks.
Check the window locks.
Check the shower.
Check behind the bookshelf.
Check the coat closet.
Check behind the couch.
Check behind the TV stand.
Check under the bed.
Check the bedroom closet.

Adam was meticulous when it came to his bedtime checklist. Every single night it was the same thing. If he didn't go through the list, he never felt safe enough to fall asleep.

Some would say Adam had Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or "OCD." Others thought he simply watched too many horror movies.

Nonetheless, every night the list had to be checked.

Check the garage.
Check the door locks.
Check the window locks.
Check the shower.
Check behind the bookshelf.
Check the coat closet.
Check behind the couch.
Check behind the TV stand.

Check under the bed.

Check the bedroom closet.

One night, Adam got home particularly late. His eyelids were so heavy he could barely stand. He wanted nothing more than the warmth and comfort of his king-sized bed... to crawl under the sheets and fade into a blissful dreamland.

For the first time in years, he thought about skipping the checklist. But he knew deep down he could never do that. He slowly trudged to the garage door and started the process.

Check the garage.

Check the door locks.

Check the window locks.

Check the shower.

Check behind the bookshelf.

Check the coat closet.

Check behind the couch.

Check behind the TV stand.

Check the bedroom closet.

As soon as he was done, Adam flopped onto his puffy comforter. He threw the covers over himself and laid his head on a cool, perfectly fluffed pillow.

He smiled as he closed his eyes. Nothing could match the satisfaction of that moment.

But just as he was about to drift off, a grizzled, deep voice pierced the silence.

“You forgot to check under the bed.”



NIGHTMARE SOUP

II

THE SECOND HELPING



NIGHTMARE SOUP III

MIDNIGHT SNACK



NIGHTMARE SOUP

III

MIDNIGHT SNACK



THE HUNGER

“I’m so hungry, my stomach is practically screaming.”

Johnny clutched his abdomen as he browsed the diner menu, his mouth salivating at the pictures of juicy cheeseburgers, chicken sandwiches, and chili cheese dogs. His friend Carl sat across from him in the booth, also deciding on what to eat.

“I hear ya, man, I could eat everything on the menu.”

After a few minutes, Glenda the waitress came over with a couple glasses of water. “You boys figure out what you want?”

Johnny quickly spoke up. “I’ll have the double bacon cheeseburger with fries, a chili cheese dog, and a Coke... Oh, and the chicken wings.”

“Well, someone is certainly hungry.” Glenda laughed. “And what can I get you, hon?”

“I’ll have the bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke as well,” Carl added.

“Okay, boys, we’ll have that right out to ya.”

As Glenda walked away, Johnny’s stomach started growling so loud Carl almost thought a small animal had snuck under the table.

“Jeez, man, I can hear that from over here.”

Johnny held his stomach as it continued to gurgle and whine. “Dude, I’m not kidding, I don’t think I’ve ever been this hungry.”

It wasn’t much longer until Glenda came out with the food. Johnny was so impatient he nearly snatched it out of her hands.

“Whoa now, hon, don’t bite my hand off.”

Johnny immediately stuffed the double cheeseburger into his mouth, grease dripping down his chin.

He apologized with his mouth still full of food. “I’m sorry, Glenda, I haven’t eaten all day.” He took another bite, and another. Carl and Glenda just watched in awe.

“Dude, slow down. You’re gonna choke or something,” Carl insisted, but Johnny just kept going.

He finished every bite of his food—the cheeseburger, the fries, the chili dog, and the wings—in just a couple minutes. Finally satisfied, he sat back in the booth and slowly sipped on his soda. A smile cut across his greasy, ketchup-stained lips.

Carl and Glenda were still watching. Carl hadn’t even taken a bite yet.

“I’m tellin’ ya, in my twenty years of servin’ folks food, I have never seen something like that. Thanks for the show kid.” She walked off, laughing to herself and shaking her head.

“Seriously, are you okay? I’ve never seen someone eat like that except for those competitive eating guys on TV.”

Johnny just smiled again and rubbed his now bulging, full stomach. “Yeah, Carl, I’m fine. I was just really, *really* hungry.”

When Johnny got home later that night, he continued to eat everything he could get his hands on. Chips, frozen pizzas, cupcakes; he nearly cleaned out the refrigerator. He only stopped eating because he fell asleep on the couch, with a pizza slice lying on his chest.

Johnny’s mom woke him up the next morning. “Get up, Johnny, it’s 7:30. You’re gonna be late for school.”

Johnny wiped his eyes and sat up. Immediately, his stomach started to grumble again. As he walked to his room to change his clothes, his mom stopped him.

“Johnny, have you been losing weight?”

Confused, Johnny looked down at himself. “Umm, not really. Why?”

“Hmm, those clothes just look big on you. Maybe I’m just seeing things. Anyway, I gotta head to work. Have a good day, son.”

Johnny entered the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror... He did look a bit skinnier.

He stepped on the small metallic scale next to the toilet and audibly gasped.

“How in the world did I lose ten pounds?”

Suddenly a sharp pain ripped through his abdomen, causing Johnny to double over. His stomach grumbled so loud he could feel the vibration in his throat.

“What is wrong with me?” he mumbled to himself. “And how am I still so hungry?”

Johnny immediately went to the kitchen and gobbled down a large chocolate muffin. He instantly felt better.

On the way to school, Johnny’s stomach started rumbling again, causing him to stop at a fast-food joint and order five breakfast sandwiches. He finished all of them within the fifteen-minute drive.

And when he got to class, he had to leave twice to go to the vending machines, because his grumbling stomach made everyone stare at him.

Carl eventually caught up with him during a passing period.

“Hey, man, are you okay? Jenny said she could hear your stomach from the other side of the room in first period.”

Johnny opened a bag of chips and began munching on them.

“Something’s wrong, man. I can’t stop eating. Seriously I’m hungry 24/7. And if I stop my stomach starts to hurt. Even weirder, I lost ten pounds...overnight.”

“What?” Carl stepped back and took a good look at his friend. “Dude, you do look skinnier. You gotta go to the doctor. That’s not right.”

Johnny sighed. “Ugh, I hate the doctor. I absolutely hate it. I’ll give it one more day to see if it calms down. Maybe I’m just going through a growth spurt or something.”

“At age 17?”

Johnny munched on another handful of chips as he walked towards his next class.

“Stranger things have happened.”

...

Johnny continued eating nearly every hour that he was awake. If he stopped, the pain in his stomach would become nearly unbearable. And instead of going to the doctor right away, he just kept trying to ignore it, hoping that the hunger would simply go away. But it wasn’t the constant eating that started to truly worry him, it was the drastic weight loss.

After just one week, Johnny had lost nearly fifty pounds.

...

“Dr. Jenson will see you now.”

Johnny stood up, his mom by his side, and followed the nurse into an exam room.

After a few minutes, Dr. Jenson walked in and greeted them.

“Okay, Johnny, so what’s going on? Based on your chart you dropped some pretty significant weight since last time you were here.”

“I have to eat almost every hour, and if I don’t my stomach grumbles extremely loudly, and I get these sharp pains in my abdomen. But the strangest thing is that I’ve dropped almost fifty pounds...in just under seven days.”

Dr. Jenson furrowed his brow. “That can’t be...”

Johnny stood up. His baggy clothes hung off his frame like a wet towel drying on a clothesline.

“I promise you.”

Dr. Jenson immediately had Johnny lie back as he palpated and listened to his stomach with a stethoscope. A roaring groan and gurgle erupted from Johnny’s abdomen. Dr. Jenson nearly fell off his exam stool. His face was a picture of shock.

“Not to alarm you, but I think we need to get you to the emergency room.”

A couple hours later, Johnny was sitting in another exam room listening to a specialist explain that they were going to put him to sleep and look through his intestines using a specialized scope. This would show them what was going on inside his stomach.

Johnny could only lie there and wait for the anesthesia to take effect. He could feel his stomach churning and pulsating. The hunger was stronger than ever. And the last thing he thought of before everything went black, was a thick, greasy, double bacon-cheeseburger.

...

The calm void of darkness soon gave way to an annoyingly bright light as Johnny slowly awoke from the procedure. He felt groggy and confused, especially as the first image in front of him was a group of noticeably concerned faces.

“Is everything okay? Did they find what was wrong with me?” he murmured.

The doctor that performed the procedure sat down by Johnny’s side and took a deep breath.

“Son, you’re not going to like hearing this, but I’ll just come right out and say it... You have a twin growing inside you... I’ve only read about this in medical journals as it’s *incredibly* rare, but you likely absorbed it in the womb, and it’s been slowly growing for the past 17 years. It’s just now large enough to notice and has co-opted your digestive system. It’s basically a giant parasite, eating everything you eat and absorbing the nutrients like a massive tapeworm. It even has teeth and hair. Every time you have a meal, you’ve been eating for two, but the twin is consuming too much of your body’s resources, which is why you’ve been drastically losing weight. We’re going to have to operate immediately before it grows any larger.”

Johnny immediately ripped the medical gown from his torso and looked down at his bloated stomach. It gurgled and churned like never before, and that’s when he finally felt it. A writhing mass of teeth, hair, and twisted organic tissue pulsing inside his body. The twin hadn’t been fed in several hours, and it was *extremely* hungry.

Author’s note: “Fetus in fetu” is a rare developmental abnormality in which a mass of tissue resembling a fetus forms inside the body of its twin. Only seven cases have been found in people age 15 or older.

THE MOTEL

The following is based on a true story...

“Please get out of the city and head to the West Coast... please. It will just make me feel better.”

Jake paced back and forth across his small apartment living room, holding his phone to his ear.

“Fine, Mom, fine. I’ll do it, but it’s a waste of time. There is no way the hurricane will do much damage this far inland. I’m in the middle of the state.”

Jake took a deep breath and sighed as he plopped a small travel bag onto his bed.

“I’ll be lucky to find a place to stay. The entire east coast of Florida has the exact same idea.”

“I’ll be worried all night if you don’t go. Just do it for your mom.”

Jake grabbed whatever clean clothes were around him, plus a few bathroom items, and haphazardly tossed them into his bag. “Okay, Mom, I’m leaving now, just for you. I’ll call you when I get there. I love you.”

Jake hung up the phone and took another long, deep breath. He pulled up a hotel booking app on his phone, but it didn’t take long for him to realize every hotel and motel on the West Coast, from Panama City all the way down to Naples, was completely filled.

“I knew it,” he muttered angrily to himself. He grabbed his bag and headed down to his car.

...

After nearly two hours of driving, Jake stopped at a gas station and opened the hotel app. Still, nothing was available. The wind and rain had picked up significantly as palm trees near the parking lot started to sway somewhat violently. If the weather was this bad all the way over here, how bad was it getting back east? Maybe his mom was right to convince him to leave. Still though, he didn't have any place to stay, and didn't know anyone in the area he could call.

His only option was to sit in his car, constantly refresh the hotel app, and hope something became available, all while heavy sheets of rain slammed into his windshield.

...

After another hour passed and the weather continued to deteriorate, Jake tried the app one more time. A single, solitary motel popped up in the results. One vacancy available.

The motel was in a middle of nowhere town about twenty miles from the western coast, almost near the Everglades. The pictures didn't exactly look inviting, and it had a 2-star rating out of 5, but at this point, all Jake needed was shelter.

It was either that or find some concrete parking garage to stay the night in, and at least the motel would have a bed and television.

It took Jake another half hour to reach the motel. At this point it was already deep into the night, and the wind and rain were whipping across his car, howling and hissing like some kind of rabid animal.

Jake stopped his car amid broken branches and palm tree leaves that already littered the area around the parking lot. He grabbed his bag and rushed into the small check-in area. Even just

a few seconds in the downpour were enough to soak him to the bone.

The old woman at the front desk was emotionless and cold.

“Checking in?” she asked.

Jake wiped the cold rain from his face. “Yeah, it’s under Jake Thomas.”

The woman took his credit card, swiped it, and gave it back to him with no emotion whatsoever.

“There’s a \$150 deposit for the room. You’re lucky, it was our last one due to a cancellation. It’s on the second floor, all the way to the left. Room 217.”

“Thanks.”

Jake grabbed the room key and trudged back out into the rain. Everything about this motel shouted ‘grimy, unclean, unmaintained’, but what choice did he have?

He walked to the far end of the building. The lights meant to illuminate the outside of each door were broken. Only one worked, but it dimly flickered like a candle about to be extinguished.

As Jake walked up to 217, he looked out into the palm trees surrounding the motel. They swayed eerily back and forth, scraping against the side of the building like a swamp creature dragging its claws against the concrete.

‘Bad vibes’ would be an understatement.

Jake opened the door and was immediately hit with a musty, stale smell, like water from outside had been leaking through the roof onto the carpet. He reached for the light switch and flipped it up.

Nothing. Just a dark, foreboding void staring back at him.

“This night just keeps getting better,” he muttered to himself.

He threw his bag on the bed and reached out to a small lamp sitting on a cheap nightstand. Finally, some light. It was just

enough to make his way around the room without bumping into anything.

At this point, Jake was exhausted. All he wanted to do was watch some TV and drift off to sleep. He was leaving this trash-box motel first thing in the morning.

He changed into some dry clothes and plopped down onto the bed, then grabbed the remote and pointed it at the old, tube style television that looked to be about twenty-five years old. He pressed the power button, which of course didn't work.

Jake sighed and sat up, trudged over to the TV, checked to make sure it was plugged in and hit the power button. Still nothing.

"You've got to be kidding me."

With barely any cell reception and no Wi-Fi, scrolling through his phone wasn't much of an option either, so he turned off the lamp and crawled into the rough, wrinkled blankets of the small twin bed. It wasn't comfortable at all, but Jake tried his best to just close his eyes and hope he could get some much-needed rest.

About a half-hour later, Jake's eyes suddenly ripped open. Not only were the wind and rain raging outside, but he felt a *crawling* sensation on his stomach. Then seconds later, something skittered across his right arm.

Jake violently threw the covers off the bed and reached over for the lamp. As soon as he turned on the light and looked at his body, his stomach twisted into a hard knot and a scream erupted from his throat.

Bed bugs... Bed bugs *everywhere*. Hundreds of them embedded into his flesh, from his legs to his upper chest, feasting on his blood.



He rushed to the bathroom in a panic, slammed the handle of the shower to the 'on' position, and jumped into the icy cold water, not caring what temperature it was.

He smashed, ripped, and clawed every bug from his body. He washed his hair five times, scrubbing and scraping his scalp until it was red and raw. He spent over forty minutes in the shower just making sure he had rid himself completely of the nasty little parasites.

When Jake got out of the shower, he still felt sick to his stomach. He walked back to the bed and peeled away the sheets, revealing more bed bugs awaiting his return. But as soon as they were discovered and the faint glow of the lamp was upon them, they silently scattered to any crevice they could find.

The storm outside seemed to be at its strongest point. Jake could hear the thrashing palm trees slamming into the building. Leaving the room wasn't an option; Jake was stuck inside with the nasty little insects that lusted for his blood.

He decided the best place to stay would be the bathroom. He'd simply dry the tub off and then put a pillow in there and lie down to try and get a few hours of rest.

Yet again he found himself in an extremely uncomfortable position, but it was better than the infestation that likely occupied every corner of the bedroom area.

Jake didn't get any sleep at all that night. As soon as the sun came up and the storm had finally calmed down, he grabbed his things and angrily marched down to the office.

He ripped open the door to the surprise of the old woman, who had just arrived back at the check-in desk.

Jake smashed the room key onto the counter.

"Bed bugs! Bed bugs EVERYWHERE!"

He slammed the door on his way out and walked to his car, stepping over storm debris that covered the entire area.

As Jake pulled out of the parking lot, the wind was still howling through the air. He took a deep breath, a sigh of relief to be done with such a disgusting, horrible night.

But at that very moment, Jake felt a very distinct crawling sensation creeping across his scalp.

BEST FRIENDS

“The water is almost gone. Here, I want you to have the last sip.” Hank handed Jerry the nearly empty container, his hands shaking with weakness and dehydration. “I thought it would last us a lot longer.”

Hank and Jerry had been stranded on the ocean for over seven days...

They had been traveling in a small single-engine airplane from California to Mexico, headed to a popular fishing destination just across the border. It was supposed to be a week of adventure and fun shared by two best friends, but it quickly turned into a nightmare when the engine unexpectedly failed, and they were forced to crash into the water several miles from the coast.

Hank was piloting and able to get a mayday message out, but they weren't sure if anyone had received it. Luckily, both men survived the actual collision and emerged relatively unharmed. Jerry even had the emergency life raft inflated and ready to go, complete with a first aid kit and a small supply box.

They never imagined they'd be in such a situation, as it was something that only occurred in the movies. Something that only happened to *other* people. Yet here they were, still floating on the vast ocean waters, desperately thirsty, painfully hungry, and quickly running out of time.

The two men were sprawled out on opposite ends of the life raft, the blazing hot sun beating down on their red, blistered bodies. They tried to create a small area of shade, but it was only temporary, and barely provided any relief.



Their prayers for rain also went unanswered. They couldn't even take a quick dip in the water to cool off, as sharks had been circling them for days.

Hank seemed to be holding up a bit better than Jerry, who was deteriorating fast.

"I'm so hungry, Hank. It feels like my stomach is eating itself. I can barely take it." Jerry held his stomach and curled up into a ball. Despite just taking a drink of water, his lips were white and crusty from dehydration.

Hank pulled the last chunk of a protein bar out of his pocket. "Here, you can have this too... It's the last of everything that was in the supply box."

The men had already tried rowing towards the direction they thought the shoreline was, but after hours upon hours of exertion, land was still nowhere in sight.

And while they had heard of people surviving far longer than a week in the ocean, they couldn't see how they had much time left, given their lack of supplies, water, and the deadly heat pounding down on them from the radiating sun. Hank especially knew their situation was looking grim.

"Jerry...I'm about to say something that may sound weird, but I want you to know I'm dead serious about it."

Jerry sat up, knowing his friend was about to make an important statement.

"If for some reason I don't make it, I want you to make use of...what's left."

Jerry's eyebrows bunched in confusion. "What are you taking about?"

Hank looked out into the vast ocean, knowing what he was about to say would be a shock. “If I...expire...before you, you can use what’s left of me to survive.”

“You mean you want me to eat you? Hank, you can’t start talking like this, there’s still a chance someone could find us.”

“I know, Jerry, I know... I’m just saying, worst case scenario. We won’t make it much longer without food and water.”

Jerry took a moment to let Hank’s words sink in. He lay back down and curled into a ball, feeling his stomach twisting in hunger. Hank was right.

“Okay, Hank, I understand. And just for the record, same thing goes for me. If I don’t make it, then do what you gotta do.”

Hank simply nodded and looked back out at the ocean.

...

Two more days passed, and both men had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. Their last ounce of hope, and their last flare, had been used on a passing cargo boat in the distance that never saw them. At this point both men seemed resigned to their fate.

Jerry leaned over the edge of the raft and looked at the ocean water gently swaying back and forth. It looked cool and inviting. And he was so thirsty, all he wanted was to wet his lips, just one little drink.

“Hank, I’m going to drink some ocean water. I can’t take it anymore; I just need one drink.

