Rhis Harris

His body was hardly recognizable. He was ripped from the midsection with his intestines strewn about the asphalt and his ribs exposed like a gaping maw. His jaw hung agape in a permanent snarl of terror, while the empty sockets that once held his eyes stared deep into space. Once sheltered within his torso, now what remained of his organs was nothing more than what resembled scrambled ground beef, tossed carelessly out of the gaping cavities. What slivers of flesh that had managed to stay untouched were glazed in a strange yellow slime, which forensics failed to both identify and actually acknowledge. The scene was determined a run-of-the-mill animal attack and was investigated no further.

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 I live in a small rural town in central Tennessee where the houses are far enough apart that no one bothers anyone. It’s always fairly quiet, which is nice, sure, but once the year’s first bitter winter breeze swept over us, we soon learned to truly dread the silence. The air became immensely cold and stagnant and people began to disappear, seemingly, at random. As a hermit of sorts, I stayed inside and honestly wasn’t particularly worried. As far as I could tell, neither was anyone else. That is, until people started finding corpses--all horrendously mangled. Due to the still air, the stench of death took fairly little time to wrap itself around the entirety of the town.

 Now, I have always found interest in the macabre. My nights are often spent lying alone in the dark and listening to readings of horror stories, as they frequently lull me to sleep. Having heard it all, it’s immensely difficult for me to find a real thrill in anything anymore. So, the sudden appearances of dead bodies hardly phased me. My close familiarity with horror has truly desensitized me to a lot of things, and even allows me to deal with my own personal terrors. The mind, when left to itself, can be a horrifying place indeed--however, not all monsters are in your head, or so I soon came to realize.

 Even shut-ins eventually have to leave the confines of their house. Food is a must, after all. I had just finished my regular stock-up at the grocery store and was making my way along the sidewalk when I noticed familiar lights coruscating just down the street. Not particularly phased, I pressed forward--failing to realize that for the police to have gathered along this road, something must have happened within the twenty minute window that I was in the store, as this was the only route I took to and from my apartment. Upon nearing the commotion, I was able to make out several yards of bright yellow tape with countless people weaving in and out. I was still a good thirty feet away when the smell hit me. Another body. Not wanting to get close enough to be shooed away, I carefully steered around the scene, but with a flicker of my eyes I was able to catch a glimpse and immediately wished I had not.

 Upon returning home, I clicked on the television to see if the local news cared enough to cover the newest addition to the death count. Within the last few weeks, half of the town quit their jobs and just up and left. While I can’t honestly blame them, every business in the area has slacked off tremendously. The television screen whirred and flashed in its old age before revealing the face of an exasperated news reporter. “...this makes three rabid animal attacks this week, making ten this month. The group of locals that had volunteered last Monday to find and vanquish this relentless creature has yet to return. No one has reported having heard from them since they set out...” I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. What does everyone think happened, that they jammed themselves into a pickup and booked it to Atlanta? Obviously a bunch of rednecks with shotguns are no match for whatever might be out there, animal or not. Making note to securely lock myself in for the night, I settled in and spent the rest of the evening working to get my mind off of all this mess.

 Well after midnight, I had nestled into bed and began my usual digging through the depths of the internet for good stories. Having grown used to the homey orchestra of crickets outside, I grew suddenly uneasy when all fell silent. I perked up from my phone’s screen and furrowed my brow, deciding to get up and take a look out my window. I wasn’t quite sure why, as it wasn’t like I was likely to see anything, especially not on the cricket-level, but I felt this sort of restlessness that forced me up. Shuffling over to the window, I squinted a bit in the moonlight and parted the blinds. I was met with the familiar forest’s edge that formed a sort of crescent around my yard and I felt relief wash over me.

Paranoia is a truly strange thing. I chuckled at myself and decided to take a moment to enjoy the view before crawling back into bed; however, while gazing up into the star-sprinkled sky, I noticed a gentle rustling in the woods below. I figured it was a deer and pressed my face closer to the cool glass, hoping to spot it through the trees. My jaw clenched as the branches shook violently, as if something was thrashing among them. I bit hard into my lip as the trees began to give way to some wild twisting, anticipation of some kind of rabid bear to come crashing into the clearing when the movement came to an abrupt halt. My jaw dropped in confusion, and I squinted hard. What I assumed was a head suddenly turned and I was met with the piercing gaze of two white orbs that cut through the darkness of the thicket and seemed to stare into my very soul. Frozen in shock, I stared back.

 For what seemed like eons, the creature and I locked eyes. I refused to blink. My eyes burned and my heartbeat hammered in my ears, filling my skull with an unrelenting pressure. A chill had settled over me that no fire from the deepest crevices of Hell could relieve and my bones felt as though they had turned to glass. My lungs ached for air as I dared not breathe. At last the creature broke its gaze, and the trees again writhed beneath it. Before I had registered it’d even moved at all, it had broken through the bramble and lumbered into the light. This was no animal. This was the stuff of nightmares. Its pale, blemished skin glistened with open and horrendously infected sores, oozing golden pus and its face was twisted in a mangled snarl with teeth in every direction. Its eyes were a solid milky white. And they were fixated on *me*.

 I bolted out of the view of the window and out of my room, scrambling to keep my balance atop the cold wooden floors. Feeling the entire house shudder against the brute force of the creature, I snatched my phone from my desk and dove into the bathroom. Swiftly dialing for help I helplessly balled myself up in the tub, cringing as I heard the violent splintering of wood, which I could only assume was my door being ripped from its hinges. Through the chattering of my teeth and the thundering of heavy footsteps, I counted seven long rings before I realized the utter uselessness of anyone left in the area. Afraid of the creature hearing it, I quickly turned off my phone and focused on staying as still and as quiet as possible. This of course proved near impossible as my lungs gulped for oxygen. My heart thudded in my chest with such force that I wouldn’t have been surprised if the creature heard it before my raspy, wheezing breaths. With each step of the beast, the floorboards groaned and the foundation threatened to collapse. The footsteps stopped at the bathroom door, and I heard the sickening snorts of the creature sniffing for me. Knowing I had mere moments left to live, a moan of immense dread rose from my throat, giving me away. A single strike to the door sent it folding in on itself like paper, and I last remember lifting my head to gaze up into milky eyes once more.