

I don't know if it was a spirit, or a demon, or some folkloric creature that you only know about if you grow up hearing about it, but whatever killed my brother was not human.

My brother, Edwin, had gotten tired of living in major cities, and I was tired of the suburban crawl I'd gotten stuck in even after my divorce. So when he called me and asked if I'd move out to some tiny town two states away, I agreed. Neither of us had children, and Ed had never married (I don't think he was interested in women, if you get what I mean), so there was no one keeping the two of us rooted to where we lived before. We hadn't spent more than a few hours together in nearly ten years because of living so far apart, but we were both unconcerned with any ideas of fighting. We'd always gotten along pretty well. I was more aggressive than he was, but he held his own against me in the few fights we had as kids. So neither of us worried about being pushed around or pushing the other around. We knew we could take it.

I didn't know this when we moved in, but a week and a half before I'd unpacked and settled into the house with Ed, a woman was found murdered in her home. And two weeks before that, they'd found a man dead in the woods behind a shut down hair salon. At the time, they said he'd died of natural causes and the scratches on his body came from scavenging animals. Now I think he was murdered, too. Ed hadn't told me about the deaths, but he reacted with no surprise when it came up in conversation with a neighbor. He must have known before me. He'd always been the type to watch the news and had moved in a few days ahead of me. I guess living in metropolises for years the way he had made him less on edge when he heard about stuff like that.

When I found out, I guess I got a little mad at him. Madder than I had a right to be, honestly. Ed didn't kill them. But it made me jumpy and nervous. That first week of us living there was hell for me. I was always seeing some shadow, a man, some *thing* just out of sight when I'd stare out the window into the woods around the house. Ed laughed off my concerns. I guess you really do just grow a thicker skin in the city. Before I moved in, the grainy photos of the woods Ed had texted me were something I'd been looking forward to the most. Looking back, that beautiful treeline looked more like a mouth of gnashing teeth.

I'd gotten a job soon after I finished moving in. I worked the front desk of the urgent care in town. It was the closest thing they had to a hospital. But it seemed well equipped for the size of the town and the level of care you'd expect they needed: flu shots, antibiotics, simple things really. There was even an old X-ray machine they trotted out once when a kid drove his bike off a makeshift ramp into a creek and broke his wrist. The look his mom gave him gave me bigger sympathy pains than the ugly white cast the NP fit him with. I handed him a fruit punch flavored sucker on the way out. He flushed with embarrassment, but smiled tightly in appreciation and stuck it in his mouth as he walked out the double doors.

Ed's job was a 45 minute drive away. He was working as a paralegal for a public defender. At the time, it was a funny job to me. The neighboring city he drove into for it wasn't even that big and it made me wonder how they had enough to pay him. He worked late frequently, and if he wasn't working late he was socializing. I think he missed some of the buzz of the big city life, and made up for it with frequent bar trips and social calls, so to speak. He was so relaxed in those days. So happy to live and work in an area where traffic never caused more than ten extra minutes to a commute. I wish he would have just been a little more nervous.

On one of Ed's late nights, I started seeing that shadowy thing outside the windows again. I tried to tell myself I was seeing things. That I was just stressed out, that I wasn't used to the way natural things crunched and swayed. But my chest tightened at the sight of that not-man and its empty stare. I wanted to scream. I wanted to run through the doors and wave my arms like being bigger would threaten it. But instead I stood still and watched its strange gait and tilted neck as it walked. And I wondered in that moment, if from the darkness outside it could see me stare back.

Nothing happened that night. Ed came home at 10:30 and the rattle of his house keys nearly made me jump out of my skin. When he asked me why I was just sitting in the living room with nothing on the TV, I just shrugged. I couldn't think of a lie, but I also didn't want to admit that I thought there was something outside again. Not this late at night, not when I saw how tired he was. So I let Ed laugh under his breath and call me a freak and watched his back as he closed the door to his room.

I glanced out the window again, but the shadow was gone. I closed the curtains anyway.

I saw it again, anyway. Not that night, not every night, but often enough that I felt completely confident that I wasn't just seeing things. I told myself that maybe it was "just" a man. Just some weird man with nothing else to do but watch people through the windows. But it was hard to believe that when I remembered the dead woman from months ago that the electric poles had never forgotten. I tried to take pictures of it, but I only had a flip-phone then and the cameras on them were weaker than they are on phones now. I ended up telling an officer about it anyway one evening after work. I walked into the office and told them about the man watching our house, and he wrote something down and said thank you. And I walked home knowing that no one was going to do anything at all.