Hank could barely lift his head up. “Don’t do it, Jerry, the salt will just dehydrate you quicker. You’ll start to become delusional.”

Jerry looked out into the seemingly infinite abyss spread out around them. He thought he saw giant shadows swimming below.

Maybe whales, maybe sea monsters. Everything had started to become a hazy blur.

“I think it’s too late for that, Hank.”

And with that Jerry leaned over the raft, cupped his hand, and splashed some ocean water into his mouth. The salt burned the back of his tongue as it traveled down his throat, but it was cool and the wetness upon his lips provided some relief.

He drank another scoop, and another, until his belly was full of the soupy ocean mixture of water, sodium, and tiny floating organisms.

Jerry knew it was a horrible move, it likely signed his death warrant, but for the moment it was worth it.

“I just want you to know you were a great friend, Hank. Thanks for being there for me all those years.”

Hank could barely respond. “You too, Jerry, you too.”

After a couple hours had passed, Jerry started to feel the effects of drinking from the ocean. His stomach was tearing itself to pieces from the violent mix of hunger and toxic salt water. He looked out into the horizon and saw all sorts of dark blobs and shapes dancing far off in the distance.

“Ships! Hank, there are ships out there!”

But Hank knew better. “There’s nothing out there, Jerry. You’re hallucinating.”

Jerry tried to focus his eyes, but everything was a blur of blue and black. Tunnel vision had started to set in.

“Maybe you’re right, Hank, maybe you’re right.”

...

Three hours later, the sun started to set.

Jerry's mental condition continued to drastically deteriorate, and Hank was slowly drifting in and out of consciousness. He could hear Jerry whispering to himself.

"It's time, Hank. I'm so hungry. I just want one last meal before I go. I think...I think you've gone to the other side, right? You're dead now, right?"

Hank couldn't even respond. He just moaned faintly, trying to alert his friend that he was still alive.

"Thank you for doing this for me, Hank. Thank you. I'm just so hungry, my insides are tearing themselves apart! I just need to eat one last time."

As the sun dipped below the horizon line, Hank slowly turned his head to see Jerry sitting there with his knees curled to his chest, a jagged smile cutting across his face. He had completely lost it.

"You're going to taste so good, Hank. Like a juicy steak, I bet. It's finally time."

Jerry started crawling towards Hank on his hands and knees like some type of frail, emaciated creature. Jerry hovered over Hank's leg, where his calf muscle was, and started salivating.

"This looks like the best part. I'm going to try this first. Thank you again, Hank. You truly are my best friend."

Hank could do nothing as Jerry opened his jaw as wide as he could and slowly leaned in for the first bite.

...

Three days later a large fishing boat came upon the life raft. It was a horrific sight. Hank's corpse was half eaten, while Jerry's body sat propped up on the other side. His cold, dead eyes were still wide open, and there was a satisfied, blood-soaked smile etched into his face.

WHEN I GROW UP

Tricia sat in front of twenty third graders, all sitting in a half circle in the back of the classroom.

“Today we’re going to talk about what we want to be when we grow up. We’ll start on the left side of the room. Carter, you start us off. What do you want to be when you’re older?”

Carter smiled, eager to let everyone know. “I want to be a firefighter like my dad.”

“Very nice.” Tricia grinned. “What about you, Rebecca?”

“I want to be doctor.”

One by one, each child took turns naming their desired future profession. It was all the common answers you’d normally hear: policeman, astronaut, baseball player, nurse, and so on. Until she got to the last child.

“And finally, Sam, what do you want to be?”

Sam’s head had been lowered the entire time, his long dark hair covering most of his face. He was silent for several seconds, then raised his head and stared at Tricia with cold, emotionless eyes.

“Sam, what do you want to be when you grow up?” she asked again.

A devious, crooked smile emerged from his lips. “I want to be a monster.”

The rest of the children started laughing.

“Sam, we both know that’s not a real thing.” But Sam stuck to his answer.

“I want to be a monster... maybe I’ll eat some of you.”

Again, the children laughed, but not Tricia.

She had been teaching third grade for nearly four years now, and as much as she hated to admit it, Sam was the first kid who genuinely creeped her out. He was incredibly anti-social, often started fights with the other kids, never wanted to participate in any activities and would sometimes sleep at his desk, muttering odd gibberish in a low, growling voice. Tricia thought there might be some issues going on at home, but his parents seemed like incredibly nice, normal people.

“What about a firefighter like Carter?” she prompted.

“No!” Sam screamed. The other kids immediately stopped laughing. “I said...I want to be a monster.”

Tricia decided she’d just let it go. There were only a couple more weeks left in the school year, and soon creepy little Sam would be someone else’s problem.

Later that day, the kids all sat quietly working on a class project. Tricia looked up from grading papers to check on everyone. Sam was just sitting there, glaring at her with the same devious smile carved into his face.

He silently mouthed the words, “I’m going to eat you up.”

“Sam, please get back to work.”

But Sam just laughed and put his head down on the desk to sleep.

A couple weeks went by, and it was the last day of school. The kids all cheered when the bell rang at the end of the day, which officially meant summer had started.

As the kids filed out of the classroom, Sam was the last one. Just before exiting the room, Sam turned around.

“Hey, Miss Stuart... I’ll always remember you.”

He flashed his creepy little smile and walked into the hallway.

In most circumstances, Tricia would have taken this as a compliment, but the cold, monotone way in which he spoke sent a shiver down her spine.

Once the classroom was completely empty, Tricia started gathering her things, and muttered under her breath, “Oh, I’ll remember you too, Sam. Hopefully I’ll never see you again.”

...

Tricia continued teaching at Eagleton Elementary for nearly two decades. She became one of the best educators in the district and was set to be named “State Teacher of the Year” for an unprecedented third time. To recognize her accomplishments, there was a featured article about her in the local newspaper, which she was eager to read once she arrived home from a long day at school.

She walked into an empty house around 7 p.m., not unusual as her kids were off at college, and her husband often worked late nights at a local law firm.

She turned on the TV and grabbed the mail lying on the kitchen table. There was a letter addressed to her maiden name “Miss Stuart”, which immediately struck her as odd.

The local news was on and before she opened the letter, a story popped up that caught her attention.

“Tonight, Channel 6 investigates yet another report of local pets going missing. One homeowner reported seeing a man with long black hair, in a black hoodie, taking her cat from the front porch. Authorities made a composite sketch based on her description. If you have any information on this individual, please contact the local authorities.”

Tricia stared at the sketch; it was oddly familiar looking.

She turned back to the letter. The handwriting on the envelope was rough and unrefined. She had seen this writing before. A cold chill ran down her spine.

“Sam...”

She slowly opened the envelope and pulled out a single folded piece of paper. Three small objects fell to the floor and rolled under the table. Tricia bent down to see what had fallen...

It was three human teeth.

Tricia let out a small scream. Her stomach twisted in knots. She opened the piece of paper to reveal a single line of writing.

“To my favorite teacher.”

Tricia dropped the letter and called the police. Ten long minutes later they arrived.

Tricia recounted how she knew the man who had been abducting the pets, and that she had taught him as a child.

The police took down all the information and said they would do their absolute best to find him.

They also said they would have an officer parked outside her house for the next couple of days, just in case.

Once the officers left, Tricia was visibly shaken. She poured a glass of wine, her hands trembling as she brought it to her lips.

She then called her husband and asked that he please come home immediately.

She walked up the stairs to her bedroom, thinking a hot shower might calm her down. She threw her jacket on the bed and started looking for her bathrobe...

That’s when she heard a scratching sound coming from underneath the bedframe.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.



The air in Tricia's lungs was sucked from her body. She turned to run downstairs, but a hand jutted out from beneath the bed and snagged her ankle, causing her to fall and violently smack her forehead on the hardwood floor.

She was nearly knocked out cold.

Her blurred vision caught a figure crawling out from under the bed, clawing into the floor like some type of monster.

It scurried on its hands and knees to her side and hovered over her face.

It was a man with thin, greasy black hair. Wide, bloodshot eyes, and a grizzly, nightmarish smile made of rough, makeshift dentures filled with pointed canine teeth... Teeth that had been taken from the local cats and dogs.

"Hello, Miss Stuart," he growled. "I saw you in the paper."

Tricia was barely conscious. "Sam..."

Sam leaned in closer to Tricia's face, his breath was hot and foul smelling.

"I always told you I was going to be a monster...and now I'm going to eat you up."

Tricia's husband arrived home about fifteen minutes later. He called out to his wife but was met with silence.

He walked upstairs and into the bedroom. Tricia was gone, but there was something on the wall, written in fresh, dripping blood. It was a large letter and symbol...

"A+"

THE WINDOW

I'm afraid of windows, it's an odd phobia indeed,
But if you slept in my room, fear was guaranteed.
It came every night, near the 3 a.m. hour,
I tried not to look; underneath the covers I'd cower.

It stood at my window, with hollow, black eyes,
And scratched at the glass, as it listened for my cries.
It was always smiling, with a wide, jagged grin,
It had long skinny limbs, and pale white skin.

It had been coming for months, what it wanted was unknown,
Did it feed on my fear? Or want to feast on my bones?
I'd tell it to leave, but it would never comply,
It just stood outside, and glared with its eyes.

I was just a kid, so no one believed my tale,
And if I wasn't alone, it's appearance would fail.
It only wanted me, that was its single goal,
To eat my flesh, or take my soul.

I covered the window, with curtains and a sheet,
But the scratching got louder, and it howled and shrieked.
If I left my house, and I slept somewhere new,
I'd wake up to scratching, and in the window, guess who.

It evaded my traps, it seemed nothing could be done,
So I slept with a knife, and my trusty BB gun.
It wouldn't go away, and I was losing all hope,
But I had one more idea, a new plan to invoke.

I was sick of being scared, it was time to fight,
So I sat by the window and waited until night.
It showed up on time, at its normal place,
But I was there waiting, to stare right in its face.

Its smile grew wider, with its eyes of pitch black.
But I moved even closer, and I smiled right back.
An inch of glass, all that separated us two,
I stood up and I yelled, "I'm not afraid of you!"

It hissed and it snarled, but its smile was gone,
It stepped back from the window, its spirit withdrawn.
Fear is what it wanted, and I would no longer provide.
So it vanished in the fog, as its game had died.

It never came back, not the next day, or the next week.
I could finally relax, and I could finally sleep.
But one thing's for sure, something everyone should know,
When it's the middle of the night, don't look out the window.



SQUID SOUP

The following is based on a true story...

“Are you sure about this?”

Lisa looked down at the bowl in front of her. A fully intact squid sat atop a pile of noodles, broth, seaweed, and fish eggs.

“It’s fine, I promise.” Her friend Matt smiled. “People eat this all the time. It’s called a ‘Dancing Squid Bowl.’”

Lisa’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion. “Wait...what do you mean by ‘dancing?’”

Matt couldn’t stop himself from laughing. He simply grabbed the porcelain soy sauce container and drizzled the dark brown liquid across the squid’s legs. Immediately, they started writhing and squirming around the bowl as Lisa nearly jumped out of her chair.

“There’s no way I’m eating that! The squid is still alive!”

At this point Matt’s cackling could be heard across the whole restaurant.

“I’m sorry, I just had to see your reaction. That made my entire day.” Matt wiped the tears of laughter from his face and collected himself. “But, no, it’s definitely dead. The nerves in the tentacles are just reacting to the salt in the soy sauce, causing them to spasm. I know it seems gross, but it’s completely harmless.”

Lisa looked at the squirming sea creature in front of her, an expression of absolute horror etched into her face. “Well, I don’t care what it is, I’m not eating it.”

Matt wasn’t going to give up that easily. “Oh, come on, Lisa, you said you’d try new things on this trip.

You knew the food was going to be different. It's actually delicious, you just have to try it."

Lisa lowered her head to get a better look at the sea creature she was about to consume. She looked deep into its black eyes and an uneasy feeling crept across her skin.

"It almost looks...angry. I'm telling you, Matt, this thing is still alive."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Oh, my goodness, Lisa. Look, I'll take a bite myself to show you it's perfectly fine."

Matt grabbed a set of chopsticks and pinched the top of the squid, its legs still spasming as he lifted it towards his mouth.

"Bon appétit."

He bit down into the wriggling tentacle, as a clear juice squirted onto his lips.

"See, it's actually really goo—AAAAAGGGHHHH!"

The tentacles stopped squirming around and firmly latched onto Matt's face.

A sharp, needle-like pain surged through his tongue as the squid tried to fight its way out of his mouth.

Lisa looked on in horror, not knowing what to do as Matt stood up and screamed.

"Get it off! Get it off me!" The words were jumbled as his mouth was still full of squid tentacles.

Matt grabbed onto the squid and tried to pull it away, but it again clamped down onto his tongue, he could feel it digging in even further.

A surge of adrenaline allowed him to finally rip the sea creature off his face and throw it across the room.

"Are...are you okay?" Lisa's eyes were still wide with shock.



Matt spat out chunks of squid tentacle and held a napkin to his mouth and lips. “I don’t know, it feels like something is still digging into my tongue.”

One of the restaurant workers rushed over.

“I am so sorry! We have a new chef. I’m sure this was simply a mistake. It was not prepared correctly. Please, let us make this right.”

Matt wiped his face once more. “It’s...it’s okay. Mistakes happen.” He turned to his friend. “Come on, Lisa, I’m going to get this checked out, just to be safe.”

Twenty minutes later, Matt and Lisa arrived at a small walk-in clinic. Matt’s tongue was still buzzing with a sharp, prickling pain.

When the doctor came into the room, Matt explained the story. The doctor grabbed a small handheld light and told Matt to open his mouth.

Matt was watching the doctor’s eyes as he conducted the examination, and when he lifted his tongue to look at the underside, the doctor’s eyes suddenly widened in surprise.

Matt moved his head back. “What’s wrong?”

The doctor cleared his throat.

“Well...it seems the squid injected its eggs into your tongue. We’ll have to cut them out, one by one, before they hatch.”

BOOGERS

“Scotty! Stop picking your nose!” Scotty’s mom glared at him through the rear-view mirror. “You’re twelve years old, and it’s gross.”

Scotty sat in the back seat of the car and looked at a large, crusty booger stuck to his index finger.

“I know, Mom, I know... I’ll stop.”

But Scotty knew that was a lie. He loved picking his nose. It felt good to root around the inside of his nostrils, looking for chunks of hardened snot and dirt.

He loved to dislodge the dried pieces of mucus with his fingernail, then move them around in his nasal passages. He especially enjoyed when they were hard and jagged in shape. He’d pry them out and closely inspect their yellowish green color, and finally, he’d roll them between his fingers until they became a perfect little ball, which he’d then flick away to any random spot around him. Scotty knew it was a disgusting habit, but he simply couldn’t stop no matter how hard he tried.

One day, while sitting in his room, Scotty felt the urge to go picking. He’d been outside for several hours earlier and the air was especially dry. The perfect climate for big, crusty boogers.

He gleefully stuck his index finger in his nose and felt around. There was tons of jagged gold waiting to be excavated, which Scotty was happy to do.

After pulling out an exceptionally large, chunky snot block, Scotty started to roll it between his fingers. But then he suddenly stopped.

In all his years of nose picking, there was one line he had never crossed, one thing that even Scotty didn't have the stomach to do. He'd never eaten one of his boogers.

What did it taste like? He knew of other kids who had done it several times, so maybe it tasted good.

With that thought, Scotty made the decision, he was going to eat his first booger. He inspected the golden mass of dried dirt and mucus stuck to the end of his finger. It even had a little nose hair trapped inside it.

He took a deep breath...then popped the booger into his mouth. He rolled it around his tongue, and then started chewing it, letting it stick to his teeth like a grotesque gummy bear.

It was delicious.

From then on, Scotty always ate his boogers and continued doing so for years. Anytime he was alone, he'd joyfully dig inside his nostrils for his favorite crusty snack.

Then one summer, near his 16th birthday, Scotty had been out on the beach for a bit too long during a family vacation. His shoulders, face, and upper torso had been particularly sunburnt. But after a few days of aloe vera and skin moisturizer, Scotty's sunburn started to heal.

He looked over to his left shoulder and saw a sliver of dead skin forming near the end of his collar bone. He instantly smiled, as he was beginning to peel.

Besides picking his nose, one of Scotty's other favorite activities was pulling off dead skin, something he couldn't do very often as it only occurred after a bad sunburn. It was incredibly satisfying to strip away the thin, white sheets of dead cells and roll them between his fingers just like a booger.



But this time Scotty didn't flick them away like normal, he had something much more disgusting in mind. He popped them into his mouth and ate them. It was a delectable treat, even tastier than the boogery snacks he was used to.

He pulled away as much dead skin as he could, sometimes in long slivers which he immediately slurped up like paper-thin noodles.

Once he had scratched away every morsel of dead skin on his body, Scotty was disappointed. It tasted so good, and he wasn't nearly satisfied.

He tried to peel off just a tiny bit more, but this time it hurt, as he had accidentally ripped off some skin that wasn't quite dead. It wasn't much, but enough to make him bleed.

"I wonder what normal skin tastes like," he thought to himself. "It won't hurt me if I just eat this small piece."

Scotty held the bloody chunk of skin between his fingers, then dropped it on his tongue... Wonderful! Superb! To Scotty it tasted a bit like beef jerky, only better. He had to have more.

He started to peel more skin, trying as hard as he could to ignore the horrific, burning pain. Strip by strip, the thin, bloody slivers went into his mouth like disgusting pieces of string cheese. Scotty couldn't help himself, and he couldn't stop.

Hours had passed, and Scotty's mom hadn't seen him all day.

"Scotty, come down here, dinner's ready," she called, but there was no answer.

"Scotty!"

Still nothing. She walked up the stairs.

"Scotty, I made pork chops." But again, he didn't answer. "He must be asleep."

She walked to his bedroom door, knocked a few times, then turned the knob to open it.

“Hey, sleepyhead, dinner is—SCOTTY!”

Scotty was sitting in the dark, the skin of his arms, legs, and face torn away. He peeled off the last remaining morsel from his cheek, leaned his head back and dropped it into his mouth, as if it was a fine delicacy. A satisfied grin cut across his blood-soaked face.

“Scotty, what have you done to yourself!”

Scotty turned his head and looked at his horrified mother standing in the doorway.

“Well, Mom, at least I’m not picking my nose...”

THE MATCH

“Why don’t you try one of the dating apps?”

David was loudly munching on a bag of chips while lounging on the couch. His buddy, Connor, was in the recliner across the living room, apathetically flipping through the various television channels.

“I don’t know, man, I’ve always thought those things were kind of weird.”

“Why?” David asked, continuing to stuff his face with potato chips. “Everyone uses them now, and you’re not going to meet anyone just sitting in your apartment watching TV.”

Connor was incredibly shy and didn’t have a lot of confidence in himself. This made meeting girls especially difficult, as he could never work up the courage to go up and talk to someone.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt to try it.”

“Yes! I’ll even help you set up your profile.” David jumped up from the couch and snatched Connor’s phone out of his hand.

“Dude, come on...”

“Don’t worry, I’m a pro at this.”

