

The room was dark behind drawn curtains, and filled with an oppressively heavy atmosphere. The only thing that cut through the inky void was the dim blue light of a laptop screen. In front of it, Alex sat slumped in an almost pained concentration as he watched that night's news cast. Despite the blond news anchor's almost unnatural grin and unwavering tone, the words cut like a knife. It's been like this for weeks.

Alex's eyes grew heavy and his brow furrowed as the woman droned on. Yet another person has gone missing. Not just this town, but others nearby as well have been experiencing this disturbing phenomenon. For the past few months, there have been a string of people seemingly wandering into the forest at night and vanishing without a trace. Authorities have not been able to find any logical explanation, and though foul play can't be fully ruled out, every case has simply been a dead end, leaving them utterly baffled.

Strangely, the vanishings seemed to happen in a sort of pattern. People would start vanishing from one town for a while, maybe a week or two at a time. Then, as suddenly as it had started, it would cease. But then a town or two over, it would pick up where it left off. The news anchor finished her piece and ended with a plea for viewers to remain wary of the forest as dusk fell, at least until the police could figure out what was drawing people in.

Alex closed his laptop with a snap, snuffing out the little light left in the room and washing him in total darkness. Tears threatened his stinging eyes before finally breaching and spilling down his hot cheeks. In despair, he curled his head down into his hands and sniffled hard for a moment.

The guilt had been building in his chest for nearly two days and finally hit its breaking point. Two days. 48 hours. Time was running out. They always say the first 72 hours is the most critical time in finding a missing person, and here Alex sat, watching the minutes tick away. It was infuriating that seemingly nothing could be done. Person after person vanishing without a trace, leaving nothing behind.

Alex was furious with the police for hardly lifting a finger in the search for Ellie, but he was even angrier with himself. He couldn't help but repeat the gnawing thought in his mind over and over; if it weren't for you, she'd still be here.

For but a moment, his mind flashed back to that fateful incident. He and Ellie had been chatting by the edge of the nearby forest as he made his way home from his after school job. She had excitedly told him that she had found something *really* cool in the forest and wanted to show it to him. But he was so tired and just wanted to go home and rest.

The sun was not yet setting, but it was drawing near. The light was beginning to take on that late orange quality. He declined, and despite Ellie's persistent whines, he insisted on heading home. He told her she should do the same, but she just laughed and promised she'd be back before dark. He knew he should have insisted she not go. The strange phenomenon was striking closer and closer to home. It was too close to sunset. But he was so very tired and she was very willful. Her smiling face and playful giggle were the last things he saw as she bounded off into the forest ahead. That was the last time he saw her.

Snapping back to the present, Alex rubbed his face vigorously and shook the memory off. He wasn't going to find Ellie cramped up in his darkened room. And if the police weren't going to do anything, that meant it was up to him. He didn't really know what else he could do at this point, but he couldn't just sit idly by. Neither of his parents were home from work yet, so slipping out would be easy.

Fuelled by a sudden rush of motivation, Alex bolted up and charged out of his room. He didn't have much to work on, but he DID know the last place she was seen. He'd searched that stretch of woods maybe a dozen times already, but he'd do it again! Maybe he'd find something he missed before.

Leaving his shuttered house, he recoiled at the sudden shift in brightness. He had completely lost track of time. It was nearing 7pm, and though dusk was approaching, the sunlight still hung low and orange in the sky and burned at his unacclimated eyes. Reconsidering, he doubled back inside and grabbed himself a flashlight and the small pocket knife he owned. He wasn't sure how long he'd be out on the hunt, but he knew it would be unwise to go out after dark without such tools.

In a hurried pace, he padded down the sidewalk in the direction of the forest clearing Ellie had wandered into. His heart pounded in his chest, and despite his determination, a nervous sweat had already formed on his brow. It took only about 5 minutes before he came to a halt before the forested grotto.

The area was deceptively peaceful. A few birds sang their final songs in the reddening orange light and the branches blew gracefully in a soft breeze. If he had not known for a fact that something dangerous was lurking within, he would never have believed it. In fact, even then Alex was starting to feel ridiculous. What the hell was he doing there? How did he expect to find anything out here if the entire police force hadn't?

But not a moment after the thought crossed his mind, the sharp snapping of a twig caught his attention. Jerking his gaze upwards, he felt goosebumps begin to form as the hairs raised on his arms. Just seconds ago he had been completely alone out there, but now, a short way in to the forest, right where it began to thicken, a pair of eyes now stared back at him.

He squeezed his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing things, and sure enough, peeking out from behind a tree a short ways ahead of him was the face of what appeared to be a clown. Alex swallowed hard. He had always found the performers particularly unnerving. But that alone wasn't what really put him off. The soft brown eyes, the perky cheeks, and the slightly crooked front tooth of the eerily smiling fool were distinct features belonging to Ellie! Of course her chestnut hair was now a bright neon pink, and her face was concealed by sharp colorful markings, but he was certain it was her.