When it came back next, I was waiting for it. I wanted to understand it. I waited for a night that Ed was working. If something was going to happen, I wanted, no, I needed it to happen to me. Of course I wanted Ed to be safe. But the truth was, the *real* reason I needed to be the target was that I needed hard proof. And an injury would be the best proof of a threat there can be, right? So I turned all the lights on in the house. I opened all the curtains. I even cracked a window. But instead of grabbing a weapon or playing threatening music like some teenager in a movie, I sat on the couch and I stared at the woods silently. I stared and I waited and eventually, it moved silently through the grass, head cocked to that same odd angle it was the last time I saw it. It wasn't even fully facing the house. I leaned forward on the couch, the faux leather creaking under the weight of my body, and watched more closely. I was searching for anything noticeable about the figure, but it was so dark out that I could only see its basic shape. I bounced my leg as it readjusted itself, turning its head purposefully, like it was a hunting dog tracking prey. I still couldn't see what it was staring at.

I watched it in silhouette, its smooth face tipped slightly down, and I squinted and tried to see what it saw in the just barely too-long grass of the back yard. I crept closer to the window, desperate to see more. The thing seemed to turn the side of its head closer to where I stood, and not just the house. I turned out the standing lamp that stood in the corner by the

window, but the thing didn't move. It turned its head slightly when it clicked off, and followed me when I returned to the window. I backed up, and the thing grew closer. I fumbled for the lightswitch and the room plunged into darkness. But the shape walked with me. I knew there was no way a human could see in this window. In my increasing panic, I slammed the cracked window shut and the thing outside jerked like it had heard a gunshot. And I realized then that the thing couldn't see me. It was only listening.

Since that night I started making an effort to move through the house more quietly. I only listened to music with headphones, I tried to shut doors more gently, I walked on eggshells in my own home. Ed had noticed me becoming more soft-spoken-gunshy, almost-and in turn had started treating me more delicately. Like he was nervous I could snap or crack under the pressure at any time. And I guess in a way, he was right. I don't know what he thought triggered my behavior to change. Maybe he thought I was having some weird belated response to my divorce. Either way, he was worried about me and I could tell. But he never got much quieter himself.

His dress shoes clicked on the floor, he dropped his keyring loudly, he shut doors without turning the knob to soften the click of the latch catching. He even watched TV. And despite all of this heightening my fear even more, I couldn't bring myself to admit to him why I had suddenly become even more jumpy than I was that first week. I couldn't admit to him that I was afraid of some human-shaped creature outside the window, not when he'd already denied it existed God knows how many times when we first moved here.

I wanted to beg him to stop working over. I wanted to invoke the rules of childhood, that I'm the older brother here, and you have to listen to me and believe what I say because I'm bigger than you. But it would have been futile if I had. To start with, I wasn't that much bigger than him these days anyway. Bulkier, sure. But he was only about a half an inch shorter than me. And certainly, he was much smarter. If either of us cared to believe in things like who the leader of the house was, it would have been Edwin. Every time, it would have been him. But Ed didn't care about things like that. And I was just glad to spend time with my brother again. I would have never said it to him like that, too caught up with the rules of being a man, then. But I wish everyday that I had just told him, "Ed, I worry about you when you work late, I don't think it's safe after dark." I wish that I could have found words for "I love you."

I'm saying all of this because I want you to understand that I love my brother. I never stopped loving him after he died. I wanted to protect him in my own way. But my pride was in the way of being honest about my fear. I will never forget what happened to him and I don't know how much longer I can live with

what I saw. And whatever that thing did to me, I wish that he'd taken his fill completely and left Ed alone.

It was early fall when it got into the house. The time of year when it still got hot, the weather never deciding if it was going to be freezing or hellish. The urgent care was busy this time of year with kids getting their vaccines and passing respiratory illnesses to each other, and then to their lying parents who called it allergies and sent them to class. When a man came in with awful claw marks on his arms like he was defending himself, I should have let my unease at the congealed blood and lines of neat stitches do more to my routine than just make me wince and offer the man a half-assed "I hope you feel better soon," as he left with prescriptions for acetaminophen with codeine and amoxicillin. I asked the NP what she thought did that to him as she shuffled through to the office during lunch, and she told me he'd probably picked a fight with a raccoon. I chuckled, but I couldn't help but feel unsettled that night. I couldn't stop thinking about his pale face blinking down at me in dull panic, last night's bandages still warm with unclotted blood.

When I told Ed about it that night, he gagged and told me never to tell him something so gross again. His childish reaction made me laugh a little, earnestly this time. For someone so unflappable in the day-to-day, always calm when cut off in traffic, never concerned with what he said in conversations, he was so easily disgusted with tales about gore. After he'd finished doing the dishes and started walking up the stairs to type up something with words too big for me to read, I warned him to watch out for wild animals the next time he was out late, only half joking. He responded with a laugh in his voice and told me he would make sure to keep his lamp off, so no moths would attack him in his sleep. I grinned and walked down the hall to my own room, satisfied with the knowledge that Ed, for all his confidence, knew better than to play with raccoons and coyotes.