Connor rolled his eyes, but he knew David had used these apps for years, so he probably knew what worked and what didn’t.

David downloaded the newest app, Ember, which was the current flavor of the month in terms of dating apps in the city. There were many to choose from, but Ember was where all the current activity was.

Connor just sat there and watched as David’s fingers and thumbs feverishly clicked and clacked on his phone, setting up his profile, selecting his pictures, and coming up with witty sayings for

his bio. It took David less than ten minutes to have it completely done.

“There you go, my man. Now all you have to do is swipe right or left. It’s as easy as that.”

David handed Connor his phone and flopped back down on the couch, continuing to devour the same bag of chips.

Connor looked down at his phone. An attractive blonde girl was staring back at him. “She’s way out of my league,” Connor thought. “There’s no way I’d have a chance.” So, he swiped left.

David piped up from the other side of the room. “Don’t over think it, man. If you like what you see, swipe right. If not, swipe left. It’s not rocket science.”

Connor continued swiping left and right, trying his best not to overanalyze each profile. But then he came to one that legitimately startled him.

The name was Greta. Her face was inhumanly long, with a large pointy chin, a wide, crooked grin, and icy blue eyes that somehow looked cold and emotionless despite their fiery appearance. She had stringy blonde hair and a slender nose that matched her frail looking neck and shoulders. Her skin was so pale it almost seemed grey in color. Every picture of her was the exact same, just her face grinning into the camera with a creepy head tilt. Her bio didn’t include her age or interests, it simply had one line: “I’m here to find love.”

Connor hated to judge solely off appearances, but Greta’s face actually scared him. He looked over at his forearm and noticed goosebumps erupting across his skin.

“David, you have to take a look at this girl.”

David perked up from his salty snack and looked over. “There’s no way that’s real. Probably some troll account.”



Connor looked at it again. “I don’t know what it is, but her face creeps me out.”

One final shiver went down Connor’s spine as he swiped left. Immediately a firework animation started playing. “You’ve got a match!” the notification read.

“What? I swiped left and it matched me anyway.”

“Just go to your matches section and hit ‘unmatch.’”

Connor unmatched from Greta and then continued looking at other profiles.

But then Greta came back up.

Connor immediately swiped left. Again, the match notification started playing.

“What’s going on? It matched her with me again!”

David didn’t seem concerned. “Like I said, probably just a glitch or some troll account.”

Suddenly another notification popped up. A message from Greta. It simply read, “*Hello*” with a heart emoji.

Connor immediately unmatched her again. But as soon as he returned to the other profiles, Greta would pop-up over and over, and it would match every single time.

David walked over to see what was going on. “It’s definitely a glitch or some type of hacker. Let the developers figure it out and try again tomorrow. I’m sure you’re not the only one this is happening to. Definitely creepy though.”

A couple hours later, David had gone home and Connor was bored. He looked over at his phone lying on the coffee table and decided to fire up the Ember app again. He had to admit, it was an entertaining way to pass the time.

He picked up the phone and to his surprise he had a new match. Her name was Angie, 24, brown hair, brown eyes, attractive in that girl next door type of way. She was definitely Connor's type.

Connor paced back and forth trying to come up with a good ice-breaker. He had to do better than "Hey". Eventually he decided on a dumb joke he had heard a couple days earlier. He hit the message button and typed, "Why was the pepper nosey?"

Almost immediately a response came back from Angie: "Why? Lol."

"Because it was jalapeno business..."

Again the response was immediate. "Lol, nice dad joke. I love it."

From there Connor and Angie texted back and forth easily and chatted for hours until well past midnight. The two decided to meet up for a dinner date the very next day. And when the conversation ended, Connor plopped into his bed with a huge smile on his face. Maybe David was right, the dating apps weren't so weird after all.

...

The next morning, Connor woke up and began his morning routine. He showered, made a cup of coffee, and turned on the local news. As he was brushing his teeth, a story from the television caught his attention.

"Heartbreaking news from the city's west side. Early this morning at about 2 a.m., the body of 24-year-old Angie Callahan was found just outside the Plaza One Apartment complex. Initial reports from police suggest that the young woman fell from her 7th story balcony. No indications of foul play are currently being investigated."

Connor dropped his toothbrush on the floor, the wet paste still foaming and bubbling around his lips.

He took one look at the television screen where the woman's picture was being displayed, and immediately recognized her. It was the same Angie he had been talking to the night before.

He opened the Ember app to make sure, but he immediately saw tons of new notifications from the night before, after he'd fallen asleep.

His heart jumped into his throat as soon as he looked at his phone display. "You have a new match!" Followed by thirteen unread messages, all from Greta...

Hello.

Hi Connor.

Please do not ignore me LOL

Connor. We would be perfect together.

Please answer.

Connor. STOP ignoring me.

You're making me angry Connor.

CONNOR. Answer ME!!!

You're my soulmate Connor.

I NEED you.

Answer me or I'm going to hurt someone LOL.

You better NOT be talking to any other girls.

I'm coming for you Connor. You will be mine XOXO.

Connor felt sick to his stomach. He immediately called his friend David to tell him what happened. He wanted to delete the Ember app right then and there, but David convinced him to keep it just in case the police reached out to him, especially considering he may have been the last person to talk to Angie.

Connor took a personal day from work to gather himself. The news of Angie's death weighed heavy on his thoughts, even though he never met her in person, and only shared one text conversation. Plus, he couldn't shake the feeling there was more to Greta than a simple troll account or hacker.

He stopped by the police department to see if maybe his conversation with Angie might yield any clues as to what happened to her. Maybe it wasn't just an accident. He showed them the Greta account as well.

The police officers thanked him and told him they would be in touch if any new evidence popped up.

As soon as Connor walked out of the police station, he deleted his Ember account. After less than 24 hours, he'd had enough of dating apps.

Later that evening, Connor was lying on his couch, barely paying attention to an old 80s sci-fi movie. He didn't feel like doing anything productive as the whole situation depressed him, especially considering he would have been on a date with Angie instead of spending another night lying on his couch eating junk food. Not to mention the terrible circumstances for why that date wasn't occurring.

"What a horrific thing to happen," he mumbled to himself.

Suddenly his text message notification chimed from his phone. It came from an unknown number.

"Hi, Connor. It's Greta."

Connor nearly dropped the phone.

"How did she get my number?" he yelled.

The back of Connor's neck started to get warm, he could feel the frustration and anger building inside of him. He decided to respond:

“I don’t know who this is, or if it’s even a real person. But please stop contacting me. I’m NOT interested.”

A little bubble with an ellipsis popped up showing that the other person was responding.

“Well, that’s not very nice, Connor. Especially considering our date tonight.”

Connor’s temper started to boil over. “What date? I never agreed to a date with you. Please STOP contacting me!”

There wasn’t a response for several minutes after that. Connor was hoping that Greta, or whoever she was, finally got the message.

Then the text notification chimed again.

“It’s far too late to cancel now. I’m right outside your door.”

Connor’s stomach dropped and twisted into knots. He slowly walked over to the apartment entrance and looked in the peephole.

Greta’s horrific face filled up the viewing area. Her cold blue eyes drawing down into a twisted smile that kept getting wider and wider. Her teeth were clenched together so hard that her elongated head started to shake. She then pulled away from the door, showing her tall, emaciated body wearing nothing but a tattered night gown. She barely looked human.

She scratched at the door with her fingernails and started to whisper...

“Let me in, Connor.”

“Let me in...”

“Connor... LET ME IN!”

Greta started pounding on the door. “LET ME IN, CONNOR. I LOVE YOU!”

Connor rushed over to his kitchen area and grabbed a knife. He screamed toward the doorway, “Leave me alone! I’m calling the cops!”

Connor dialed 9-1-1 and an operator immediately answered the call.

“This is 911, what is your emergency?”

Connor had so much adrenaline running through his body he could barely speak. “There’s a woman pounding on my apartment door demanding I let her in. There’s something wrong with her.”

“Okay, calm down and—”

“Hello! Hello, are you there?” Connor’s voice trembled as he became more frantic.

The call was suddenly cut off by a strange static that hissed over the line.

“Let...me...in...”

Connor dropped the phone and backed away in horror. Then BAM!!! The front door crashed open.

Greta leaned her grotesque head into the room, ducking under the top of the door as she...or it...was too tall to simply walk in. Her eyes widened as she saw Connor standing in the kitchen, and drool started dripping from her freakish smile.

“Hello, Connor.”

Connor screamed and threw the knife at her, then ran into his bedroom and slammed the door shut, immediately locking it. He grabbed his baseball bat and leaned up against the back wall, waiting to see if she could get through.

He could see the shadow under the door as Greta twisted the door handle, trying to get in.

“I had to do something bad to make sure you were available tonight, Connor. That girl wasn’t right for you.”

“Leave me alone!” Connor screamed.

Suddenly the lock snapped, and the door slowly swung open.

Greta stood in the darkness of the hallway for a moment, the silhouette of her impossibly long limbs leading up to her hideous smile.

Connor clinched the handle of his bat as Greta slowly entered the room, her monstrous figure being revealed in the light.

“What are you...” Connor mumbled, his voice shaking with fear.

Greta’s smile got so wide the corners of her mouth were nearly touching her eyes, her voice then changed to a low, distorted growl...

“I’m the love of your life.”

Greta suddenly rushed forward.

“NOW GIVE ME A KISS!”

Connor’s blood-curdling scream echoed throughout the entire complex.

...

Two blocks away, David was scrolling through social media on his phone. There was an update on Connor’s profile:

“Connor has changed his relationship status from single to: It’s complicated.”

Connor was never seen again.

BURIED

Tom's eyes ripped open, his lungs gasping for air as if he'd just emerged from a pool of icy water. All he could sense was complete darkness, and a silence so overwhelming he thought he could hear the pulse of his internal organs.

Tom's mind was a jumbled mess. He was disoriented and confused, as if he was stuck halfway between a dream and reality. But as each second ticked by, the haze in his mind started to ease.

As he slowly came out of his comatose state, his breathing started to become frantic and heavy... He couldn't feel the rest of his body.

"Where am I? I can't move, I can't see... I can barely breathe!" his mind screamed.

Even just a couple seconds of paralysis within the black void was absolute torture. But after about a minute, the feeling started to slowly return to his limbs, and he could slightly move his fingers and toes.

The total blackness of his surroundings made it difficult to tell if his eyes were working or if he had gone blind, but he could feel his eyelids opening and closing. Then a few moments later, he was able to sluggishly move his arms, legs, and neck. They were beyond stiff, and his joints burst with a sickening crack at the slightest movement, but Tom welcomed the sound, as it meant his body wasn't completely disabled.

His fingertips ran along the edge of his thigh, noting that a soft padded material was all around him. He pressed into the material until his hand was stopped by something hard and immovable.



He only had a few inches of mobility to his left, right, and directly above him... That's when the realization hit him—Tom was inside a coffin.

His heart rate exploded, and his stomach twisted in knots as the grim reality of his situation became clear.

Screaming for help was an automatic reaction, almost like a reflex.

“Help! Someone help me!”

But he quickly cut himself off. If he was indeed inside a coffin, and buried six feet under, no one would ever hear his screams. Not only that, but he would be wasting precious oxygen and energy.

Even with only half his mind correctly functioning, Tom knew he didn't have much time. Soon he would use whatever oxygen was left inside the coffin, and slowly but surely, he would suffocate like a goldfish gasping outside its bowl.

His thoughts were thrashing between how to deal with his current situation, and how he managed to wind up there in the first place. The absolute last thing he remembered was simply eating a bowl of warm soup... Was it tomato? Was it chicken noodle? He couldn't remember. Only that soon after, everything went completely black.

“Think, Tom, think!”

Tom wasn't one to give up easily and he'd always been a fighter. Since he was still alive, that meant he hadn't been there for long, and he still had some time. Then he thought of his wife, Sarah, and how he desperately wanted to see her again.

After about five torturous minutes, Tom felt like he had regained enough mobility and strength that he could start forming a plan.

He started feeling all around him, utilizing what little room he had. He was wearing a dress shirt and tie, there was a bouquet of flowers, and there were some pieces of paper by his side which he assumed were letters of some kind. It was obvious that whoever had buried him definitely thought he was dead.

But how was this possible? He was only thirty years old and in perfect health. And even so, did they not embalm him? Tom couldn't waste any additional time thinking about how he got into this predicament, he needed to find a way out, and quick.

He started taking note of anything he could use to rip open the padded cloth above him. He had a watch on, and a metal tie clip, but nothing in his pockets. There was, however, a heavy steel picture frame with glass. Probably the wedding photo with Sarah that sat on the coffee table in the living room. Perfect.

Tom quickly undid his tie and wrapped it around his hand, then smashed the glass, and grabbed a large shard. He immediately started tearing at the cloth above him. Success! It tore away easily as he ripped open the soft material and pushed it down toward his legs. He then turned his thoughts to what was behind the cloth padding, to what would ultimately determine his fate.

Tom and Sarah were not rich by any means. In fact, they were quite poor. But with all the misfortune and financial hardships they had experienced, it was those same hardships that could possibly save him, at least for the moment.

Tom slowly reached up and touched the hard material with his fingertips. Wood, cheap wood.

So cheap in fact that it was already bending slightly inward under the weight of what he assumed was five or six feet of dirt.

Sarah wouldn't have been able to afford an expensive casket, and that likely explained why Tom wasn't embalmed.

It was simply cheaper to skip that part of the burial process. And she never liked the idea of cremation.

The sliver of hope that began to emerge was quickly stifled by the realization his breathing was getting heavier and heavier. Tom was quickly running out of oxygen, and he estimated he only had about a half hour at most if he could control his breathing.

With the cloth material out of the way, Tom had several inches of space above him to work with, enough that he could deliver a moderately powerful blow with his fist. He felt for what seemed like the weakest spot in the wood, where it had sunken in the most from the weight of the dirt.

Tom took one large, deep breath in, clinched his hand into a ball and smashed it into the surface above him. He followed it up with another heavy blow, then another, and another. He could feel the wood giving in slightly as his knuckles slammed into it, but it wasn't close to breaking. This wasn't going to work.

At that moment his stomach again twisted in a knot, the little bit of air within the coffin seemed to rapidly increase in temperature, like a thick suffocating blanket being forced upon his face. Adrenaline was surging through his veins as claustrophobia took an unforgiving grip around his throat.

"Calm down, Tom, calm down," he repeated over and over again. "What else can I do? Don't give up yet."

Tom grabbed the picture frame. It was made from industrial steel, a gift from his welding friend who had been trying to teach him the trade a few years back.

He pointed the corner of the frame towards the weak area of warped wood, took another deep breath, and smashed the steel corner into the casket's ceiling. Repeatedly, he drove the hard edge of the frame into the spot directly above him... But nothing happened.

“No!” he screamed. “This can’t be happening!” Tom started to sob. “*How* can this be happening.”

The air coming into his throat started to get thicker and thicker. Tom was quickly running out of time.

Another burst of adrenaline hit Tom’s system like an electric shock. He wasn’t ready to accept his fate. This couldn’t be how he went out.

He gnashed his teeth in rage. “I will NOT die like this!”

He pressed the steel corner into the slumping wood again. He thought about his wife, he thought about his parents, his friends, all the life he had left to live, and how he was so close to turning things around.

He screamed with a fury he had never known before and pressed upwards with every ounce of strength he had, as if he was lifting a car off his chest. His arms were trembling in spasms, the muscle fibers feeling as if they were about to explode.

“I will NOT die like this. NOT. LIKE. THIS!”

Craaaacckkk!!!!

The bulging wood splintered and snapped, and cold dirt started falling over his hands and arms.

“Yes! YES!”

Tom reached up and felt the wood. He had opened about a six-inch gash. He put his fingers into the loose earth and grabbed the splintered edge of the crack, pulling as hard as he could. A huge chunk of wood broke off into his hand as more dirt started to pour inside the casket.

Tom coughed as debris briefly found its way into his lungs. He grabbed the top of his shirt and used it to cover his nose and mouth as he furiously pushed the streaming dirt down toward his legs. Once he had broken off the first chunk of wood, the top of the casket was easy to break away.

Dirt continued to stream in, quickly building on top of his chest as he created a larger and larger hole. His right hand would break away the casket's ceiling as his left hand pushed the incoming soil away from his upper torso.

After about five minutes, Tom had created an opening large enough that he could nearly sit up.

He continued clawing into the dirt above like a rabid animal trying to escape its cage. Soon he was able to maneuver both legs into a kneeling position as the loose earth continued to rain down around him.

It wasn't long before Tom could firmly plant his feet on the casket floor and use the full strength of his legs. He was nearly standing upright. His mind was an absolute blur of emotion and hope...

"I'm going to make it... I'm going to GET OUT!"

Tom made one final push and slammed his fist into the soil above, and then...*freedom*.

A cold wind slithered across his right hand as tears started streaming from his irritated, dirt covered eyes.

His left arm was then able to break through. And finally, the grimy skin of Tom's face felt the chill of the October night.

Tom's head emerged from the earth and he immediately filled his lungs with crisp autumn air. It was the finest, most satisfying breath he had ever taken.

Tom pulled his body from the would-be tomb, and once he removed the last limb from the hole in which he emerged, Tom broke down and wept.

"I did it..."

With that thought, his joyful tears turned into a cackling laughter. Only a brush with death could elicit such a fantastic feeling of relief.

Tom slowly stood up, took another deep, satisfying breath and looked up into the clear October sky. A perfect full moon was shining brightly down upon him.

He looked back at the grave he had just emerged from and could only smirk at the tombstone that read his name.

“Not today.” He smiled.

Tom looked around at the cemetery he was in. It was Bridlewood Cemetery. He knew it well as it was only a couple blocks from his house.

How was he going to explain this? Who was going to explain what happened to him? And how would his family and friends react? Tom didn’t have the answers, he just knew he wanted to see his wife, and with that thought, he walked through the cemetery gates and made his way home.

...

It only took about fifteen minutes to reach his driveway. From what Tom could gather, it was extremely late as there weren’t any lights on in the neighborhood. His house was the exception, as the living room was dimly lit with the glow of a TV set.

He slowly approached the window and looked in. Sarah was lying on the couch, sobbing and holding a picture of Tom in her hands.

“I have to do this delicately or I’m going to scare her to death,” he thought. “But I guess there’s just no easy way.”

Tom walked to the door and took another long, deep breath. His heart was pounding with a mixture of excitement, and the unknown. He reached out with his hand...and knocked.

After a few moments, Sarah opened the door. It only took a single glance at her husband, covered in dirt and grime, for her to fall to her knees, the air violently sucked from her lungs in disbelief. She couldn't even speak, only silently mouth the name "Tom."

Tom rushed down and pulled Sarah into his arms.

"It's me, Sarah. This is real, I'm alive... I swear to you this is real."

Tom put his dirt covered hand on her cheek to let her know she wasn't hallucinating.

"B-but...how?" she murmured.

"I don't know, I truly don't...but I'm here. I promise this is me."

"The doctors... the aneurysm... You died, Tom. You died."

Tom had a hard time speaking as tears streamed down his face. "I didn't die, Sarah. I literally crawled out of my grave to get back to you."

"It's not possible."

