

A grotesque, gnarled face roared at you, frozen in time. The beast's patchwork of skin alternated between bristles of coarse hair, a stretched and tormented hide, and the moldy remains of what once was. The skin did a poor, scattered job of covering what was beneath—withering bones with rotten, pulsing meat bulging around and under. It stood in defiance of what was natural. Despite having long forfeited its right to be anything close to alive, it still glared with a keen awareness that struck fear and betrayal into the hearts of anyone unfortunate enough to bear its witness. Betrayal of logic, of order, of the universe adding up. It was a sick counter-example to all that made sense.

Or rather, that had been the goal.

The imperfections, as they always did, crowded out everything good. Imperfections that ruined the illusion. The lines were inconsistent and lazy. The rot adorning the fibers of muscle followed an unvaried pattern, looking more pasted on than the result of natural decay. It was clear that you had lost the will to keep going long ago. Each stroke dragged along the canvas like the feet of a belligerent toddler.

Sure, it could be fixed. Everything *technically* could be fixed. But was it worth the painstaking effort that stood between this mess and something you could be proud of? You tried once, then again, to convince yourself it would be worth it. Your optimism faintly reached out into the bleakness before falling, limp and ineffective. A hollowness so thoroughly pervaded your body and mind that maybe it was you who was standing in defiance of nature. You were no longer a person. It was only a matter of time before it all caught up to you.

You slumped back into your chair. The sun was in the process of setting, casting a red-yellow glare across the screen. The little circle of your digital brush swam in an ocean of warm light. Watching a sunset in the reflection of your computer screen was somehow shameful. Mother nature deserved more respect than that. This was just sad.

You let your fingers press down on the control and Z keys, and you watched as your work was erased. The line art jumbled about, becoming sketchier and less developed right before your eyes at a marvelous speed. Hours of work undid themselves in a moment. The art program hit its undo limit, and stopped moving you back in time. What lay on your screen now was nothing but a series of aimless scribbles in the vague shape of a body.

Getting up wasn't fun. The chair creaked, your bones creaked. You had been sitting there for far too long accomplishing nothing. Sluffing over to the other room, you entered the kitchen and opened up your cupboards to see what was remaining. The beautiful natural red light in the room parted dramatically to reveal only disappointment. A couple of cans of soup you weren't too keen on and a box of pasta. Nothing was wrong with the soup, per se, you were just tired of

it. The two-dollar cans, a meal each, were convenient, but soul-sucking. Back in college eating the same thing every day was less of a problem, back when you just wolfed down a meal between classes without paying it any heed. Whatever. You started heating a pot of water; the soup could wait until another day.

Plain pasta was one of your favorites as a child, and you would complain if there was any sauce on it. You'd have your mother wash it off in the sink. The memory brought a pang of guilt, as you now knew the sauce was generally the hard part. At least, if you didn't just use the canned stuff. Mom never used the canned stuff. Where did she get all that energy from? Regardless, along with the wonders of adulthood came the feeling that you should probably not eat plain noodles anymore. Nobody was going to judge you, other than yourself of course, but it was the principle of the matter. There had to be something there to mask the fact that you were shoveling pure carbohydrates into your mouth.

You didn't have any ingredients that would make a decent sauce. Oh well.

You ate a very boring meal in an equally boring way—looking at the wall while you chewed, your eyes only half-focused, barely registering what little taste there was. Everything was dull. The house, as much as you liked it, was a tomb. And inside, you did your part, the obedient little corpse making sure to not disturb the silence.

The complete lack of anything edible in your kitchen had become more and more apparent lately. Hunger was one of those problems that stubbornly refused to go away when ignored. Continuing to exist took far too much effort, but you were weak. You'd cave, giving in to the stupid requirements of being a living person. You didn't have what it takes to rebel.

You left the house. Shadows draped over the entirety of your car now that the sun had set all the way. It was better this way. Normally it was nothing but a boring, fairly dirty white. But in the dark, you could pretend it was gray, and the rust was harder to notice.

As you drove through the forest, freakish ghouls peered out at you from between the trees. Tendrils clawed across the ground, whipping at the car. Your headlights cast impossible shadows into the woods, revealing twisted mockeries of nature that only existed in your periphery, tingling the back of your mind with excitement. The tips of the pine trees silhouetted against the dark blue sky as if you were sinking into the maw of a great beast. You slowed to take the view in. You could easily get away with going faster down this road, but it was so beautiful that doing so would be a crime.