"Ellie is that you? What the hell are you doing? Do you have any idea how worried we've all been?" Alex shouted out at her, an equal mixture of anger, confusion, and relief in his voice.

However, at his words, the "Ellie clown" simply released a giggle and zipped away, deeper into the forest and out of sight.

"What the hell Ellie! Get back here now! We have to go home!" Alex barked, immediately giving chase.

But before Alex could see what happened, she was gone without a trace. He spun in circles, scanning the forest for any sign of her. He heard a distant giggle to his right, so he whipped his head in that direction, only to be met with empty wilderness. He spun around again and saw the flash of a skirt tucking behind a tree. He charged at it but as soon as he reached the tree, again she was nowhere to be found. He grew more and more confused and frustrated, chasing after the faint giggles and every fleeting wisp of her skirt until suddenly, it all went silent.

Alex panted, out of breath from the ordeal. It was then that he realized the lack of any sound whatsoever. No wind, no crickets, nothing. And worse yet, while chasing after Ellie, the sun had completely set. This baffled him, as he was certain there was still at least 30-40 minutes before sundown. But it was pitch dark, and with the sudden halt in giggles and snapping twigs, it had become quiet as a grave. And what's worse, as Alex reached down to his pocket to pull out his flashlight, he found that it was no longer there. He somehow must have lost it in the wild chase, though he couldn't see how. Things were beginning to feel far too unnatural now.

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket, and as if following the same bizarre rules of every other mysterious phenomenon that night, this too was now useless. He knew for a fact he had fully charged it before leaving. There was no way it should be dead by now. But it was. So there he stood, alone, in the dark, and with no way to call for help.

His pulse began to rise and he went into high alert as he realized the predicament he had just gotten himself into. Had that actually been Ellie? He thought on it a minute. Things were indeed very strange but he'd know her face anywhere. It had to be her. He decided that the smartest course of action at this point was to take this new information to the police in the morning and let them sort it all out. After all, this may just be the kind of lead they needed to really get the case rolling.

However, as Alex turned around to head back towards home, he realized to his dismay, that during the chase he had become completely turned around. He had no idea where he was and it was too dark to see much of anything.

In a moment of panic, he shoved his hand in his pocket and clutched his knife tightly in his fist and scanned desperately around for any sign of the direction back toward civilization. He grew more and more distressed, whipping his head around and squeezing his eyes in hopes of seeing something, anything- when he suddenly saw it. Far off, a distance into the trees, he saw the telltale glow of faint colorful lights. His gut screamed at him to be cautious, but he had no other idea of which way to look, so, slowly and steadily he began walking toward the softly twinkling lights.

As he walked, he began to feel strange. His head hurt a bit, and no matter how far he walked, the lights never seemed to get any closer. And worse yet, he now thought he could begin to make out the shapes of figures in the glow of the lights. Losing his will, he stopped in his tracks and turned on his heel. However, when he whipped around, his jaw fell to the floor.

No longer was he isolated in the dense stretch of forest. His feet were now firmly planted in a dusty dirt road cutting through an old carnival midway. The old multicolor lights twinkled ominously, and faded triangular flags danced in the slight breeze above the surrounding structures. On the wind, a faint carnival song chimed, but something was off about it. Instead of cheerful, it sounded strange, and vaguely dangerous.

The sights sent a violent shiver down Alex's spine and set him even further on edge. Looming high above, lit up by partially burnt out bulbs was a massive sign reading "The Dusklit Carnival". Something about it turned his stomach, so he looked back to the midway around him.

Besides the unbelievable way in which he had arrived there, there was something else that disturbed Alex about this place. Despite the lights, music, and even wafting smells from vendor carts, there were no other people there. No guests, no employees, hell, not even any wildlife trying to rummage through the bins.

Taking a deep breath, Alex stole himself and decided it best to keep moving. Even if this place chilled his blood, Ellie could be out there somewhere. So he clenched his fist and slowly began to trod down the eerie midway.

As he walked, he passed by a parade of old game booths. Curiously, despite the relative griminess, they appeared functioning. Their little lights and sounds went off merrily, and even stuffed prizes swayed from the walls they were pinned to. He peered ahead a ways into the distance, swallowing hard as he began to take in the sheer size of this bizarre place.

It stretched on literally as far as his eyes could see. Looming beyond, a silhouette of a hulking metal Ferris Wheel frame and roller coaster tracks were swallowed by the swirling mist hanging heavy behind them. But these were not the most striking things that lay before him. No, that bone chilling honor was reserved for the colossal three ring circus tent that sat dead center in the midway ahead.