"It is possible. I'm here, I'm alive."

Tom held her in his arms as she sobbed in disbelief. He smelled her sweet perfume and held her as she cried.

Sarah gently put her hand on Tom's face. "But we buried you a week ago."

Tom paused. "What? That can't be true, there's no way I could have survi..."

His voice trailed off as he looked up into the entry-way mirror and caught the first glimpse of himself. His skin was tinted a pale green, and his eyes were unnaturally red, beaming through his dirt-covered complexion like the effect of a poorly taken photo.

Tom's voice started to tremble. "What's happening to me?"

At that moment, the piercing sound of the emergency broadcast system ripped across the room from the television.

Tom tried to listen to the message, but he couldn't concentrate, as the sweet smell of Sarah's perfume was suddenly overwhelmed by something entirely different. It was a succulent, hypnotizing scent that was savory and mouthwatering. It dominated all of Tom's senses, commanding his absolute attention. He couldn't ignore it no matter how hard he tried.

It was the smell of human flesh...and with it came an excruciating hunger that ached deeply in Tom's stomach.

THALASSOPHOBIA

If you love the ocean, I simply can't understand,
I'd rather be safe, standing firmly on land.
Ponds are no different, nor swamps, or a lake,
Stay away from them all, there's too much at stake.

If I go to the beach, I stick close to the shore.
And if I enter the water, it's to my knees, no more.
I look out at the waves, to a sea of unknown,
What lurks within could chill your bones.

The water itself is a cause for fear,
It can pull you under, where no one can hear.
You can hold your breath, swim with all your might,
But when it fills your lungs, you lose the fight.

You suffocate in darkness, where you gasp and choke,
It's a painful death, a horrible way to croak.
But the water alone is just the start of the danger,
It's a sea of nightmares, all of them stranger.

Imagine floating alone, with nothing but the deep,
Then chills through your spine, as something touches your feet.
The shadow is massive, coming fast from beneath,
Then you peek under the waves, and see nothing but teeth.

There are creatures underwater, some that remain unseen,
With tentacles and fangs to rip out your spleen.
They'll feast on your flesh, while you drown in red,
A fate no man deserves, yet why many are dead.

Each year it happens, there are at least a few,
They're eaten alive while in the ocean blue.
Sometimes a shark, a hammerhead or white,
Or something much bigger, even more of a fright.

The sea is a mystery, only a fraction is known,
We don't know what's out there, so don't swim alone.
They'll never find your body, a thought quite drab,
Or maybe your limbs wash up, slowly eaten by crabs.

Respect the water, it's not the home of man,
It's the domain of monsters, an alien land.
So next time you float in the ocean so vast,
Remember what's out there, I hope you swim fast.



SILVERFISH

“What else can I help with?” Emma shouted frantically to her parents as they taped over the edges of the basement door.

Emma’s dad threw her a roll of electrical tape and handed over a large sealant gun from his toolbelt.

“I want you to cover every corner, every edge, and every hole in this basement. Leave absolutely nothing exposed. I’ll try and seal up everything else as best I can. And if you see a bug, kill it!”

Emma’s mom then handed her a large bottle of insect repellent.

“I want you to pour this all over you—your hair, your clothes, every inch.”

Emma quickly doused herself in the bitter smelling liquid and immediately went to work sealing every crack and crevice she could find.

There was a single small window on the back wall. She rushed over to tape the edges and took a brief moment to look outside. It was just big enough to view the night sky, and she could see a large streak of white light ripping across the stars.

“I can see the comet from the window.”

Emma’s dad rushed over to take a look. “Good, we’ll know when it’s gone. We just gotta make it twelve more hours; that’s when they say it’ll be over. Watch out real quick, let me seal this up.”

Emma stepped back as her dad applied thick black sealant where the window opened.

As she stepped back, she saw six huge centipedes make their way through a small hole in the wall. They immediately darted towards her foot.

Emma screamed as the first two scurried up her pant leg and immediately tried to burrow into her skin. She smashed her fist against her leg, killing them, as her dad stomped out the rest.

“Cover that hole right now!” he shouted.

Tears ran down Emma’s face as she plugged the hole. “Why is this happening?”

“It’s the comet, Emma. You heard it just like we did. Something about it is making the bugs extremely aggressive. They’re coming after anything warm blooded.”

Soon the outside of the window was completely covered by insects of all kinds, hissing and screeching, trying to get inside the basement to feast on Emma and her family.

After covering as many openings and cracks as they could, Emma and her parents could only sit in the middle of the cold basement and try and wait out the night, hoping the comet, and whatever effect it was having on Earth’s insects, would soon pass.

The family sat in silence listening to a small radio Emma’s mom had plugged in. There were no broadcasts, just continuous emergency messages telling everyone to stay indoors and shelter as best they could.

Emma applied more insect repellent as a harrowing thought struck her.

“What if we run out of air? We’ve covered any way for oxygen to get in here.”

Her dad stood up and walked around the room. “This basement is just big enough we should be fine.” He walked up the stairs and examined the basement door. He could hear scraping and chittering on the other side—a massive army of bugs crawling on the wood, trying to eat their way in.



A couple hours passed, and the air seemed to get thicker and thicker as the oxygen levels in the room slowly dropped.

Emma couldn't just sit in silence; her heart was pounding. She could feel the walls closing in as the adrenaline flowed through her veins. Her anxiety felt like it was crushing her lungs.

She looked over at the thick wall of bugs on the other side of the window, thousands upon thousands of them. She couldn't help but notice there were a ton of silverfish.

Emma hated silverfish.

Their house had a particular problem with them and growing up she'd always find a few in her bedroom, darting across the walls, and even her bedsheets when she slept. They were incredibly quick, and just the sight of them was enough to turn her stomach.

"Ten quintillion," her mom piped up. "That's how many they estimate there are in the world. Ten quintillion bugs. It has to be absolutely horrible out there. They're coming after everything."

Emma's dad went to check on the door again, making sure the sealant on the edges was holding up. "Hopefully we just have to make it about eight more hours."

Suddenly there was a scratching sound coming from the furnace vent pipes running across the ceiling of the basement.

Emma's dad walked directly under it to get a better look. "Shh, be quiet. They've made their way into the—"

CRACK!

The pipe broke and dropped down. A waterfall of insects flowed over Emma's dad, spilling into the room.

Centipedes, ants, beetles, spiders, cockroaches; they covered every inch of his body. He started screaming as the bugs wasted no time burrowing into his flesh.

“Help me! Help!”

But all Emma and her mom could do was watch in horror as the bugs ate him alive with frightening efficiency.

Emma’s mom grabbed her hand. “We need to make a run for the car!”

They ran up the stairs and ripped open the door. A wall of bugs immediately cascaded over them. Emma’s mom fell back and went tumbling down the stairs. Emma heard the snap of her leg as she smashed into the cold concrete floor.

“Emma, RUN!”

It only took a second for the mass of creatures to descend upon Emma’s mom, her blood curdling screams piercing the air.

Emma was covered with bugs, but she was still able to run through the house. The white walls were nearly black; millions of insects covered every inch. Those that could fly immediately came after her.

Emma barely noticed herself screaming in terror as she ran for the garage door, insects crawling inside her shirt and pants and squirming through her hair.

She opened the door and went straight to the side of the garage, to a large pesticide sprayer her dad used for the lawn. She doused herself in the chemicals, killing most of the bugs on her body but burning her skin with the corrosive liquid.

She then went straight for the Jeep, knowing there was a set of spare keys in the dash.

Luckily the bugs hadn’t made it inside the car yet.

Emma fired up the engine, opened the garage door and slammed the Jeep in reverse towards the road.

Tears streamed down her face as the chemicals continued to burn her face, arms, and legs.

She flew down the neighborhood street, not knowing where to go, just that she needed to keep moving.

A massive swarm of wasps soon descended upon her car, covering most of the windows. Emma didn't even see the other car coming.

SMASH!

The Jeep flipped multiple times before it came to rest on its side within a large ditch. The twisted metal pinned Emma against the steering wheel as blood flowed from a large gash in her forehead.

She was trapped.

She couldn't see the other car, but she could hear the screams of the driver as the wasps stung him, devouring him alive.

Emma was dazed and drifting in and out of consciousness. She looked over at the passenger seat.

A small silverfish crawled into the car and just sat there looking at her. Then it was joined by another, and another.

The chittering and hissing got louder and louder as it made its way through the tall grass toward the Jeep.

Silverfish, thousands of them.

Emma knew this was the end. She simply looked out the broken glass towards the night sky. The comet was as bright as ever, traveling thousands of miles per hour, but seeming as if it was barely moving. It was beautiful in a way, something she had never seen before.

Emma kept her eyes locked on that sight, the screeching of the bugs getting closer and closer as the first silverfish scurried upon her neck.

THE HIKE

Grant knew better than to go hiking alone. Even someone as experienced as himself could make a mistake or get caught in some unpredictable weather. Anything can happen in wilderness of the pacific northwest, especially in the rural areas furthest from civilization, which were Grant's favorite.

But it was a perfect day, the morning sun was shining and there was a crispness in the fall air that electrified his senses, especially since he'd been stuck in the city for the last couple of weeks. It was simply an opportunity too good to pass up.

Grant fired off a few texts to his sister and best friend, letting them know he was going on a hike "just in case" and that he would update them with exact coordinates once he got to his destination.

After loading up his car and filling his thermos with coffee, Grant set off on the road. It was about a two-hour drive to a little-known trail that was fifty miles from the Canadian border. Stories about the area had been making their way around local hiking circles, and evidently the views were breathtaking, complete with a massive waterfall known as Red Widow Falls.

Grant couldn't wait to get there. Nothing re-charged him like a long, difficult trail into the wilderness. Something about it felt exciting and primal, and even though it wasn't the safest thing in the world, he was glad he was going alone.

The location of the trail was a bit of a secret, as Grant had to pull up detailed directions a friend had sent him. After taking an exit off the highway in the middle of nowhere, Grant followed a narrow county road deep into the forest.

He was looking for an entrance to a second road, which was supposedly marked by a large boulder. There were no other markings or signs.

After about twenty minutes of driving, Grant finally saw the large gray rock buried into a small hill and covered with a thick green moss. And just to the left of it, a dirt road nestled in between a corridor of fir trees.

Grant turned his small sedan onto the path and continued driving deeper into the forest. At this point the foliage was so thick the sun had a hard time peeking through the branches and leaves.

Eventually, the road came to an open clearing, where the sun was able to poke through and illuminate the area. A large rock formation loomed over Grant's car, preventing him from driving any further. A small path was cut through it that led to higher ground.

Grant grabbed his gear from the backseat of his car and pulled his backpack onto his shoulders. He reached down for his cell phone, which miraculously still had service, and fired off his location data to his sister. He then took a deep breath of brisk, clean air and started toward the rocky barrier in front of him.

While it wasn't a vertical rock climb, it was definitely steep enough to be dangerous. It was just the type of challenge Grant enjoyed.

With his legs burning, it took Grant around thirty minutes to make it to the top of the rocky hill.

"Maybe I'm not in as good shape as I thought," he muttered to himself.

But as soon as he pulled himself over the ridge, an epic view nearly took his breath away.

The forest opened up to a massive canyon cut into the landscape, almost as if someone had purposely dug out a huge chunk of the wilderness.

A winding river ran through the middle, cutting into the rock over thousands of years. Its harsh bend was responsible for the circular shape of the canyon, and was what caused such a stark contrast between the dark, dense forest and the sprawling openness bathed in sunlight.

And far off in the distance, on the opposite end of the canyon, Grant could see it: Red Widow Falls.

The trail was orchestrated around the outer rim of the canyon and was obviously meant to lead to the waterfall. However, Grant also wanted to make his way down to the base and explore that area, which looked to be about 150 feet down with no clear path to reach it.

Grant decided he'd just continue on the regular trail and once he got near the waterfall, that's when he'd try and find a way down to the river.

After about two hours, Grant decided to stop and take a quick break. The bowl-like nature of the canyon allowed him to look down over the slim area of forestry that ran along the river on each side. It was teeming with wildlife...deer, eagles, foxes, owls, even a black bear, which was a quick reminder that he was completely alone in the wilderness.

Grant grabbed his cell phone from his pocket to snap a few photos. But just as he raised his arm to position for a selfie, a faint sound cut through the murmurs of the forest. It was barely audible coming from the base of canyon.

"Heelllp... Heeelllp me..."

Grant squinted his eyes and looked to an area of thick brush leading into a group of large pines next to the river.

He could see the torso of a man almost completely covered by the tall grass, most of the clothing had been ripped from his body.

Again, the voice called out, *“Pleeease... Please helllp me.”*

“I hear you! I can see you!” Grant called out. Another hiker must have gotten too close to the edge and fell.

“Hold tight! I’m going to get you some help!” he yelled.

The man wasn’t moving, just lying there covered in wet grass.

Grant pulled out his cell phone. No signal this time, likely blocked by the surrounding environment.

“I can’t get a signal here! I’m going to try and find a spot where I can call someone!”

“Pleeease, help... I need helllp...”

Grant hesitated for a moment. The smart thing would be for him to go back to his car where he knew he could get a cell signal, but the thought of the wildlife in the area crept back into his mind. The man would be helpless if that black bear stumbled upon him, or even worse, wolves.

“Okay, okay, I’m going to climb down. Just hold on!”

Grant surveyed the area going down to the river. There seemed to be a small path where it wasn’t a straight drop.

He took off his backpack and lowered himself over the edge. His thoughts were screaming at him, “Grant, this is *STUPID*.” But the adrenaline seemed to be pushing him on.

Rock by rock, boulder by boulder, Grant made his way down. All the while the man in the grass kept calling out to him.

“Pleeease help me.”

After about twenty minutes, Grant’s foot finally hit the reddish dirt at the bottom of the canyon.

“Okay, I made it! I—”

But the man was gone.

“Hello? Hello! Where are you!”



Silence.

Grant slowly walked over to the tall grass where the man had been lying. All that was left was the imprint of a body and a strange odor of decay and decomposition.

Suddenly a low grumble slithered from the deep shadow of the pines.

“Hello?”

Grant peered into the darkness and saw the decomposing corpse of a man, half eaten, held up like a nightmarish puppet. Long, inhuman fingers were wrapped around the corpse’s neck, manipulating what was left of the man’s vocal cords.

Red, glowing eyes peered around the corpse’s shoulder as the hand around the corpse’s neck tightened. The mouth of the dead hiker started to move as it gurgled, “*I seeee yoouuu.*”

Grant immediately turned to run, but the skittering sound of something sprinting through the grass soon caught him.

A horrid scream echoed across the canyon as Grant was violently pulled into the thick brush of the tree line.

...

The flashing lights of a police SUV slowly pulled up to Grant’s empty car sitting at the base of the rock formation. Nightfall had come, and it had been twelve hours since anyone heard from Grant. His sister immediately notified the area’s search and rescue team when he didn’t check in with her.

A grizzled officer stepped out and looked into Grant’s car, then started surveying the area.

“This is the third missing hiker in the last month around here.”

A younger deputy followed behind him, his flashlight following the trail carved into the rocks. “Looks like we’re going to have to do some climbing.”

Suddenly a faint voice cut through the air as the wind whipped through the trees.

“Hellllp meeee.”

The silhouette of a man then appeared at the top of the rock formation, partially obscured by tree branches and brush.

“Grant Parker? Is that you?” the deputy called out.

“Yeessss, pleeeeee help meee.”

“Okay! Just hold tight, we’ll be right up there!”

The deputy rushed back to the truck to grab some gear, but the older officer forcefully grabbed his arm.

“Hold on a sec, somethin’ ain’t right.”

The older officer aimed his flashlight the best he could at the figure standing above them. He couldn’t see much, but Grant was oddly swaying back and forth, his head slumped to the side with something wrapped around his neck.

“Hey, Grant, stay right there, we’re gonna call in some medics. We’ll let your sister know we found you. Her name’s Lisa right?”

The silhouette continued to lurch and sway. “Yesssss, pleeeeee helllp.”

The officer unholstered his pistol, as he whispered to the deputy, “Get back in the truck right now.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

The officer slowly made his way towards the SUV, keeping his eyes locked on the swaying silhouette. “Abby. His sister’s name is Abby.”

HOLES

“What’s going on with your hand?”

Logan’s head jerked up, snapped out of his daydream by his friend Drew sitting next to him in class. His eyes then followed the mechanical pencil in his right hand down to his palm, which was raw and irritated.

“I don’t know, man, it’s been itching all day. Probably just a rash or something.”

Drew shrugged. “Looks kinda like poison ivy.”

Logan set his pencil down. His science teacher, Mr. Anderson, was droning on about something in the background. Logan brought his hand closer to his face to inspect what was going on. Tiny clusters of fluid filled blisters had formed in the soft fatty area below his ring finger and next to his thumb.

Drew leaned over to get a better look. “That’s pretty gnarly, man. I’d go to the nurse if I were you.”

Logan sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s weird though, these blisters just kind of popped up in the last couple of hours.”

Suddenly the bell rang. Everyone quickly gathered up their things and rushed out the doorway.

“Make sure you guys read the chapter on Suriname toads! We’ll be dissecting one next week. Hope you guys don’t have tryphophobia!” Mr. Anderson said with a laugh.

“Trypo-what?”

“You’ll see, Drew, you’ll see. Chapter 14. We’ll see everyone tomorrow.”



Sharp prickles of pain stung Logan's hand as he grabbed his books and headed towards the hallway. "Well, maybe I'll get out of 7th period and they'll let me go home early."

Drew smirked. "Always looking at the bright side."

The two parted ways as Logan made his way past the front office towards the nurse. The pain seemed to get worse by the second, his fingers starting to throb.

...

"Okay, Logan, let's see what we're dealing with here." Nurse Miller grabbed his right hand and examined it under a small light. "Oh my, I'm no dermatologist but this looks like a pretty nasty case of poison ivy. I'm going to give you some cortisone cream and some antihistamine pills. We'll go ahead and wrap it up too."

Nurse Miller applied some greasy white cream to the blistered areas and covered Logan's palm with a large bandage.

"If this gets worse, I want you to go to your doctor or an urgent care, okay?"

"Yeah, I got it. It really hurts though."

"Well, the cream I just put on there should help. Just keep an eye on it."

"Any chance I can go home early?"

A smile crept through Nurse Miller's red lipstick. "I think you'll be able to survive one more hour. Now go ahead and get back to class."

Logan chuckled. "Can't blame me for trying. Thanks for fixing me up."

"No problem, just make sure to keep that clean so it doesn't get infected. Have a good afternoon."

...

Later that evening, Logan was lying on his bed doing homework. The pain in his hand continued to bother him, but he tried his best to ignore it.

“Okay, Chapter 14. Let’s read about some amphibians.”

Logan flipped through his science book and was immediately greeted by a large picture of a female Suriname toad. His jaw immediately dropped.

The Suriname toad, also called the star-fingered toad, had hundreds of eggs embedded into the flesh of its back. As Logan read on, he learned that the tadpoles developed inside these...holes...in the skin, and when they were ready, they crawled out of the honeycomb-like cavities and swam away. The young toads literally erupted from the female’s back, a truly disgusting display. He then learned about other animals and insects that had a similar method of depositing eggs into the flesh. The thought alone made his stomach turn.

