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### The Return

She allowed herself to rest for a moment, sitting on the dashed yellow line in the middle of the empty country road she knew so well. A thick mist hung around the area and stuck to her neck like frigid quicksand, filling her lungs and darkening her field of vision. As she listened to the world around her, she heard no sound other than her own heaving breaths, no oncoming car or chirping cicada, just the deafening, unreal silence of the valley. It was a moonless night, and the only light she had to see by was from the glaring, prying stars that scarcely illuminated the desolate road in front of her, and the faint glow left by the sun as it sank behind the rolling hills. Her light blue Honda Civic had broken down on the same road miles back, but she trekked slowly onward, determined to get away from the monster she had once called love. On either side of her were vast, dead fields that might have been green and supported crops some time long ago, caged by rolling black hills in the distance. About one hundred yards ahead of her was a forest, one that she had driven straight through many a time during the day, but was cloaked in a different, more ominous air this windy winter twilight.

That cold December night wasn't the first time she had left him, it wasn't even close to the tenth, but she was determined that it would be her last. Whenever she looked back on their first meeting, it struck her to remember how innocent she was. She had never been kissed, never been exposed to the cruel workings of the real world, and had never really faced adversity beyond the decisions of what school to go to, or the occasional scuffle with her parents. Her

whole life up to that point had been a picture-perfect, dainty little existence, but it was in her first few months at university and she was hungry for a change, for some excitement to draw her out of the box she lived in. She found such excitement under the red neon lights at a poorly-lit local bar one rainy October night, looming in the shadowed corner with a drink in his hand and his sunken, wholly black eyes fixed on her. She remembered it all so clearly, she thought, the way he traced her arm with his hand, the way he told her she was beautiful and that he wanted to see her again. She remembered the first time he told her he loved her, months later as they passed through the thick snow in the shadowy alley outside of her apartment. With a chill, she remembered the threats he would scream to her apartment window, shrouded by the darkness in the same place he had told her he loved her. She remembered the first time she had noticed the deep blackness of his eyes, the night he put his fist through the pale, yellow walls of their apartment. His love was a lie.

The gaping jaws of the forest in front of her pulled her out of this reflection. For the first time that night, since she had left the apartment she once shared with her former boyfriend, she felt hesitation pull her from continuing on her path. The forest, which was green and welcoming in the day, had become bathed in a thick, black darkness by the night, and expanded from a friendly huddle of greenery to a mangled, monstrous cluster of broken limbs and branches, each of which seemed to menacingly reach toward her. She was determined, however, and stepped carefully out of the starlight and into the dark woods, her small frame disappearing into the ocean of shadows. Immediately, she felt a chill down her spine, and a cool gust of wind blew her curly copper hair ever so lightly around her face. With a shudder, she shrugged her olive jacket tighter around her shoulders, trying to defend from the sudden icy wind as it violently tore at her. She had always hated the cold, and she wished she'd had the sense to grab a warmer coat when

she stormed out earlier, but she knew to have stayed any longer would have been a mistake. She closed her eyes, remembering how he had screamed at her as she departed from the doorway, hearing once again the plates shattering as they collided with the closed door behind her. *That's over now*, she thought with a faint smile, with tears brimming her green eyes she looked upward at a piece of star-speckled sky nestled in the trees. *It's going to be okay.*

*The woods have a way of playing tricks on people*, she told herself. She had been walking on the road as it curved through the forest for a good thirty minutes when she first began to notice shadows that danced and darted about. They scurried and scampered about her path, darting over the road and through the woods around and above her, groaning with the wind that rustled the trees. *They're small...* she thought uneasily, *they must just be squirrels or something.* Looking up again, hoping to see the comfort of the sky through the trees, she found only the forest canopy closing in on her, reaching down to her. Heart pounding, she told herself it was nothing until four words, ever so quiet and faint, yet sickeningly familiar screamed out into the silence of the woods, "why did you leave?"

She stopped dead in her tracks, heart racing, hands shaking, tears already slipping down her bruised cheeks, and turned slowly around, as if searching for a lion in the inky woods. The forest, which had been eerie before, now donned an even more terrifying cloak, the black trees rushing in on her all at once, suffocating and confining her. Her mind raced frantically, pain of the beatings fresh in her mind, the sound of his still voice ringing in her ears. The shadows seemed to move faster now, rushing throughout the bases of the trees, chasing and sound or sliver of light. She was struck with the uneasy feeling that she was no longer alone, yet the silence of the woods screamed even louder than it had before. Shakily, she took another step

forward, only to be greeted by the same terribly familiar, slightly louder voice saying, “How could you do that to me?”.