Despite taking your time, the trees eventually began to thin and buildings took their place. You were slightly disappointed, no longer able to imagine what terrors might be hiding in

the dark. Streetlamps ruined the illusion of desolation, and you found yourself soundly within the cozy little town.

You had quickly grown fond of this place. The nearest grocery store lived here, along with an assortment of folks with whom you'd never quite made any acquaintance. It was a pleasant confluence of nature and civilization. The convenience of pre-packaged goods intermingled with the brisk pine air. Looking out on the horizon, the comforting embrace of the mountains and trees was always there. Like a nest, it hid everything away from the outside world. A place away from time, an escape.

At the market, you couldn't help but splurge a bit. The drive had lifted you somewhat, and it was good to be out of the house. You decided to buy a little bit more than you needed. Maybe a lotta bit more. That was one of the perks of waiting until your pantry ran dry— there was no judgment in overcorrecting and filling it to the brim. You spent your time filling your cart, even having some fun in the process. Aspirationally, you hesitantly added the necessary ingredients to bake a pie. Pumpkin pie. Nothing too fancy, but for you, someone who barely ever turned on their oven, it was certainly novel.

By the time you had checked out, the store was closed. You were far from the last person at the self-checkout stations, but you were keenly aware of every glance the employees sent your way. Hopefully, your meandering wasn't too much of an inconvenience. The thought plagued you on the drive home. Surely the employees needed to stay there beyond close to clean up and get everything shut down, right? No, it was a bad idea to make excuses. Being so lax about disrespecting service workers' time was unacceptable. The pit in your stomach had opened back up as you pulled up next to the house.

You had left your laptop on, the light shining eerily out of the windows. You paused, glancing around. The tree trunks cast shadows against each other, criss-crossing into the distance. Various insects could be heard going about their business but never seen. Thankfully there were no mosquitos—the little hellspawn ruined everything. Your car made some noises as the engine cooled, and the automatic cabin lights clicked off. Now significantly darker, you couldn't see much other than your windows, floating squares from which emanated the subtle white glow of a canvas that was entirely too blank. But it was okay. Out here, the air was so fresh and brisk that it didn't matter. You sighed, soaking it in just a moment longer, before turning the porch light on and beginning to move the groceries inside.

Your feet dragged. Beginning a shopping trip that late was irresponsible, but you had to take advantage of the thought when it struck. Otherwise, you'd just starve, slowly wasting away like a sad lump of garbage that someone forgot to throw out.

Hunger crept its way back into your mind. How long had it been since you last ate? The shopping had been enough effort for today, so you reached for a can of soup. You poured it out into a bowl, then microwaved it. Then took it out. Then stopped. Your eyes lost their focus. Your arms trembled.

You hadn't spoken a single word today. That wasn't anything special. And yet, the realization struck you with a deep, vacuous kind of sadness. It was a fundamental human failing. You considered saying something then and there in defiance of these feelings, boldly cutting through the silence with some kind of a declaration of purpose or existence. No, that would be pointless. Instead, you sank to the ground, held your legs to your chest, and rested your head between your knees. Tears dripped onto them. The soup cast a sinister glare down at you, triumphant. How were you always so weak, that the tiniest of things would break you?

"Ugh," you said, breaking the streak. With a modestly renewed fervor, you rose to your feet and scowled at that soup. You wanted—oh, you really wanted to dramatically throw it into the trash, showing that dumb pile of muck who was in charge. But that would be wasting food, which always made you uncomfortable. You grudgingly ate a spoonful of it as you retrieved ingredients from the cupboard. It was pie time.

About halfway through the process of preparing the pie, you realized you had not started the oven. "It's called *pre-heating* for a reason," you said. Admittedly, that statement was only a faint homage to the idea of a joke. Regardless, saying it aloud made you feel better. You were there, present. You existed. Your mistakes were quickly erased, as the oven did its work with surprising speed. This house was fairly modern, a fact which was an endless source of comfort. You could not imagine what you would do out here in the cold if the insulation and central heating did not work as well as they did.

Pie in the oven, you sat down finally. Not on the floor this time, but on the couch in the other room—an upgrade. You deserved an actual seat. You might not have accomplished anything today, and yes, you were awake far past your regular bedtime, but you still felt a sense of pride. Gotta celebrate the little things. At least, that was advice you liked to parrot. In reality, you were the biggest hypocrite you knew.

Waiting for something to bake was not especially fun, so you engrossed yourself in your laptop. Reading strangers' opinions on the day's news was a pleasant past-time of yours. God, you were boring.