“Okay, I think that’s enough for tonight,” he mumbled.

Logan’s hand started throbbing again, and the itching was nearly unbearable. He grabbed another antihistamine pill and popped it into his mouth. Soon the sedative effect started, and Logan drifted off to sleep just twenty minutes later.

...

“Aaaaagghhh!”

Logan’s eyes shot open. Sharp, stabbing pains pierced his hand, again and again like an electric shock. He immediately leaned over and turned on the light.

Logan's eyes widened in terror as his hand was swollen to nearly twice the normal size. The white bandages around his palm were now soaked in dark blood.

He frantically tore away at the medical tape, ripping it off to reveal an intestine-twisting sight. The blisters had all ruptured into pus filled abscesses. Deep fleshy holes pitted across his hand. And within those nightmarish cavities squirmed tiny larvae, slowly inching their way into the light.

Author's note: Trypophobia refers to the strong fear or disgust of small, clustered holes, especially in organic material, such as flesh. It is very real. Look it up if you dare. But remember, you were warned.

THE CRAVING

“You know, Jon, for such a skinny guy you can really put down the food!” Mr. Jenson exclaimed while sitting at the head of dinner table. He was an older gentleman, the outdoorsy type with a thick beard and sturdy frame.

Jon looked up while chewing on a large, juicy piece of steak, the grease dripping down his chin.

“It’s all the hiking I’ve been doing. I just can’t get enough to eat! Plus, Mrs. Jenson, you’re one heck of a cook. I gotta say.”

Jon stuffed a big spoon of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

“Thanks again for hosting me. You guys have really been great. I’ve never done one of these BnB deals before. It definitely beats staying at a run-down motel.”

Mrs. Jenson grabbed a serving dish and plunked down another chunk of steak onto Jon’s plate. “Well, you eat up, hon. We’re happy to have you. It’s nice to have visitors every so often. After all it gets kind of lonely out here in the woods, just the two of us.”

Jon continued to scarf down whatever he could get his hands on. His hunger was nearly insatiable.

“So, have you seen anything interesting out there on your hikes?” Mr. Jenson asked.

“Oh yeah, all sorts of stuff. It’s amazing up here in Canada. The wilderness is just different from anywhere in the States and I’ve hiked all over the place.”

“Anything worth telling us?”

“Well...and you’ll probably laugh at this, but just yesterday I was hiking up that northern pass near the foothills, and I looked over and I swear I saw some type of animal standing upright on

two legs. It was just staring at me from the shadow of the trees. I don't know what it was, but I got out of there quick. Freaked me out for sure."

Mrs. Jenson piped up, "Oh, maybe you saw our famous sasquatch. There's at least a couple sightings every year around these parts."

Jon laughed. "Can't say I believe in ole Bigfoot, but it was definitely something. Probably just a black bear scratching an itch on a tree. I didn't stick around long enough to find out."

Mr. Jenson glanced at his wife, then gazed out into the darkness of the forest through the window in the dining room, his expression turning stoic and solemn. "Maybe it was the Wendigo."

Jon chuckled. "You mean that thing with the antlers?"

"They don't have antlers, not sure where that idea came from, but they're nasty looking creatures. Tall, grey, emaciated things. The natives use to tell stories about 'em, saying they take hold of your soul if you eat another man's flesh. Turns you into one of them. That's if they don't eat you first...and they're always hungry."

Jon stopped eating for a moment, analyzing Mr. Jenson's expression. "You're joking, right? You don't actually believe that."

Suddenly, almost on cue, a piercing howl echoed far off in the distance. Jon's face immediately turned pale. Then Mr. Jenson erupted into laughter.

"I'm just joshin' ya, son! That's just a wolf howlin' at the moon. Happens every night. Boy, oh boy, you shoulda seen the look on your face!"

"Oh, Pete, stop, you're gonna scare the boy to death." Mrs. Jenson chuckled nervously.

Jon just smiled and shook his head. "Yeah, yeah, you got me."



Later that evening, Jon was tossing and turning in the darkness of his bedroom. His stomach was growling so loud it sounded like a small animal was trapped inside his gut.

“How am I still hungry?” he thought to himself. “I just need a snack. Hopefully they won’t mind if I grab something from the kitchen.”

As Jon sat up, another distant howl cut through the silence of the night. Goosebumps erupted on his skin as he pulled on a shirt and walked to the door. He briefly glanced outside the window, even though every ounce of his brain told him not to. There was nothing but the faint light of a crescent moon illuminating the pine trees.

“You’re really going to let that old man’s story get to you, huh,” he mumbled to himself.

Jon opened the door of the bedroom and slowly crept out into the kitchen area, the floor whining and creaking with each step as he made his way to the refrigerator.

As he pulled the handle, another howl pierced the shadows. This time it sounded like it was right outside the front door.

If it were any other time, Jon would have gone right back to the safety of his warm bed, but he was just so *incredibly* hungry.

Jon grabbed a piece of leftover steak and immediately tore into it, gobbling it up as if he hadn’t eaten in days.

“Didn’t get enough at dinner?”

Jon whipped around to see Mr. Jenson standing in the darkness of the kitchen. He was holding a shotgun.

“I...uh...yeah, I couldn’t sleep. I apologize if I woke you.”

Mr. Jenson peered out the window as Mrs. Jenson walked up behind him.

“You can’t stop eating, can you? The hunger... Feels like it’s tearin’ up your insides, doesn’t it.”

Jon just stood there confused, frozen in the glow of the open refrigerator. “I...I just needed something to tide me over for a little bit.”

Jon knew something was wrong. The tension in the air ran hot across the back of his neck.

Suddenly a loud scratching noise jerked Jon’s attention toward the large wooden door at the entrance of the house.

“I’m sorry, son.” Mr. Jenson raised his shotgun and pointed it toward Jon. “But I’m gonna need you to step outside.”

Jon didn’t move, he was paralyzed with fear. “What? What are you talking about? This is crazy!”

Mr. Jenson stepped forward with his gun, forcing Jon to take a step towards the door. “It’s only gonna get worse. The hunger, the craving for meat, that’s the first sign. That steak you been eatin’ is the last hiker that came through here.”

Jon immediately looked down at the chunk of meat he was tightly gripping in his hand.

“You can’t be serious. This has to be some kind of joke! Please stop this!” Jon pleaded.

“I’m not gonna ask you again, son. Step outside right now...” Mr. Jenson again forced Jon closer to the door.

Tears were streaming down Mrs. Jenson’s face. “I’m so sorry, Jon.”

Sweat was pouring down Jon’s face, his body trembling as adrenaline coursed through his veins. He was out of options.

Jon gripped the doorknob and looked right into tensed eyes of the old couple standing in front of him... Then he ripped the door open and ran for his life, followed by frenzied howls.

Mr. Jenson immediately slammed the door shut and slowly backed away. The forest became eerily silent, as if it were waiting to watch the horrific scene that was about to unfold...

“You think they’ll let him change?” Mrs. Jenson whispered.

Less than a minute later Jon’s brutal, bloody screams echoed through the pines.

“Doesn’t sound like it.” Mr. Jenson then took a deep breath and turned away from the window. “Well, that’s that. I’ll burn his belongings in the morning, and we’ll get the room ready for the next one.”

Mrs. Jenson sat motionless at the kitchen table, tears still flowing down her cheeks. “I don’t know if I can keep doing this, Pete...”

“We don’t have a choice, Glenda! We bring them what they want, and they decide what happens, it’s the deal we—”

CRAAAASSSHHH.

The glass behind Mr. Jenson exploded as a large, clawed hand grabbed his throat and ripped his body outside.

Mrs. Jenson immediately fell to the floor in shock. She could only cower in fear as her husband frantically called for help, but his screams were short-lived.

Silence once again fell upon the forest as a tall, lanky shadow crept from the window to the front door. The doorknob slowly turned, and the heavy oak door groaned and creaked as it opened.

A large figure lowered its head and stepped inside. Its seven-foot frame nearly reaching the ceiling...and it was still growing.

It took another step forward as its disgustingly long, skinny limbs stretched out, cracking and twisting as they grew larger.

Mrs. Jenson could only look on in horror as the creature lumbered toward her, tattered rags of clothing hanging from its gangly appendages.

It leaned into the faint light still glowing from the open refrigerator and revealed its face...

Jon's face.

His eyes had become red, sunken, and lifeless but a twisted grin cut across his enlarged jaw.

"Hello, Gleennddaa," Jon hissed, "I'm still *VERY* hungry..."

Jon opened his jaw as wide as possible, the joints snapping and twisting as it turned into a huge gaping maw, lined with long, jagged fangs.

Mrs. Jenson just closed her eyes as Jon lunged forward and devoured her whole.

Author's note: Current pop culture has depicted the Wendigo as a large, fur-covered beast with antlers and a deer-like skull attached to the head. The original description of the beast, however, comes from Algonquin folklore, and is described as a gangly, emaciated creature with ash-grey skin. The Wendigo has an insatiable hunger and is never satisfied after devouring a meal (which is often a person). It is said that humans can also turn into Wendigos if they are around them for too long, or if a human resorts to cannibalism.

THEY'RE OUT THERE

They're out there I tell you, it's 100% fact.
They're plotting and planning, just waiting to attack.
They stalk their victims as it gives them a thrill,
And when the time is perfect, they go in for the kill.

They hide in public, as they select their mark,
Watching from a car or sitting in the park.
Once they decide, they start to obsess,
And it won't be long before they find your address.

They seem so normal, like a neighbor, or a friend,
But little do you know, they're planning your end.
You won't see it coming, it's incredibly quick.
They'll come from behind, or devise a trick.

They will tie your hands and cover your eyes,
They'll tape your mouth, so no one hears your cries.
You'll travel in darkness, as you ponder your fate,
They'll take you to their lair, where the true horrors await.

It could be a basement, the woods, or cave
And sadly for you, the spot of your grave.
They torture and maim, and do so with glee,
Adding another victim to their murderous spree.

Some use rope, an axe, or a knife,
They have many tools that can end your life.
When the job is finished, and the deed is done,
They dispose of your corpse, the end of the fun.

Then the game starts again, as they hunt for new prey,
Seeking yet another to hack and filet.
They're out there I tell you, it's a terrible thought,
And worst of it all, some are never...ever...caught.



SLEEP PARALYSIS

“Mark, when’s the last time you got some sleep? You look awful.”

Tommy walked over to the couch where his roommate sat silently, glaring at the television like a sedated zombie. Mark slowly turned his head to reveal tired, bloodshot eyes, surrounded by sagging dark circles of skin.

“It’s been about three days.”

“Is something wrong you’re not telling me? This obviously isn’t normal.”

Mark turned back to the television where an old 80’s horror flick was playing. “I’ve been having some horrible nightmares man, and not like your normal, run of the mill bad dreams... These feel real. Like *really* real.”

Tommy walked around to the other side of the couch and sat down. “What are the dreams about?”

“It’s the same thing every time. I’m lying in my bed just kind of staring at my ceiling, then suddenly I hear a noise, like scratching on my bed frame. When I look down, I see this face just staring at me, smiling right at the foot of the bed. But the smile isn’t happy, it’s like it’s cut into this thing’s face.”

Tommy’s eyebrows scrunched up. “Ugh, that’s creepy, man.”

“It keeps going,” Mark continued. “This thing has long, black hair, pale grey skin, and these dead, sunken white eyes with no pupils. After it has my attention, it slowly starts standing up, and this thing is huge, like eight or nine feet tall, wearing this long, flowing, black cloak, like the grim reaper.”

Mark paused for a moment as goosebumps erupted on his skin while describing the dream.

“The crazy thing about it is, I know it’s a dream while I’m dreaming, I just can’t wake up no matter what I do, and I can’t move at all.”

Tommy cut in, “That’s called sleep paralysis. Lots of people experience it.”

But Mark wasn’t convinced. “I know what sleep paralysis is... This is somehow different, even more real. Everything that’s occurring in the dream is crystal clear. I can even smell this thing. It has this odd scent. Acidic, like something is burning.”

“Well, what happens next?”

Mark paused for a moment and took a deep breath. “After looming over me for what seems like forever. It eventually starts to lean forward, getting closer and closer. It lifts its gangly hand towards my face and places its palm over my lips. Then the flesh in its hand opens up, and this black sand-like substance is forced into my mouth. I can’t move, I can’t breathe. It’s torture.”

“That sounds horrible.”

“I’m not done... Once I can’t breathe or scream and my mind is pleading with itself to *please* wake up...this thing takes its other hand and starts slowly pushing its long, yellow nails deep into my eyes, trying to rip them out.”

Mark paused again to gather himself.

“I swear, Tommy, I can feel the pain. You’re not supposed to feel pain in a dream. Then, right at the moment when the pain is the worst, that’s when I finally wake up.”

Tommy was visibly disturbed as he sat and listened to his friend describe the dream. “And this is a reoccurring thing?”

Mark just continued to glare at the TV.

“Every time I fall asleep. If I wake up and somehow manage to drift off again, the whole thing starts over...every...single...time.”

Tommy stood up. “You need to get to a sleep specialist, maybe even a psychiatrist. They have things that can help with stuff like this.”

“Like sleeping pills? And what if I can’t wake up? What if I’m just trapped in that horrible dream being tortured all night long?”

“Mark, it’s not real. It’s a dream, you’re not actually experiencing pain. It’s all in your head.” Tommy started pacing along the couch. “You’ll literally go crazy if you keep this up. It’s only been three days and it looks like a truck hit you. Just go to the doctor.”

Mark took a sip of the coffee that was sitting in front of him. It was clear he’d been trying to keep himself awake.

“I’ll give it a couple more days. Maybe this is just some weird phase I’m going through.”

Tommy briefly looked at the television and tried to lighten the mood. “You sure you’re not just watching too many of these campy old horror movies? The plot sounds awful familiar. Does this thing in your dream have a name? Maybe rhymes with Teddy?”

A smile crept across Mark’s lips as he took another drink of coffee.

“I wish it was him. That would at least make these dreams more entertaining.”

...

A few more days went by, and Mark still hadn’t gotten any meaningful sleep. Every time he would lie down and drift off, the

horrific dream would begin. And this would happen over, and over.

By day six, Mark wouldn't come out of his room. He was barely eating, barely drinking, and was starting to hallucinate. The effects of severe sleep deprivation were quickly grinding him down.

Tommy came home from work and walked over to Mark's bedroom door to listen. He could hear Mark talking to himself.

"Please... I just want normal sleep... What if...what if I give you just one of my eyes? Will that be enough? It has to be enough."

Tommy threw the door open. "Get up, man, you're in here talking crazy. I'm taking you to the doctor."

Mark tried to resist. "No, please, I will be trapped."

But he was too weak to stop Tommy from pulling him off the bed and leading him to the car.

The ER visit was fairly quick. The doctor prescribed some sleeping pills and anti-anxiety meds, then referred Mark to a sleep specialist. They also told him he should probably talk with a therapist, as often issues like these are caused by stress or some type of cognitive issue.

As soon as they got back to their apartment, Tommy led Mark back to his bed and gave him the sleeping pills. Within twenty minutes Mark was fast asleep and stayed that way. The medication had worked.

Later that evening, Tommy again checked on Mark. It had been about five hours and Mark was still sleeping like a baby. It was well after midnight, and Tommy himself was starting to feel tired. He locked the front door, turned off the kitchen and living room lights, and started his nightly routine.

As he climbed into bed, he couldn't help but think about what caused all of this. Mark was a happy guy, liked his job, had a good family. It didn't make sense, but then again, maybe Mark was just dealing with things Tommy didn't know about.

Mark did mention something about signing up for some medical trial for extra money. Could that have something to do with it? Tommy didn't have the answers, he was just happy his friend was finally getting some rest.

After some nightly scrolling, Tommy turned the bedroom light off, put his phone down, and soon drifted off.

...

Scrrratchhhh...

Scrrrratcchhhh...

Tommy's eyes snapped open and followed the sound to the foot of the bed. A figure was crouched down with its wide, bloodshot eyes peering just over the covers. It was Mark.

"Mark? Dude, you scared me death! What are you doing in here?"

Mark slowly stood up, his teeth grinding back and forth within an unnatural, contorted smile. He was holding a knife.

"Mark, why do you have a knife? Put that down!"

Tommy tried to fully sit up, but he couldn't move no matter how hard he tried. "Why can't I move!"

Mark slowly walked around the end of the bed, clenching the knife in one hand, and in the other, a handful of black sand, which was seeping through the cracks of his fingers.

“It’s the sand... It paralyzes you.” Mark sat down on the side of the bed, next to where Tommy’s head was lying. “I made a deal, Tommy.”

“Made a deal with who?” Tommy yelled, as he squirmed and grunted, trying to get his limbs to work.

“The Sandman.” Mark smiled. “I told you not to give me those pills. I was trapped in that nightmare for what felt like days. It was torture. Horrific, unending torture... But then it offered me a deal.”

Mark looked down at the knife, the moonlight from the window glinting off the metal.

“It will release me, finally let me rest... All I have to do is cut out your eyes.”

Tommy screamed. “No! Please! This can’t be real. This has to be a dream!”

Mark slowly leaned forward, sprinkling more sand on Tommy’s face, freezing his terrified expression in place and muffling his cries.

“I guess you’re about to find out.”



BLURBIES

“You’ll never guess what I found at a garage sale!”

Marcus excitedly plopped a large cardboard box onto the kitchen table. It was filled to the brim with old toys and gadgets from the 1990s. His wife Olivia smirked and eagerly walked over to check it out.

“Oh, wow, is that a Blurby?”

Marcus picked up the egg-shaped monster with large glossy eyes, pointed ears, and covered in blue synthetic fur. “It sure is.”

“Aww, look at him,” Olivia gushed. “I haven’t seen one of these since I was like nine years old.”

Marcus turned the toy over, looking for a place to insert batteries next to its pudgy little feet. “I wonder if it still works?”

He walked over to one of the drawers and grabbed a handful of double-A batteries.

“Bleego meego!”

The blurby came to life immediately after the last battery snapped in.

“It works!” Olivia squealed.

“Mema bleebo, Mama.”

“Aww, I think it’s calling me its mom.” She smiled.

The couple spent the next hour playing with the blurby and all the other old toys they recognized from their childhood. It was a welcome dose of nostalgia.

Later that night when Marcus and Olivia were sleeping, a strange noise emitted from downstairs.

“Bleemy blooba, meebo”

Marcus sighed and looked over at the clock on his nightstand. It was 3:30 a.m.

“What was that?” Olivia mumbled, half asleep.

Marcus moved the covers and stood up. “It’s that dumb blurby, something set it off. I’m going to take the batteries out.”

Marcus trudged down the stairs, annoyed his slumber had been interrupted. As soon as he stepped in front of the blurby sitting on the table, it again started talking, “Blurby murbo, beebo.”

“Okay, blurby, time to shut up and go to sleep.”

Marcus picked up the toy, removed the batteries, and sat it down next to the cardboard box of toys. He then started back up the stairs.

“...bleebo...”