A chill like a stream of ice water raced down her spine. She hadn't been sure the first time, but now she could make no mistake, it was her boyfriend's voice she was hearing, calling out to her the way it had so many nights before, only now she was alone, and had no apartment walls to protect her. With a rush of terror, she whipped around, looking for where he might be hiding, but found nothing other than the tremendous, tenebrous figures of the trees and the dark abyss from which they hailed. Turning around to look forward once more, she felt a feeling of mysterious uneasiness from a source she could not identify, like the feeling of an unseen spider running up one's leg. Scoping the sparkling asphalt in front of her more intently, off to the left of the road, she noticed a pair of all too familiar, jet-black eyes around six feet in the air, keenly staring at her. His black eyes, which she had only truly perceived in his most vicious moments, were now somehow by her path, fixed on her with all the intensity and rage she had grown so accustomed to seeing, yet with no sign of a living creature attached to them, no body with which the eyes could see. Astounded and frozen by this sight, she squinted, peering closely at the eyes before her, and noticed with immense dread, a flinch of a shadow below them, not quite like a body, but certainly not an illusion of the night. Suddenly filled with white-hot adrenaline, she flew onward down the road, sprinting as fast as she could away from what she had seen and heard. Her head was on fire, unable to make sense of the woods and its secrecies, and her heart screamed in her chest. Her legs burned from running and her whole body ached from the exertion, but the terror in her mind would not allow her to stop. For what felt like centuries, she ran blindly through the stygian forest, with the winding pavement as the only guide through its treachery. Finally, the burning exhaustion became too much, and she collapsed on the road

several miles ahead, sobbing on its jagged asphalt surface. With heaving, shaking breaths she slowly raised herself, her body soaked with sweat, her heart racing even as her breaths calmed down. Again, the silence of the forest was sliced by the disembodied voice, deafeningly erupting into its still atmosphere, "I'LL KILL YOU! I SAID I WOULD AND NOW YOU'VE LEFT ME NO CHOICE".

The second voice to break the silence was her own, a heart-broken, terrified scream of a tortured survivor. She rose clumsily, eyes squeezed shut and stumbled down the road, trying desperately to escape the voice. The forest only seemed to invade the road more, encroaching onto its sacred border as it crept slowly toward her, caving inward with the rest of the world. *He's not here*, she thought frantically, *why do I hear him? Why do I hear him? What is happening?* She gasped futilely for breath, her thoughts running together in a panicked stream. *How did I see his eyes?* She knew not the nature nor the cause of her circumstances, only the primal, frantic urge to escape them, so on she ran, absconding through the darkness. Running more smoothly now, she felt a small semblance of security for the first time since the sun had set, for she knew the precious dawn was not far away, but her eyes still remained shut. With the promise of the morning drawing her into a sense of security, she opened her eyes to see a thousand pairs of jet-black, haunting eyes staring at her from all sides of the abyss of the forest. For a moment she froze, and they all suddenly advanced to surround her, revealing mangled, shadowy bodies to match the ghastly eyes. Each was unique in its own appalling way, some oozing black liquid from open wounds in their disfigured bodies, some looming above her, and some barely reaching her scabbed knees. All of the figures were completely devoid of any color separate from an onyx shade, all had the same gaping mouths full of jagged teeth, and each one shared the same dead, black eyes that burned with an intense loathing and malice.

With one final burst of strength, she tore madly through them, eyes blood-shot, screaming bloody murder, she sprinted onward toward the end of the forest. The shadowy figures scratched and pulled her, ripping the green jacket off her trembling shoulders, yet they could not seem to hold onto her. As she raced away from them, they cried out to her with a million enraged voices, a piercing, terrifying scream that would still the liveliest jungle. In the distance, she could see the end of the forest, her only way to safety, and she was rejuvenated with a new strength in knowing she was almost free of the forest's darkness and apparitions. She gulped in air, desperately tearing toward the clearing, every step fighting with the shadowed figures to get through. "COME TO US" they screeched, swiftly pursuing her, "FIND RELEASE AND FIND REVENGE". She shook them off, almost to the end of the forest, just a few steps more and she would have reached the clearing, when she began to feel a force drag her backward. Kicking and screaming, she freed herself from the figures' grasp and ran the last few steps, finally flinging herself out of the forest. Fearful and beat, she peered back behind her to see if the figures still followed, and to her great relief, their doings remained confined to howling in the woods.

Warm relief rushed through her as she fell heavily to her knees, the sun beginning to rise ahead of her. She staggered up to her feet, looking behind her at the horrors she had just escaped, the black figures swirling restlessly in the woods behind her, and she knew she should be glad to be away from them, she knew she should run away, she knew all of these things and yet, the strongest hesitation tugged at her. Be it some spell of that dark forest, or a calling from her own broken soul, she found herself powerfully drawn toward the woods. She looked back toward the sunrise, knowing that under its light she could find safety and healing, and then back in the opening of the forest, knowing exactly what horror awaited her there. *I am lost*. She thought about the abuse she had endured with her boyfriend for the past few years, and of the lack of

satisfaction her life had held even before that. *This world has no real place for me.* Slowly, she stepped down into the forest's shadowed floor, then her walk became a run, then a savage bounding into the trees. As she sprinted into the woods with a rabid swiftness, the shadows raced up to meet her, screaming out to her and calling her name. Unable to control herself anymore, she let out a blood-curdling scream of release, her hair whipping wildly in the wind. Smiling, her eyes turned black, and she felt herself consumed by the darkness.