I couldn't sleep that night, and that might have been what made the difference between my life and Ed's. If I had just fallen asleep and let that thing kill me, it would have been the end of it. But the man from the urgent care's wild, dark eyes staring down at me in pain and fear kept me up. Of course, working there I'd seen plenty of people in pain. He wasn't the first person I checked in who had even needed stitches. But no one before him had been attacked or had that look of pure animal panic in their eyes. I just couldn't forget it. I guess I still can't, even now.

I'd been lying in bed for hours by the time the window opened. It opened so softly that it wasn't the sound of it that I noticed. It was the wind moving my curtains to let a beam from the almost-full moon hit my eyes. The small strip of blue-white light was blinding for a moment in the darkness of my room. I'd bought blackout curtains weeks ago when I was sure the thing was looking in the windows rather than listening through them. They were expensive and they'd kept out the oppressive heat of the summer well, so I just kept them up anyway. I'll always regret that.

In that pale strip of light, I saw the thing close up for the first time. It was tall and built like a runner, humanlike but distinctly inhuman, like a boy raised by wolves somehow growing fur of his own. It was a nauseating thing. And worse than its body of twisting muscle was the terrible nothingness that it had as a "face." Deep blue something, skin maybe, or some sort of shell, smooth like polished wood, with two holes where the eyes would be on a man's face. They looked like they had been gored out. Rough and irritated looking, and if the thing was human, or even a dog, I'd have felt pity for it. It had no mouth or nose, but its shoulders rose and fell like any breathing animal. As it towered in the dark of my room, staring down at the cheap twin-sized mattress I'd taken so Ed could have the queen, I stared into the empty, dark holes and watched black blood seep slowly down its face. I was afraid to move. I was afraid to breathe. I thought maybe, if I laid still and quiet, if I held my breath and didn't move, it would leave. But my heartbeat pounded in my ears and I knew the thing could hear it too.

It walked in silence from the window to my bedside and looked down at me from above. I wonder now what it was thinking

in that moment. Its clawed hand stripped the blanket off my body and I was paralyzed with fear. It placed its hand on my stomach, pressing around like a doctor looking for abnormalities. By the time it reached my left side, it sunk its claws into me and I felt the spell I was under break. I'm not afraid to say that the pain of having something dig through skin and fat was enough to send tears to my eyes as I screamed. The sound made it draw away for a second before doubling back onto me. It looked irritated now. I grabbed at any part of it I could, screaming and thrashing, slamming my forehead into its awful face in a headbutt that hurt me more than the thing. I clawed my way into an upright position and pressed my face into its black torso, using all my strength and weight to force myself further into it. I drove my feet into the hardwood and tried to stand. When I forced myself upright the thing fell flat on its ass. One set of claws had dug deeper into my side in the struggle, the other leaving a set of four lines across my stomach. I was breathing heavily by then, swaying more than standing, and it must have been the first time the thing had started a fight it didn't win, because it left through the window, streaks of my blood going with it.

The screaming and shuffling finally woke up Edwin and he barrelled into my room seconds after the thing had left. The moment it was gone from my room, I collapsed in a heap on the ground, bloody, my face covered in sweat and tears. Ed must have driven me to the urgent care in his panic, because I should have been in an ER instead. When I woke up, it was to the sounds of an ambulance siren. One of the nurses must have called 911 while I sat slumped in a plastic-cushioned waiting room chair, unconscious but staring at the wooden blocks kept in a corner for the kids.

There wasn't any damage to my internal organs, although he had come close to puncturing my kidney. So I got to leave the ER after a round of stitches and an IV; a blood transfusion and the most expensive saltwater I've ever had. I slept more on the way home. Ed helped me limp inside and laid me on the couch, unshed tears hanging in his eyes. In the haze of pain pills and fear, I can still remember the thumbs up I gave him, grinning in sarcastic satisfaction.

He asked me the next morning what happened and I told him a half truth: someone broke into my bedroom window and attacked

me. He believed me because there was no reason not to. He found me bleeding out in our own house himself. He asked if I recognized them and I lied again. Told him they were athletic and wearing a blue mask, so I couldn't tell him what their face looked like. He hugged me tight. He hadn't done that since he graduated high school. The lie ate away at me, but he would sooner believe a poorly planned robbery went wrong than another insistence that there was a monster stalking us. And either way, the results were fine, for a time. We changed the front and back door locks. We both promised to be more diligent about locking windows, and we'd never open one unless we could see it at all times. We were supposed to always be looking out for one another. We made our promises while I laid on the couch, high and smug, confident that my little fight with the thing would be enough that it would never come back.