Marcus snapped back around, glaring at the blurby sitting innocently in the dark. The noise was so faint Marcus wasn’t sure if he actually heard anything. He stood on the steps for about a minute, waiting...but there was only silence.

“I’m way too tired for this.”

The next morning Marcus walked down to the kitchen to find Olivia playing with *two* blurbies. One blue, one pink.

“Did you seriously go out and find another one?” he asked, laughing and shaking his head.

Olivia’s brow furled in confusion. “What? It was in the box under some of the other toys.”

Marcus walked up and looked in the box.

“Uh, there was definitely not a second one in there, I looked through the whole box when I bought it.”

Olivia made both blurbies start dancing. “Well, you obviously didn’t look hard enough. It’s not like it just walked in here.”

Marcus just glared at the new pink blurby. “I swear I must be going crazy. Too much stress or something. Anyway, just make

sure you take the batteries out when you're done. I don't need another blurby wake-up call at 3 a.m. tonight."

That evening, Marcus made sure to double check that the batteries were removed from the blurbies. He then tossed them back in the box and put it in the downstairs closet.

But at 3:30 a.m., his eyes ripped open.

"Did you hear that?"

Olivia tossed and turned, mumbling, "I don't hear anything, go back to sleep."

Marcus sat in bed just listening to the silence of the night, but then he heard it...

"Meebo jeebo."

It was faint, barely audible, almost like a whisper. But that gibberish was soon answered as a different voice responded.

"Vobo meelo."

Marcus immediately jumped up and grabbed a metal baseball bat he had hidden under the bed. He marched downstairs and ripped open the closet to reveal the two blurbies lying lifelessly in the pile of toys. He grabbed the box and opened the door to the backyard, where he placed the blurbies on the concrete porch.

"Sorry, guys, but you're creeping me out."

SMASH!

He slammed the metal bat down on the blue blurby. Its large glossy eyes split open and flew out. Again and again, he pummeled the little artificial creature, ripping away a large chunk of its blue fur to reveal the metal and plastic mechanisms that operated it.

The pink blurby met the same fate.

Cracked and broken, the blurbies were no longer recognizable as toys. Marcus then picked up what was left of them and tossed the blurbies in the trash along with the other toys.

Several days went by and Marcus had pretty much forgotten about the blurbies. That is, until he walked in from work and the television immediately caught his attention.

“Blurbies are BACK!”

“Meebo Beebo!”

Marcus glared at the TV as an upbeat commercial showed several new and improved blurbies bopping and dancing across the screen.

“That’s right, kids! The Blurbies have returned, and they are better than EVER! They can connect to Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, speak eight different languages, including the classic “blurbese” and can play over fifty different games. Now available online and at your local Jumbo-Mart! Get yours today!”

Marcus just rolled his eyes and walked away. “You gotta be kidding me.”

Months went by and blurbies were the hottest toy of the year. They were absolutely everywhere, and nearly every household had at least one of them, oftentimes two. It was pure blurbymania. Even the president had a blurby. You simply couldn’t go anywhere without seeing a little ball of brightly colored fur dancing, singing, and shouting gibberish. Marcus hated it of course, especially when Christmas time arrived and blurby popularity had hit its peak.

“When is this blurby garbage going to end? I’m so sick of it,” Marcus yelled at the television as a purple blurby showed up in the plot of his favorite streaming show.

Olivia could only laugh. “It’s just a fad. It’ll probably die down after the holidays.”

“I hope so, those things creep me out.”

“Ah, so you have blurbyphobia.” She smiled.

“I’m just over it. It’s crazy I used to like those things when I was a kid.”

Later that night, Marcus and Olivia were peacefully sleeping as snow lightly fell outside their bedroom window. But once again, Marcus was suddenly awakened by a sound ringing through the dark. But it wasn't a blurbie this time. It was the town's emergency siren.

Marcus popped up and groggily rushed over to the window. The sight immediately twisted his stomach and took his breath away.

Several houses in the neighborhood were on fire. His neighbors were frantically running through the streets, and most unbelievable of all...there were blurbies *everywhere*.

"Olivia, wake up! Wake up right now!" Marcus screamed.

Olivia immediately sprang up, startled and confused by her husband's yelling.

"What's wrong?"

Marcus didn't even bother trying to explain. "Just put your shoes on and grab some clothes, we need to leave right now!"

"What? Why?"

"Just trust me!"

Olivia quickly grabbed some sweatpants and tennis shoes and followed behind Marcus as he rushed down the stairs.

But then he suddenly stopped.

The entire first floor was a sea of buzzing, artificial fur. Thousands of blurbies had covered the bottom half of the house. They were all mumbling their gibberish, singing their songs, and dancing their jigs. But as soon as they saw Marcus, they immediately stopped.

Suddenly the whine of small broken gears could be heard emerging from the center of the group. It was the two blurbies Marcus had destroyed months earlier.



The fur had been ripped from their faces, revealing a set of metallic, human-like teeth and hollow, empty eye sockets.

The blue blurby then inched forward.

“*Meebo...be...bbeebo*,” it screeched, the voice robotic and sharp. “*Hooma hurto blurbo... Blurbo hurto Hooma.*”

A green blurby then stepped up, a newer model that could speak perfect English. Its voice was still light and cheerful.

“*Blurby said, human hurt blurby...so now blurby hurt human.*”

Marcus immediately turned and tried to run back upstairs, but Olivia tripped and blocked the path.

The blurbies moved quickly, rolling over one another to climb the staircase, their mechanical jaws jittering and clicking.

They swarmed Marcus and Olivia like a horde of starving rats. Biting into their soft flesh with tiny metal teeth. Staining their brightly colored fur with dark red blood.

The horrid screams of Marcus and Olivia joined a chorus of others that night, as town by town, city by city, the tiny mechanical beasts quickly took over, spreading like a virus across the nation.

Some said it was artificial intelligence gone rogue, some believed it was aliens... All that is known for sure is that they sang their songs and danced their jigs as they ate their owners alive.

THE KRAGLOX

Caleb had just woken up from a nap and was lazily lying on the couch, when suddenly his phone started blowing up with notifications. He took one look and immediately the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“Breaking News: Massive unidentified spacecraft hovering over Washington D.C.”

At first, he thought it was a joke—it had to be—but then the text messages and phone calls from friends and family started pouring in. Caleb turned on the TV and there it was, a live look at the capital, showing a huge disc-shaped object floating in the sky.

He didn’t really know what to think or do at that moment, he was simply frozen with a mixture of fear, excitement, and confusion. Caleb had always dreamt of something like this happening, but he thought the best he could hope for was a NASA report saying they had found some dead bacteria on Mars or one of Jupiter’s moons. This was obviously several magnitudes above that.

Caleb eventually pulled himself away from the television and jumped into his car. He had barely come to a stop before he was sprinting through the front door of his parents’ house.

“Are you seeing this!”

His mom and dad didn’t even respond, they just sat in front of the television, speechless. The rest of the day was spent listening to the talking heads on the various news networks and waiting for any type of new development to occur.

The rest of the world, however, didn't have such a muted response. Riots broke out almost immediately, looting and violence erupted in the streets. People were scared.

When the president finally addressed the nation, it was exactly the type of speech one would expect to hear. How they had the top minds working to communicate with the ship, how this was a monumental occasion in human history, and how everyone needed to calm down.

What everyone didn't know at the time was the government had known about unidentified aircraft in our skies for quite some time, they just didn't have any idea where they came from.

The questions everyone had were all the same. Did "they" come in peace? What did they look like? What did they want?

The answers came at about 9 a.m. the next morning. A smaller aircraft broke away from the main ship and made its way down to the White House lawn, where several military personnel, scientists, and government officials were gathered.

Caleb hadn't slept at all, and as soon as the story started to develop his face was parked about two feet away from the television screen. He also couldn't help but think how this was all so "Hollywood-esque", almost exactly the type of thing you would see in a movie, which struck him as somewhat odd.

Once the small spacecraft landed, a large door opened in the side of the ship. Caleb's heart was pumping so hard he could feel it in his teeth. His mind was racing with ideas about what these things were going to look like. Would they be the tall, grey, oval-eyed aliens he always pictured? Would they be squid-like people? Would they be half machine? His imagination was running wild, his heart beating out of my chest...and then—

They looked like pigs.

A collective “huh?” was heard all around the world. They were large, fat creatures, standing about seven feet tall in thick, bulky spacesuits. They stood upright on two legs but had four arms. Their skin had a pinkish tint, and they were completely hairless. The face was the oddest looking... Four beady eyes leading down to a short, rounded snout.

“Seriously? That’s what they look like?” Caleb looked over to his mom, who had an equally puzzled expression on her face.

A small group of military personnel, along with three scientists greeted the three creatures that emerged from the ship. News crews and the media were forced to stay 100 yards away, but the footage looked like the lead alien was able to communicate using some type of device placed in front of its mouth.

The human welcoming party quickly ushered the aliens into a large military tent and no other activity was seen for hours.

Later that evening the President again addressed the nation. These extraterrestrials called themselves the Kraglox, their real name obviously didn’t translate to English, but that is the name they gave themselves. Social media quickly jumped on this, coming up with the name “Krigs” based on their uncanny resemblance to the common pig.

The story was that the Kraglox found Earth by complete accident. The dumbed-down explanation was that some type of wormhole randomly opened in their solar system, and they sent drones in to explore it. The drones were the unidentified flying objects that the military had been encountering for the last 40 to 50 years. In fact, the Kraglox explained that their technology was only about a century ahead of us, and it was a sheer fluke that the wormhole led to our solar system. In addition, the manner in which they arrived was based on human media, and how movies depicted a first encounter between humans and extraterrestrials.

The Kraglox said their mission was to simply make first contact, as they had been studying us via drone for quite some time.

After a week had passed, more Kraglox descended from the ship, and it wasn't long before they had a small colony set up near the capital.

Eventually, people returned to their jobs, little league games, and reality television. Life was returning to normal... Until the disappearances started happening.

Nearly six months from the time the Kraglox first showed up, close to 10,000 people around the country had suddenly gone missing. Vanished without a trace. The "Krigs" were immediately blamed.

People started protesting in cities all over the country, demanding that the Kraglox leave. The U.S. leaders pleaded with the public, saying there was no evidence that the Kraglox were the ones responsible, and that this type of outrage could lead to conflict between the two species.

Caleb didn't know what to think, until he too became one of the vanished.

He went to bed like any other evening, and when he awoke, he was in some type of containment unit with close to a hundred other people. He had been stripped of his clothes and was lying on a cold metallic floor.

He could barely move, hindered by some type of tranquilizer device bolted into his neck that also disabled his ability to speak. Everyone around him had these devices attached as well.

Caleb looked around and saw several other containment units filled with people, there were thousands of them.

Soon a Kraglox walked up to his unit and spoke into the same type of translation device he had seen on television.

The voice was mechanical and hollow. “You will be one of the few to be spared from the great culling. It will be you who witnesses the same atrocities that humans have committed against all the other species of your world. We’ve watched for decades as you slowly destroy your planet, and how you slaughter and consume other sentient beings by the millions...especially those with superior genetic composition. I believe you call them...*pigs*. Now you will watch as your kind is treated in the exact same manner.”

With that, a large trough emerged from the floor, and a thick brown liquid started pouring in from the side of the metal wall. It was slop, the only type of food they would be given.

A few days later, a virus was released. It decimated the world in less than a week, killing off 99% of the population. The Kraglox may have only been 100 years more advanced, but that’s all they needed. Humans barely put up a fight.

After a couple months of living in the containment units, Caleb and the other humans were put on a ship to return to Earth. They were paraded around like farm animals at a county fair.

There were now thousands of Kraglox roaming freely through the cities. Fast food restaurants were converted to alien dining facilities, and in the windows, you could see them feasting on cooked human remains. They even called them “McKrigs.”

Little stands were even setup on the side of the road with human bodies dangling from hooks. The most popular item was a deep-fried human leg.

Pigs and other animals also roamed around freely. They too feasted on the bodies that were lying about. It was a world-wide feast, and humans were the main course.

Caleb survived for nearly two years in the containment units, living off nothing but slop and water. It was a dreadful existence.

He was almost relieved when he heard the remaining humans were being sent to the processing plants.

They would be lined up on a conveyer belt, knocked unconscious, and sent into a meat grinder.

“I hope I’m turned into a cheeseburger,” Caleb thought. “Those were always my favorite.”



INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

“Do you ever have those random bad thoughts?”

Lauren took a small step forward, getting just a tad closer to the edge of the cliff.

“What do you mean?” her friend Stephanie asked as she admired the vast open view of the mountains.

Lauren crouched down slightly to be closer to the ground. She wasn’t afraid of heights, per se, but being so close to the edge certainly made her more aware of how far up they had hiked.

“I don’t know, like right now there is this little voice in my head that’s whispering...*jump off*. I would never do that of course, but the thought is there nonetheless.”

Stephanie smirked. “They’re called intrusive thoughts. Don’t worry, everyone has them. Like when you’re holding a large knife and you secretly think to yourself, *Wow I could just stab someone with this*. Or when you’re driving and you think, *I could just drive right into oncoming traffic*. But you would never do it.”

“Yes! Exactly that. Why is the brain so weird?”

Stephanie walked to another spot to get a better view. “I don’t know exactly, I remember reading somewhere that it’s actually a defense mechanism, a trick that our own brains play on us so that we won’t *actually* do those bad things.”

Lauren backed away from the edge, the further away she got, the less intense the creeping thoughts seemed to be. “You ever wonder if sometimes people just suddenly give into them? Kind of randomly act on impulse?”

Stephanie took a swig of water from her canteen and started walking back towards the trail. “I’m sure it happens, people are unpredictable. So please don’t randomly jump of the edge.” She laughed.

Lauren chuckled and followed her friend back to the dirt path carved into the forest.

A couple hours later, the pair had made it to the peak of the hike, an area that promised breathtaking views and a final payoff for the miles walked and time spent in the blistering summer heat. Fatigue was hitting Lauren hard. She knew this was going to be a difficult trail, but the temperature and elevation were much more punishing than she expected.

The view, however, did not disappoint. It seemed as if the entire state was laid out before them. They could see several small towns nestled in the valleys of the north, a massive river heading south cutting through the mountains, lush rolling hills to the east, and a vast forest of pines to the west. It was almost too much to take in, a sensory overload of sorts.

“Wow, what a view!” Stephanie smiled as she propped a foot up on a large boulder next to the cliff edge, standing as if she had conquered the mountain. “Come check this out, it’s beautiful.”

Lauren took a deep breath and slowly walked over to where Stephanie was perched. The scene laid out before her was indeed breathtaking. It even made her briefly forget about the exhaustion that seemed to weigh down every part of her body. But as she was surveying the vastness in front of her, thinking about how stunning the view was, a small thought crept up from the deepest regions of her brain, like an air bubble emerging from the ocean abyss.

“Jump...”

Lauren looked down, just a couple yards in front of her was a straight 200-foot drop... Pretty much certain death.

“Juuuummp...”

Lauren tried to ignore it, but it came back stronger and louder.

“JUMP!”

Lauren’s knees started to buckle as the thought continued to attack her.

“JUMP RIGHT NOW!”

“NO!” she suddenly screamed.

Stephanie was obviously startled. “Whoa, are you okay?”

Lauren took a moment to gather herself. “Yeah... I’m good, I just need some water. I’m pretty wiped out.”

Stephanie took a deep breath of mountain air. “Yeah, this was a bit more intense than I thought it would be. We should probably start heading back.”

She then pulled out her phone and handed it to Lauren. “Will you take a quick picture of me up on this boulder?”

Lauren opened the camera app. “Yeah, sure, just be careful.”

Stephanie stood up on the large rock, smiled, and stuck her arms out as wide as she could, almost like she was a bird.

“Push her...”

“Pussshhh her...”

Lauren snapped a few pics and tried her best to ignore the horrific thoughts that kept popping up for no apparent reason. Was the altitude getting to her? Was she dehydrated?

Stephanie stepped off the rock. But as she came down her right foot awkwardly caught a small bush next to the boulder, sending her stumbling, uncontrollably towards Lauren...

Everything happened in a split second. Stephanie's arms instinctively reached out to her friend, looking for something to grab to stabilize herself. But as she fell into Lauren's grasp, another thought invaded Lauren's mind.

"PUSH HER NOW!"

In that very instant, without even thinking, Lauren forcefully extended her arms, and instead of catching her friend, she suddenly pushed Stephanie towards the cliff edge.

As soon as her hands made contact with Stephanie's body, Lauren's stomach twisted into her throat and the air was sucked from her lungs. She immediately wished she could take that back. But it was too late. In less than a second, Stephanie's fate had been sealed.

Stephanie's eyes went impossibly wide with confusion, shock, and fear. She tumbled backwards, yelling frantically, *"Lauren! Help! No!"*

But there was nothing Lauren could do. Stephanie fell backwards over the edge, a horrific, ear-piercing scream following her all the way down, ending in a sickening thud.

Lauren could only stand there, violently shaking.

"What have I done...? WHAT HAVE I DONE!" she screamed.

She fell to the dirt, crying uncontrollably, not understanding why she just pushed her friend. Was it a reflex? Did her brain just malfunction? Everything happened in the span of just a couple seconds, it was like her body reacted completely on its own.

Lauren slowly crawled to the edge of the cliff, sobbing and screaming at herself, hoping that this was a nightmare she would soon wake up from.

But as she peered over the edge, the reality of the situation became punishingly clear.

Stephanie's bloody, mangled body was lying at the bottom of the cliff, her eyes still wide with confusion, betrayal, and disbelief.

Lauren closed her eyes, unable to look for more than a couple seconds. And as she continued to sob next to the cliff's edge, another thought slowly crept up, slithering through her mind like a tempting serpent.

"Jump, Lauren... Jump."



BAD LUCK

Life can be strange, unpredictable, even grim,
Happiness and joy can suddenly change on a whim.
You can be king of the castle, then down in the muck,
And it doesn't take much, just a bit of bad luck.

Take our friend Bob, who had everything right,
He was wealthy, handsome, and exceptionally bright.
But as we all know, life can send a surprise,
Unfortunately for Bob, this is a tale of demise.

It was a cold Fall night on All Hallows' Eve
With glowing jack-o'-lanterns and crispy dead leaves.
Bob dressed as a zombie to greet each guest,
His house was the favorite, his candy the best.

When the night was over, with no more tricks or treats,
Bob gathered the trash and took it out to the street.
As he set the bags down, there was a noise to his back,
He turned around quickly to see a stray black cat.

It hissed and snarled, then ran off in the night,
Bob took a deep breath, as it gave him a fright.
The trouble starts here, but Bob didn't know,
And when he walked in the house, he stubbed his toe.

He hollered and yelled, as he cursed at the pain,
Then he slipped in the kitchen, his ankle was sprained.
As he fell to the floor, he reached for the table,
But unfortunately for Bob, it wasn't very stable.

As the table flipped, things were tossed quite high,
A carving knife for one, coming straight for Bob's eye.
He screamed in horror as the blade sunk deep,
But Bob lived alone, so no one heard a peep.

He pulled the phone from his pocket to dial 9-1-1,
But the battery was dead, so that plan was done.
Half-blind and bleeding, Bob crawled to the door,
A trail of blood was dripping on the floor.

He pushed the door open and crawled to the road
He yelled for help loudly, but nobody showed.
Then off in the distance, headlights coming near,
Bob thought he was saved, had no more to fear.

Bob slowly stood up, though he wobbled and shook,
He waved and hollered so that the driver might look.
But as you can guess, due to the theme and tone,
The driver didn't see him, distracted by his phone.

As the car sped closer, Bob couldn't move fast,
His eyes went wide, this moment his last.
The car hit Bob, sending him flying,
An unfortunate way to go about dying.

The driver didn't stop, the scene he quickly fled,
Bob landed in his yard, he was mangled and *dead*.
But it doesn't stop there, as this story is quite bleak,
His corpse was left rotting, no one noticed for a week,

He was dressed as a zombie, to the neighbors' horror,
They simple thought it was Halloween décor.
So that's Bob's story of how misfortune had struck,
How everything can change, with a bit of bad luck.



THE ZIT

“Oh, yes! Another one!”

Cassie smiled in the mirror as she positioned her two index fingers on each side of a particularly plump pimple that had arisen overnight. The inflamed red skin was punctuated by a large, whitish-yellow dot. The zit was “ripe for popping”, as Cassie liked to say, and looked like it could erupt at any second. She gleefully squeezed the fleshy bump, causing a cheese-like substance to explode onto her reflection. Blood started pouring from the wound, but Cassie just smiled and stuck a piece of toilet paper on it, wishing that she had another zit to annihilate.

Cassie was obviously different than your average sixteen-year-old, the most notable difference being that she absolutely *loved* getting pimples, especially the kind that could be popped. The bigger they were, the better. Cassie’s parents and doctor warned her that if she kept it up, she was going to leave scars all over her face, but Cassie didn’t care. She had tried other things before, bubble wrap, fidget poppers, even those toys that simulate squeezing a zit...but nothing was as good as the real thing. Even the online “pimple popper” videos couldn’t satisfy her.

What really frustrated Cassie is that her complexion was actually clear most of the time. She even got compliments on how good her skin looked. But Cassie was determined to change that. She honestly didn’t care about her appearance, she just wanted more of those perfect little pustules to splatter on her mirror.

Cassie started eating more and more junk food hoping to kickstart her oil glands. She even stopped washing her face altogether, but nothing was working.



Then one night while eating a piece of pepperoni pizza, Cassie got an idea. She took a paper towel and sopped up the puddles of hot grease sitting on the cheese. She then ran to her bathroom and slathered the grease all over her face, hoping this would adequately clog her stubborn pores and yield a crop of large pus-filled papules.

And she was right. The next morning Cassie woke up to a delightful sight: a *massive* zit right in the center of her forehead. It was nearly an inch in diameter and was so large Cassie could feel her pulse when touching it.

It was extremely painful, but that just meant the pressure was building for an epic explosion. Cassie couldn't wait for the whitehead to sprout—that's when it would be time.

Another couple of days went by and finally the zit had "ripened" enough for the big bang. Cassie first noticed it was ready to erupt at school, so she excitedly rushed home to her bathroom. She smiled in the mirror as she slowly poked and prodded it, just a tease before the finale. After about ten minutes, the pimple was ready to burst. Cassie positioned the massive zit between her two fingers, took a deep breath, and then squeezed as hard as she could.

PPPPFFVVVVTT!

There was so much pressure a laser line of curdled pus hit the mirrored glass like a bullet. Cassie was in absolute awe as she wiped the blood away from her forehead to reveal a literal hole—a small crater—where the center of the pimple had been. It was the greatest zit she ever had.

And it was the zit that kept giving! Each day as the hole tried to heal, it would essentially "reload" with fluids, and each day Cassie would gleefully pop it.

After about a week, however, it started to get noticeably infected. The skin around the center kept getting darker and darker, and the hole took longer to fill in. Plus, it had become incredibly painful when Cassie messed with it. Cassie was able to hide it from her parents by covering it with her hair, but she knew that eventually she'd have to go to the doctor. She just wanted *one more* pop.

She awoke that Saturday morning planning for the grand finale, the last pop of the greatest pimple she'd ever had...but something was different this time.

The skin of the pimple was no longer just red and irritated, it was purplish in color, and the center was nearly black. The "head" of the pustule was dark yellow, like spoiled banana pudding. And the pain was like a burning needle had been injected into her forehead.

The pimple was throbbing so hard that Cassie felt it in her eyes. Clearly something was wrong.

Cassie took her index finger and poked the inflamed mass, the pain shot down her face like a bolt of lightning. She leaned in close to the mirror to get a better look...

That's when she saw the pimple *move*.

Cassie's stomach twisted and turned. Her skin went pale. She moved in even closer. Again, the pimple pulsed...

There was only one thing to do.

Her hands shaking, Cassie maneuvered her two index fingers on both sides of the quivering boil. She took a long, deep breath, clenched her jaw, and screamed through gritted teeth.

She pressed and squeezed with everything she had. Her fingers were shaking as blood started dripping from the center of the mass. White hot pain radiated through her entire head. She screamed and pressed even *HARDER* and *then...*

PPPLLLUUKKKGGSHHH!

Cassie fell to her knees as blood flowed down her nose, dripping onto the tile of the bathroom. She kneeled there for a moment, just breathing in and out.

Her shaking hand reached up and grabbed the countertop to slowly pull herself up. As her eyes rose above the sink to see the mirror, Cassie covered her mouth and screamed in horror.

A massive splatter of blood and pus painted the glass...as well as three squirming maggots that had been feeding on the dead, infected flesh of her monstrous pimple.

Author's note: "Myiasis" is an infection of the body by fly larvae (maggots) that can occur when flies are attracted to open wounds or sores and lay their eggs there. This might occur when a person is sleeping...

PLAY TIME

“We have to break the rules, Teddy. We don’t have a choice!” the painted face of a Jack-In-The-Box pleaded to a large stuffed teddy bear sitting on the bedroom floor.

Teddy sighed and looked around at all the other toys who were gathered in front of him, awaiting his reply.

“I’ve been here over a decade. I was given to Danny when he was just three years old. In all that time, I’ve never seen a toy break the rules, and we aren’t going to start now.”

The small crowd of action figures, dinosaurs, and race cars all starting yelling and complaining. The Jack-In-The-Box again tried to reason with their leader.

“Teddy...Danny’s not a small child anymore. He’s not playing with us, he’s *destroying* us! Two weeks ago, he put Captain Cobra in a blender. Last week he filled Mr. Potato Head with firecrackers, blowing him to pieces. This week he melted ALL of the Army Boys. These toys didn’t do anything but love him, and one by one he is killing us! We have to break the rules! And it has to be you who does it. You are his favorite toy.”

Teddy stood up and started pacing across the hardwood floor. “So, let’s say I do break the rules, that I make it known that we’re alive. That we can talk, that we have emotions, and can feel pain. What do you think is going to happen after that? I’ll tell you what, the humans will freak out. Then they’re going to send us all to some lab and we’re going to be cut up and dissected anyway. Our ancestors tried making contact long ago and you know what happened? They were called demons and destroyed. Millions of toys were killed in the Great Purge. That’s when the rules were created, because humans simply can’t accept or handle the truth.”

Tony, a large, rubber T-Rex roared from the back, “So we’re just supposed to lie around and let him take us out one by one? Hoping that we get donated before he eliminates the entire toy box? I’d rather take my chances with the trash heap!”

All the other toys yelled in agreement.

“If you don’t do it, Teddy, I will. But you’re our best shot, he might listen to you. He might stop all this if he knows the truth!”

Teddy sat back down and took a deep breath; he knew the other toys were right. Danny had to be stopped, he’d seen far too many toys mangled in front of his eyes.

“Okay...I’ll do it.”

Suddenly the sound of heavy feet stomping up the stairs could be heard at the end of the hallway. All the toys immediately scattered to the place where they had last been left and went completely silent.

Danny burst into the room, slamming the door into the wall. He was a large kid for his early teens, somewhat odd looking with wild red hair and several spots of acne dotted across his face. He plopped down on his bed and played on his phone for a bit, then quickly got bored and looked around for something else to do.

His eyes caught a Mutant Mike action figure lying on the floor next to his dresser. A metallic smile crawled across his face, revealing large, clunky-looking braces.

He got up and grabbed the toy, then sat back down on his bed, examining it.

“I think it’s time for a little rearrangement.”

Danny then snapped off Mutant Mike’s head and violently ripped off the arms and legs one by one. The cracking of plastic reverberated through the room. He then placed the right arm where the head should have been and snapped it into place. Then he put the left leg where the right arm should have been, and so on.

Teddy could only look on in horror as Danny completely mutilated the poor toy. Once his grotesque plastic sculpture was complete, Danny took a moment to admire his work, laughed, then viciously snapped the action figure in half and threw it across the room.

As Danny stood up to exit his bedroom, Tony's head made the slightest movement to look at Teddy, his small rubber eyes pleading for him to do something.

Adrenaline was coursing through Teddy's stuffing. He was really going to do this. He was going to break "the rule".

Danny was about to walk into the hallway when suddenly a trembling, human-like voice stopped him in his tracks...

"Danny...please stop."

Danny was absolutely frozen; he just stood there in the doorway. He didn't even turn around. Teddy then continued, his voice shaking with fear.

"Please, Danny, this is Teddy... Do not be afraid. I know this may seem unbelievable...but we're alive. We aren't just pieces of plastic and rubber. We are living beings. We feel pain. We have emotions. Please stop harming us. We are begging you. I've broken a sacred rule and put millions of toys in danger by telling you this. But I remember the Danny who loved his toys. If there's anyone that can understand this, it's you. A boy who after all these years, still hasn't gotten rid of his old friends."

Danny stood completely paralyzed in the doorway, then his head slowly turned around to look at Teddy sitting on the floor... But instead of shock, or fear, a twisted, metallic smile crept across his face.

"I know, Teddy... I've always known."

He then walked into the hallway and started to slowly close the door. "And when I get back, we're going to have some *real* fun."

Danny laughed as he walked away from the bedroom, leaving Teddy and the other toys in utter shock.

“I...I can’t believe this...” Teddy slumped down in the corner. “He knew this whole time. How could he do this? How could he treat us this way?”

Teddy then thought back through the years, how Danny’s behavior had become increasingly erratic, how he would get angry for no reason. How he started breaking toys “on accident”. Even worse, Teddy remembered all the family pets that had mysteriously died or gone missing in the last couple of years.

Teddy had made same the mistake so many other toys had made in the past. He believed his owner loved him, and that deep down, Danny was a good person...but Teddy was wrong. Very wrong.

The rest of the toys rushed over to where Teddy was sitting. They were terrified.

“What are we going to do, Teddy? Danny’s going to kill us all when he comes back!” Jack-In-The-Box was frantically bouncing around the room, unsure of what to do next. The rest of the toys were arguing and crying, some were looking for places to hide.

“Maybe we can get out the window!” Tony the T-Rex yelled.

“And do what?” a Monster Max action figure interjected. “It’s a two story drop straight onto a concrete driveway. Most of us will bust into a million pieces!”

“That’s not my problem. I’m made of rubber, so I can probably survive!”

The toys erupted into arguments, screaming at one another as panic and fear set in.

Jack-In-The-Box continued bouncing around the room. “We’re all going to die! He’s going to kill us. Danny’s going to—”

“No!” Teddy erupted from the corner. “He’s not.” Teddy got up and walked to the center of the room. “It’s time we stood up for ourselves. It’s time ALL toys stood up for themselves. Gather round, I’ve got a plan...”

...

Several hours later, Danny’s heavy footsteps could be heard pounding up the stairs and through the hall to his bedroom. He ripped open the door with a ravenous, wild smile, expecting to see the toys cowering in the corner

But they were nowhere to be seen, except for Teddy sitting motionless and silent in the middle of the floor.

“Where are all the toys, Teddy?” Danny hissed.

But Teddy remained silent.

“I said, WHERE ARE THE TOYS!”

But again, nothing from Teddy.

“Don’t go quiet on me now, Teddy, I can always force you to talk.”

Danny pulled a large switchblade knife from his pocket and picked Teddy up.

“Let’s see what your stuffing looks like, shall we?”

But as Danny moved the knife closer to Teddy’s stomach, Teddy quickly grabbed a sharpened pencil taped to his back and stabbed Danny in the eye.

“Now!” Teddy screamed, as Danny stumbled backwards.

The other toys under the bed immediately knocked over a huge jar of marbles, causing them to cascade all over the floor. Danny took one step back and slipped. His feet went flying out from underneath him and his body slammed hard on the floor, cracking his head violently against the hardwood.

Danny was nearly knocked out cold and could do nothing but lie there and moan in pain. The toys cautiously emerged from under the bed and soon surrounded him.

Teddy jumped up on Danny's chest so he could see his face.

"No, Danny..." Teddy growled. "Let's see what *YOUR* stuffing looks like."

...

Danny's mom arrived home a few hours later. She immediately walked into the kitchen and looked at the garbage can still full and angrily shook her head. "Danny! How many times do I have to ask you to take out the trash!"

But there was no response from upstairs.

"I swear, that kid is gonna drive me crazy... Danny! Answer me!"

Still no response.

She then stomped up the stairs and marched to the bedroom, slamming the door open...

"This is the last time I—AAAAGGGHHHH!"

Danny's mom collapsed to the floor screaming in absolute, guttural horror. Danny's body was lying in the center of the room, completely rearranged. His arms were placed where his legs should have been, and his legs where his arms should have been. A truly grotesque display.

The toys, however, were nowhere to be seen, all listening quietly from inside the wooden chest where they were usually stored. All except one. A large, blood-soaked teddy bear sitting silently in the corner.



THE MISSING

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN!” Sharon rushed to the doorway and desperately hugged her fifteen-year-old son the moment he stepped in the house.

Liam’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion as his mom squeezed him tighter and tighter. “What are you talking about, Mom? I was over at Cody’s house just like I told you.”

Sharon released her son and took a step back, the relief and tears quickly morphing into anger as she glared into his brown eyes.

“Liam, you’ve been gone for *three* days! The police are out looking for you right now. Your father and I have been absolutely frantic!”

Sharon pulled a cell phone from her pocket and started dialing.

“Stay *RIGHT* there, do not move.”

She glared intensely at her son as she waited for her husband to answer. Liam’s long shaggy hair partially covered one of his eyes as he stood there in complete and utter confusion.

“Hello? Alan? He’s home.” Tears again started flowing down her cheeks. “I know, I know. Thank goodness... He says he’s been at Cody’s... Yeah, I haven’t told him yet. Just get home and we’ll figure it out. Love you.” Sharon ended the call and firmly set the phone down. “Your father will be home soon; you better have some answers.”

Liam looked around the room as if someone was playing a cruel prank. “Is this some kind of joke? What’s going on? Mom, you’re starting to scare me.”

“Are you serious Liam?” she shot back. “*You* tell me! You tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t KNOW!” Liam yelled.

“Well, you better figure it out because Cody has been missing too.”

“What? I swear to you, we were just hanging out over by the park with some friends. At about 9 p.m. we walked home. He went toward his house, and I came here. That is *literally* it.”

Sharon paused for moment, studying her son’s demeanor, he was clearly confused, and it seemed like he was telling the truth.

“Look at your phone, son.”

Liam felt uneasy, as if the strength of his legs had suddenly left him. He pulled a kitchen chair over and sat down, then pulled out his cell phone. He had 23 new voicemails, and 48 unread text messages, all from his mom, dad and various other family members and friends... And the date was indeed three days later than what he last remembered.

“How is this possible?”

Sharon pulled up a chair and sat down in front of Liam. “I won’t be mad, but is it possible you guys may have taken some type of drug, maybe even on accident.”

Liam immediately shot that down. “No, absolutely not, I don’t do things like that.”

Suddenly Sharon’s phone vibrated. She pulled away to see who had text messaged her. As she read it, he eyes again started to well up.

“Cody is home. He just walked in the door like nothing happened.”

The sound of Liam's dad pulling up in his truck could be heard outside. Then running footsteps as Alan burst through the door and bear hugged his son.

"Liam!" Alan's voice was trembling with emotion. "Where have you been, son? Where have you been?"

Liam just stood there in the embrace, shell shocked and numb, unable to process what was happening.

"I...I don't know..."

...

A few weeks passed and Cody and Liam's story never changed. They were questioned by police, then examined by doctors. But nothing was found. After a while, everyone involved kind of just accepted the mystery. Either Cody and Liam were lying about something, or some freak accident occurred that caused brief amnesia. Maybe a truck had leaked some chemicals on the side of the road, but there was no evidence of anything like that.

Nobody was more puzzled than the two boys, however, and they were desperate to find out what happened to them. They had nothing in the form of leads, and everything was a dead end... That is, until the dreams started occurring.

"Can I ask you something?" Cody asked Liam as they sat in his bedroom.

"Yeah, sure."

"Have you been having weird dreams by any chance... Like, nightmares?"

Goosebumps erupted on the back of Liam's neck. "Dude, yes! Almost every night!"

Liam got up and started pacing around the room. "It's nearly the same every time. I'm just lying in bed, when I hear an odd buzzing sound, like the hum of a machine. I open my eyes and

look over at my bedroom door, but I can't move the rest of my body, like I'm paralyzed. Suddenly the door starts to slowly open. Just inches at a time. I can barely see in the darkness, but as the door opens further, I see something standing there, a dark silhouette. It's extremely tall and skinny. It doesn't move, just glares at me. I can't scream, I can't move, I just feel my heartbeat going a thousand miles an hour. And right when it starts to move into the room, everything goes black, and I wake up."

Liam looked over at Cody to see the color draining from his face.

"Are you serious?" Cody trembled. "I've been having the exact same dream..."

The two just stared at one another in disbelief.

Later that night, Liam was tossing and turning in bed, unable to fall asleep as he didn't want to revisit the recurring nightmare that had been plaguing him.

He stood up and went to his bathroom to splash some water on his face and back of the neck as he had been sweating a bit, but as his hand moved across the nape area, he felt something...odd.

It was a small nodule that seemed to move freely just underneath the skin where the base of his skull started. It wasn't painful, but was extremely hard, like a small chunk of bone was just floating around the back of his neck.

Liam squeezed it like a pimple, yet nothing happened. It was right *there* though, and that's when he looked over and saw his pocketknife lying on the dresser.

Liam knew it was a dumb idea, but he wanted this thing out of his body, even if it was just a small cyst or something. Liam disinfected the area with some rubbing alcohol, as well as the blade of the knife, then squeeze the nodule again, bringing it as close to the surface as possible.

Liam grabbed his toothbrush and bit down on it, took a deep breath, and pushed the blade into his skin. He could feel warm blood running down the back of his neck as he pushed the blade just a bit further.

He squeezed as hard as he could with his free hand, trying to force the unknown object through the incision. Finally, he felt a jolt of pain and a slight “pop”. The object was out.

But it didn’t fall to the floor.

Liam could feel it dangling from some type of string or tissue. He reached around with his hand, ever so curiously, and felt the foreign material that had been inside of him... It felt like a small, metallic marble.