I'm assuming Ed is the one who reported the incident to the police because days later a skinny young officer came to the house to ask the both of us questions. Edwin answered most of his questions because I could barely keep my eyes open from the mix of medication and the still-there wooziness from the blood transfusion. I'd developed a minor fever from it, and combined with whatever pills they had me on left me awake but not truly conscious most days. The officer thanked us both and wrote some more on his little legal pad, and then left. I'm not sure anything was done with the information on it until it was too late for Edwin. If it saved anyone else, I couldn't tell you. I'd attempted to call the urgent care and let them know I couldn't work for a while, and the woman who picked up laughed at me. She told me she certainly hoped I wouldn't be in for a few weeks, with an injury like that. A few hours later, the main RN left me a voice mail to tell me if I tried to get any hours for the next week and a half, she would ring my neck. So I spent a lot of time at home.

Ed couldn't stay home with me, which was okay because my bedroom and the kitchen and bathroom were on the same level of the house. I could have used the stairs if I needed to, but walking in general was a painful thing, and the pain pills left me with a lingering sense of vertigo every time I took them. And I took them often. There were days that I must have slept for 17 hours. I took them for the pain, sure, but it was also a welcome excuse to spend any time I could unawake and unthinking of what had happened in the room that I was still sleeping in. Ed had cleaned it up the night I came home while I passed out on the couch. It was cleaner than it had been when we moved in, probably. I think it helped him feel more in control, cleaning up like that.

He gave me a few days of him coming home before dark, or at least at dusk. For those brief days, he woke me up when he came home. Made sure that I had managed to eat something that day, even if it were just plain saltine crackers from the drug-induced nausea. But he soon realized that most nights I'd be content to sleep for hours, and he returned to staying out later than he really needed to. I was too out of it to notice some days, and the days where I wasn't asleep or completely zoned out, my attempts to remind him that we needed to be more careful were met with gentle refutations that he was being

careful even when he was hanging around after dark. And I'm sure he was right. The night Edwin died, it happened in our house.

Nothing about the night leading up to it was special. Ed stayed out late, I fell asleep with my face turned to watch the window. My orange bottle of pills sat on my nightstand. I was sleeping deeply. I'd taken an extra pill that night because one of my stitches broke and after calling the 24/7 hospital hotline, they decided if nothing was bleeding then there was no cause for alarm. It hurt like a bitch though, and indulgently I took the excuse to have more than I needed. Just something to take the edge off, I told myself. And I slept for hours uninterrupted until I heard that last awful sound, the dying scream of my brother.

When I got to his room, I was dragging myself up the stairs more than I was running. On the way there I'd picked up some random decorative vase. It was the closest thing I could think of to use as a weapon in my sleepy, drugged up haze. After I'd slammed the door open, it was like some part of my brain had shut itself off in an attempt to keep the rest of itself alive. Ed was on his bed. I think he might have been sleeping when it attacked him because it looked like he barely had time to defend himself. The thing was hunched over him, clawing at him. Biting him. Its smooth face had split in two, a sort of jagged mouth cutting across it with sharp lines of teeth and a black tongue. For a moment, the only sound was the awful sound of it chewing. I stumbled to the side of the bed and slammed the vase over its head and wailed. I must have grabbed whatever was nearby and brought it down on the thing over and over, based on the police report of what the room looked like after the fact. A mindless stream of brute force attacks, no thought or strategy put behind them, no act of defending my own body. It was like I was acting on autopilot. After the fact, my arms and face were covered in awful scratches from its claws, but in the moment they didn't register at all. I guess at some point I started screaming again because the thing curled up like it was in real pain for the first time since my attempt at a fight began. It made a sort of pathetic rumble in response, writhing awfully on top of my brother's body, before it left through the broken out window I realized it came in through.

It goes without saying I called emergency services once it was gone and I realized I was staring at Edwin's corpse. I

hadn't brought my phone with me to his room in my panic. They weren't like an extension of a person's body the way they are now. I stumbled through the house dumbly until I managed to flip my phone open and call 911. They came and went and loaded us both into separate ambulances, but only one had the lights on.

After Edwin died, the county sheriff made an announcement saying they believed his death was connected to the woman who by then had been murdered months ago. They never solved either one. People in the next town started dying. And then the next.

It hasn't caught up to where I moved after all the questions were done being asked. I wasn't staying in that house or those hotels any longer than I had to. I try to stay in crowded cities these days. When I lived in the suburbs, even the sound of a single car horn past a certain hour drove me insane, but now I find the noise comforting.