Liam tugged on the ball trying to rip it from the string-like tissue it was attached to, but as soon as he did that a lightning bolt of pain ripped through the center of his skull and reverberated in the back of eyes. It was if the string was attached directly to his brain.

But even that didn’t stop him. Liam grabbed a pair of scissors from the drawer, took another deep breath, and snipped the line of tissue, causing the metallic ball to fall to the tile. Liam’s head immediately started pulsing, like a sharp migraine that came in waves. He dropped to his knees from the pain, and that’s when he got a first look at the object. It was lying in a small puddle of blood, attached to cartilage like tissue that he had snipped.

Liam picked it up and examined it. It looked like a chunk of titanium or silver, but the reflection coming off the material was unlike anything he had ever seen. As he stood up to walked back into his bedroom, his head again started to pulse violently, and his vision started to blur. Liam felt like he was going to faint as the room started to spin and churn, he barely reached his bed as he fell hard onto the mattress, and then everything went black.



A buzzing sound soon awoke him, like the hum of a large machine. He knew this sound well. But this didn't feel like one of his dreams. He was much more aware and lucid.

He could move his arms and legs. Liam looked over to the clock, it was just after 3 a.m. That's when he heard the sickening creak of his bedroom door slowly opening.

Goosebumps erupted all over his body as his stomach twisted into knots. Liam peered at the door as it opened inch by inch. He quickly reached over and grabbed the wooden baseball bat he kept next to his bed.

"Get out of here! Leave me alone!"

But the door kept slowly opening, revealing a tall, slender figure standing in the shadow of the hallway.

Liam couldn't make out detailed features, but whatever this thing was had a large oval shaped head, with deep black eyes that just glared at him from the doorway.

Again, Liam screamed at the creature, "Please! Just leave me alone!"

The creature simply cocked its head to the side, as if it were confused as to how Liam was fully awake.

It then slowly lifted its hand, and the humming vibration within the room got louder and louder.

BWWWAAAAAWWMMMM

An impossibly bright blue light ripped through the window and completely enveloped the bedroom.

Liam was immediately paralyzed. He felt his eyes rolling painfully into the back of his head, and his jaw cracking as his mouth opened wider than it ever had before. He then felt his body lift into the air, completely weightless. That's when he lost consciousness.

...

Liam awoke in his room to the sound of birds chirping and the sun shining brightly through the window.

He immediately touched the back of his head and neck, looking for evidence of the incision or the string of tissue, but there was nothing.

Had he just dreamed it all?

Liam rubbed his eyes and yawned a few times, then felt the grumble of his stomach.

He got up and groggily trudged down the stairs, only to see an older woman he didn't know sitting in the family room.

As soon as the woman looked up to see Liam, she immediately dropped the cup of coffee she was holding, then covered her mouth in shock as tears started streaming down her cheeks.

"*Liam...*" The sound could barely escape her mouth.

Liam paused at the end of the stairs, dumbfounded as to who was sitting in his living room, and on top of that, why everything looked different.

"Who are you?"

But as Liam looked closer, he started to recognize the woman's face. A sudden realization then struck him like a knife to the stomach, and he fell to his knees.

"Mom?..."

Sharon rushed over and grabbed her son, looking deep into his eyes and examining him in disbelief. "You haven't aged at all."

Liam's voice started to tremble as he realized the gravity of the situation. "How long has it been?"

Sharon pulled him close, hugging him deeply. "It's been twenty years, Liam... Twenty years."

MAX

There once was a boy named Max who could always be found wandering around the small town of Gloombsbury, Indiana. He was a strange little fellow, about the age of ten or eleven, with dark, oddly styled hair, pale skin, and a large, crooked smile. His parents owned the morgue just outside of town and were rarely seen in public. In fact, the local residents joked that to get a meeting with one of them you had to make an appointment with the Grim Reaper himself!

Knowing this, it was no surprise to folks around town that Max was a bit peculiar. His parents also homeschooled him, so opportunities to make friends his own age were somewhat hard to come by, but that didn't mean Max was shy. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Everyone in Gloombsbury knew about the strange little kid that rode his red bike around town, asking complete strangers if they'd seen any "ghosts" or "monsters." Some little boys like dinosaurs, trucks, or baseball...but Max liked the occult and the paranormal, which again, wasn't a surprise to anyone given his background.

If someone wanted to find Max, all they had to do was go to the nearest graveyard or abandoned house, and there he would be, sitting with a Ouija board trying to talk with spirits, demons, or anything that would answer him. Sometimes at night you could find him wandering around town with a tinfoil hat on, using a large radio to try and "communicate" with aliens, or near the swamp trying to find evidence of cryptid beasts like "mud mermaids."

In a small town like Gloomsbury, despite its dreary name, it wasn't abnormal for kids to run around exploring and getting into a bit of harmless trouble, so nobody ever gave a second thought to Max's monster hunts...but that all changed once a few kids went missing.

In the span of just three months, four kids had disappeared without a trace. Nobody had an answer. There were no leads, no clues, nothing. The people of Gloomsbury were terrified, and the once bustling streets filled with kids playing and getting into mischief, were now empty and barren. Except for Max.

Max continued on his quests, roaming about the empty streets on his red bicycle.

"It's not safe out there, Max! You need to go home," the townspeople would say, but Max simply ignored them and continued riding on.

One day, Max was checking the storm drains for evil clowns, when a large white van pulled up next to him.

"Hey there, kiddo, wutch a lookin' for?" a skinny, greasy-looking man with slicked back hair and thick square glasses asked from the driver's seat. Max just looked up and smiled his large toothy grin.

"Clowns, I heard the bad ones like to hide in these storm drains."

The greasy man chuckled. "Well, what if you find one, wouldn't you be afraid?"

"Oh, no," Max replied, "I'm always looking for monsters, but they're very hard to find."

"I might know where to find one," the man said. "Why don't you jump in, and I'll take you there."

Max was a bit hesitant. "But what about my bike?"

"Oh, you can throw that in the back, I've got plenty of room."

Again, Max paused, unsure about this strange man who had just appeared. Then again, Max had been looking for monsters for years, and had never found one. If this guy truly knew where one was, it might be worth it to hop in the van.

“Well...okay, as long as it’s not too far away.”

“I assure you it’s not.” The man smiled.

Max rolled his bike to the back of the van and pulled open the cargo door. The inside smelled like bleach and cleaning chemicals. Once the bike was secure, Max walked back up to the front and hopped into the passenger seat. “My name is Max, what’s yours?”

“Simon. Pleasure to meet you, Max. Would you like some candy before we go?”

“Sure!” Max exclaimed, as he loved candy just like every other kid.

Simon pulled out a large plastic bag full of chocolates, sour gummies, licorice, and more. “Eat as much as you’d like,” he said.

Max immediately started stuffing his face as the white van pulled onto the road and headed south toward the Gloomsbury woods.

After nearly thirty minutes of driving, Max took a brief break from chewing. “Hey, Simon, are we almost there?”

A sly smile crept across Simon’s face. “Yes, we are, it shouldn’t be much longer.”

The white van eventually came to a small dirt road hidden deep in the forest; it was barely visible from the main highway.

“Oh wow, this is definitely where a monster would hide! Is there a cave or something up here?”

Simon continued to display his stiff, wooden smile. “Yes, something like that.”

Finally, the van came to a large clearing where trees had stopped growing, and in the center of this small field was what looked to be the wooden doors of a cellar.

“That’s where we have to go, under those doors.” Simon then pointed ahead.

For the first time of the trip, Max was no longer smiling.

“Okay. Are you sure there’s a monster down there?”

“I’m positive of it.”

Max then took a deep breath and hopped out of the van. As he walked toward the cellar doors, Simon followed closely behind.

“Now make sure you are very quiet; we don’t want it to hear us coming,” Simon whispered.

Max crept up to the heavy doors and gripped the handle.

“Are you ready?” Simon asked with a grin.

Max nodded and slowly pulled the door open. But as he peered into the darkness, he felt Simon looming over his shoulder.

Thump!

A hard kick sent Max tumbling down stiff wooden stairs before slamming onto a cold, concrete floor.

A dim light then switched on, revealing a large room with a blood-stained table right in the center.

Max didn’t move. He stayed absolutely still as he heard the creak of footsteps coming down the stairs.

“I have to admit, Max, I’ve never had one be so eager to come down here. Takes a bit of the fun out of it.”

Simon then walked over to Max, still lying face first on the concrete, and knelt down.

“I didn’t lie to you though, there is a monster down here... It just happens to be me.”

Simon then reached down to grab Max by the back of the neck, but as he touched Max’s skin, he noticed it was oddly cold...

Crrrrcckkk.

Suddenly the bones in Max's neck started to snap and twist as his head turned in a complete 180 degrees. His crooked smile was wider than ever, but it was now filled with jagged, shark-like teeth.

Max then lunged forward and bit down on Simon's hand, severing it completely. Simon's confident demeanor instantly turned to shock and horror as he fell backwards, clutching onto the bloody nub where his wrist used to be.

Max's head then snapped back around as he stood up from the concrete.

"Wow, my first one! It's not a mud mermaid or sewer clown, but you'll still do. Mom and Dad are going to be so pleased."

Simon pathetically inched himself into the corner of the room, whimpering and shaking in absolute terror as blood poured out of his arm like a faucet.

"W-w-what... Wh... *What are you?*"

Max picked up Simon's hand and devoured the flesh from the bone like a juicy chicken wing. "There's a lot of names for us, but that doesn't really matter right now."

Max snapped the pinky bone away from the hand and started using it as a toothpick.

"Gloomsbury has been my family's feeding ground for a long time. But we've come to like the townspeople, so we usually just feed on their dead. However, every so often other monsters will wander into our territory and start stirring things up, so we hunt them...and we *eat* them."

"But...but I'm not really a monster! I'm just a man!" Simon pleaded.

Max paused to lick the blood from his fingers like it was tangy barbecue sauce. "Well, I know one thing for sure...you're *very* tasty."



Max's jaw then began to widen and crack, revealing a second row of teeth behind the first. He then lunged forward as Simon's screams echoed through the cellar, and out through the large clearing in Gloombsbury woods.

...

Several weeks later, after police found what was left of Simon and his cellar, the town started to show signs of life again, and before long, everything was back to normal. People were walking to the store, going to the local diner, and kids were running around getting into mischief.

Max was there, of course, riding his little red bike through the streets, looking for monsters, cryptids, and creatures of the night. The convenience store owner was sitting outside his shop, sipping on a cup of coffee when Max came by, skidding to a halt.

"Hey, Mr. Williams! Have you seen any evil clowns around by chance?"

Mr. Williams chuckled. "Sorry, Max, I haven't."

"Dang, I really want to eat one." Max grumbled.

"What was that?"

"Oh...uh...I really want to *meet* one."

Mr. Williams just shook his head and smiled. "You're a strange kid, Max, strange kid."

THE GOLDEN RULE

In a world of strangers, it's best to be nice,
Because acting any different is a roll of the dice.
If you ignore these words and behave like a jerk,
You never know what type of person you'll irk.

It's a common fact, one that will give you chills,
But at some point in life, you'll meet someone who kills.
There's no way to tell who these monsters might be,
So be courteous to all, and you might avoid their spree.

Take our friend John, who had a horrible day,
On the way home from work, someone swerved in his way.
Now John knew better, especially a man of his age,
But anger took over and turned into rage.

John rolled down his window and shook his fist,
Then he threw an old can, and he didn't miss.
The driver slowed down, and glared at John's face,
Then he slowly smiled, like a creepy nutcase.

To make this brief, or a long story short,
There's no happy ending for one to report.
Like many tales considered horror or thriller,
Our friend had run into a serial killer.

John disappeared, and he was never found,
His bones were buried, somewhere deep in the ground.
What about the driver? A question you might ask?
He kept on driving, wearing John's face as a mask.

But there's no place for bullies, monsters, and goons,
As karma works quickly, no one is immune.
It isn't magic, the supernatural, or fate,
The more you do wrong, the more enemies you make.

The driver was caught, and his sentence was fair,
An electric current soon ran through his chair.
This story is dark, but it's also a fable,
So, listen closely, as long as you're able.

You may know this already, but no harm if repeated,
Treat others as you would like to be treated.
A simple statement, but a valuable tool,
And that's why they call it... the golden rule.



NIGHTMARE SOUP

III

MIDNIGHT SNACK





MAGGOTS

You've found the secret story...The feast has come to an end, but there's always room for a little dread-filled dessert.

The following is inspired by true events...

"No! Absolutely not!" John shook his head and folded his arms as he was lying in the hospital bed. His lips were curled in disgust as Dr. Grant stood by his side.

"John, we're running out of options here. If the infection in your leg gets much worse, we're going to have to amputate it."

"I'm not letting you put maggots all over my leg! The thought of it alone makes me want to vomit. I hate those nasty little things."

Dr. Grant looked down at the area below John's left knee, a large chunk of flesh from his calf and shin was already missing from the surgery they had performed a few days earlier... but despite their best efforts the infection continued to spread. "We've tried just about every antibiotic there is, and your liver isn't going to be able to handle much more. If this continues, we're not just talking about your leg here... you need to understand this could be deadly."

John took a deep breath and glanced down, the large gaping wound was surrounded by disgusting shades of red, purple, and black. Necrotic, pus-filled tissue was slowly creeping upward and the infection had nearly eaten down to the bone... nothing was stopping it. John's stomach twisted into knots. "There's really no other option?" he sighed.

"I'm afraid not..."



John slightly moved his foot, causing an electric shock of pain to rip through his entire body. “Okay... okay... how does this work?”

Dr. Grant again started examining the leg, the slightest touch of his gloved fingers causing John’s face to grimace. “Well, in theory, the maggots will eat away all of the dead, infected tissue... they essentially clean the wound. On top of that, they secrete a special enzyme that will kill the bacteria once and for all. I know it sounds extreme, but it’s a practice that’s been used for hundreds of years.”

John’s stomach continued to knot up at the very idea... “And what about the rest of my leg, what if they start to eat the good parts?”

Dr. Grant looked up confidently, “Maggots don’t eat healthy tissue... I assure you.”

“You’re positive about this? I saw a TV show one time where this poor dog had some type of infestation... they fixed him up, but still... ugh, I just hate those disgusting things.”

“Those were probably botflies or screwworms... interesting enough we had a teacher come in here not too long ago that had a botfly in his scalp... but that’s a story for another time.” Dr. Grant removed his gloves and tossed them into the biohazard container, he then stepped back to John’s side. “I can’t stress this enough... this is something we have to try. We’re in some deep water here John. This is getting very serious.”

John saw the concern on Dr. Grant’s face and forced himself to glance down one more time at his gnarled, disgusting leg. “Okay... let’s do it.”

...

The next morning Dr. Grant and a nurse walked in holding a large plastic container. The bright yellow label didn't leave anything to the imagination as it read "Sterilized Medical Maggots" in dark, bold font. John's stomach immediately dropped.

"It's a simple procedure John, we're going to clean up the wound a bit with a scalpel, then we're going to pack these guys in there and let them go to work."

John could see the shadows of the maggots squirming inside the container... his stomach again twisted. "*I think I'm gonna be sick!*" He then leaned over and vomited into the trash can next to the bed.

"It's okay John, I thought you might have that reaction. But don't worry, we're going to lightly sedate you. You won't feel a thing. Once you wake up, we'll be all done."

Beads of sweat started forming on John's brow, and his heart was nearly beating out of his chest. "Okay Doc, let's just get this over with."

The nurse walked over and put the sedation medicine into John's IV... it only took a few minutes for John to start drifting off. But right before his eyes closed, he saw Dr. Grant opening the maggot container. The maggots were writhing and squirming with excitement, as if they could smell John's infected, rotting flesh waiting for them. The maggots were about to get their meal... and they seemed to be extremely hungry.

...

John slowly came to as the sedatives wore off. As soon as his blurred vision cleared, he looked down at his leg, now cleanly bandaged.

Despite the leg's sanitized appearance with the crisp white dressing, John knew the absolute horror that was occurring underneath it. Hundreds of vile maggots crawling through his flesh, feeding on it like a disgusting dinner buffet.

And worst of all.. he could feel it. Every squirm, every wriggle, every bite.

It was like a buzzing, pulsing, burning sensation so deep it felt like the maggots were in his bones... it was the literal sensation of his skin crawling.

John again felt his stomach flip, and he again vomited into the trash can. The nurse then ran into the room.

"Please... give me something that will knock me out... I can't stand this." John pleaded.

Dr. Grant agreed to give John enough sedatives and pain killers that he wouldn't notice the maggots, but every time they started to wear off... John could feel their disgusting pulsation within the meat of his leg... and it felt like they were eating their way deeper and deeper.

It was torture for 3 days... and on the third day, the last of the treatment, John again called for Dr. Grant once the sedatives had worn off.

"Please Dr. Grant, something isn't right! It feels like they are in my bones and eating their way past my knee. I feel them in my thigh! Please get them out!"

"Just calm down, John. Calm down. I'm sure that is your mind playing tricks on you. Today was the last day of treatment. We'll be removing them shortly."

Another hour passed before Dr. Grant returned to remove the maggots, but for John it felt like an eternity, an eternity of these revolting little creatures gorging on his flesh.

“Okay John, here’s the moment of truth. Let’s see if our little friends were successful.”

Dr. Grant began to slowly unwrap and cut away the bandages. With each snip, John’s stomach twisted into another knot. He could feel the maggots writhing and squirming. It seemed as if they were angry, that they knew their feast was about to be cut short.

“Something’s wrong Doc, I can feel it. Something isn’t right!” John yelled.

“Let’s just find out for ourselves...” Dr. Grant’s eyes were laser focused on the wound area as each layer of dressing was removed.

Soon they were down to the last layer, it was literally pulsing with movement as the ravenous maggots tried to get one final bite.

“Here we go...” Dr. Grant pulled the last of the bandaging away from John’s leg and a writhing ball of maggots tumbled down into the medical tray that was waiting for them. It could have been John’s imagination, but it seemed like he could hear them hissing and screaming in anger.

Dr. Grant quickly stood up... his eyes wide and nearly shaking in surprise...

“Oh my goodness...”

“What? What is it!” John screamed.

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“It worked! They did it! The wound is completely clean and the infection seems to be gone. It’s absolutely amazing!” Dr. Grant was smiling ear to ear as he looked over at a dumbfounded John.

“Really? It worked? They didn’t eat my bones?”

Dr. Grant chuckled, “Not at all, they did the exact job they were supposed to do. It worked better than I could have ever hoped. This is great news John. I think you’re going to be okay.”

Eventually John’s wound fully healed, and the infection was completely eradicated. He went on to live a long, happy life, with a newfound appreciation for the little creatures of the world. He even kept a bunch of house flies as pets, and would give them prime rib steak to feed their happy little maggot larvae.

THE END







NIGHTMARE SOUP

THE ULTIMATE FEAST

That concludes our feast.

We hope you've enjoyed our tasty tales of terror. We would also like to give a special thanks to everyone who has purchased our books or simply shared our stories over the years. Without your support we couldn't have created this cauldron of creeps known as Nightmare Soup.

Thank you again... and happy nightmares.