A great feeling of unease washed over Alex as he stared at the massive monolith. But oddly, he struggled to break his gaze away from it. Something about it seemed to almost call to him, like a demented siren song. Despite every warning bell in his head going off, Alex felt himself slowly resume walking, aimed directly to the tent like a moth to a flame.

As his feet softly plodded across the dusty road, he began to hear noises filling in the silent void around him. He couldn't break his direct gaze away from the ominous tent ahead, but in his peripheral vision he began to see colorful forms spilling out between the stalls and into the road behind him. The sound was various whispers, slowly building up into a dull cacophony.

At first it was difficult to make out who- or what the shapes were. But as they loomed closer, Alex suddenly came to the realization that they were all dressed as clowns, not unlike Ellie had been. The sight sent a sharp ping of fear into his gut, and was almost enough break the spell and send Alex hurtling as fast and as far as he could to get out of this place. But what he heard next instantly wiped all traces of fear away and quickened his pace ahead.

Calling, from somewhere beyond, obscured by the mist that seemed to be ever growing, Alex could hear Ellie. She was calling his name. Crying out playfully.

"Alex" she breathed with glee, a dainty silhouette coming into view. "Come find me Alex!"

"Ellie?" he shouted, breaking into a sprint toward the foggy patch ahead.

Once again, his name was called out. Alex hurdled forward, screeching to a halt mere feet from the figure before his brain processed what was wrong with the situation. You see, the last time his name had been called out, the voice had changed. It was not Ellie calling out for him anymore. And before Alex could realize his mistake, the figure ahead stepped out of the mist, revealing itself.

What now stood before him could not be any further from Ellie. It was a strange woman, far too tall and unnaturally pale. Her long blue hair was messily tossed up in pigtails, and she wore a battered old ring mistress's coat and skirt. She too had her face done up like a clown but there was nothing funny or charming about her. The longer Alex stared at this woman, the more he noticed things that were just... off. Her too sharp teeth in a sickly sweet grin, her long claw-like fingernails poking out from the tips of her gloves, and her cold unfeeling eyes, white as blazing snow. He knew in his gut this thing wasn't human. Or at least if it once had been, it was no longer.

Distressed as he was at her presence, Alex realized all too late that the strange force calling him forth was not, in fact the tent. But it was the strange woman herself. Try as he might to break away, his panicked green eyes were locked onto her ancient white ones. His body remained frozen, unable to move, aside from his shaking chest.

The woman's gaze bored into his soul, petrifying him. Slowly and carefully, she began to take tender steps toward Alex. With her captive audience, the strange woman began to speak.

"Hello there Alex. It's very nice to meet you! I do hope you've been enjoying my humble little show!" the woman breathed, sweet as honey.

If her eyes were frighteningly captivating, her voice was positively hypnotic. Despite Alex's internal voices of logic screaming bloody murder in his head, he suddenly found himself in somewhat of a trance. His pounding heart slowed, and his tensed shoulders began to droop lazily. And despite himself, Alex found himself nodding a nonverbal answer to the woman's question.

"Good! I'm thrilled to hear that!" the woman trilled, "You know, the great thing about this place is that if you want, you never have to leave!"

Alex's internal voice continued to scream at him, but a lazy smile began to fix itself on his face. The longer he listened to the woman, the more at ease he began to feel. The surrounding midway no longer seemed eerie, but instead the most inviting destination he'd ever visited. DID he really want to leave?

"Would you like that? To stay here with me? Me and my family?" the woman cooed.

Finally, something snapped in Alex. Her family? He forcefully broke his gaze away from the woman and realized that all the while, more and more clowns had begun to gather around, drawing nearer. Their faces too weren't right. Some far too long, some with features far too large, and even a few who's eyes refracted light like a cat in the dark. Processing the impending danger, Alex quickly took the moment to bolt.

Dodging the nearing clowns and dashing to the left of the strange woman, Alex ran for the flap of the side tent, hoping to lose his pursuers backstage. He tore through the slim opening and hurdled into the tent beyond. It was then that he realized he had made a grave mistake. He nearly flew out of control skidding on something slick on the floor into the total darkness ahead. Steadying himself, he nearly choked at the overwhelming smell of blood and rot.

With a faint fizzle, the room was suddenly awash with ominous red light. It was then that he could truly take in the horror of what lie around him. A grim cornucopia of body parts hung on suspended meat hooks, entrails cast about like party streamers. The slick substance he had slipped on was blood that had dripped off of them. Worse yet, was the pile of pale figures back in the corner. If they were indeed what he suspected them to be, Alex was fairly certain he had figured out the mystery of where so many of the missing persons had ended up.

Another pair of catlike eyes blinked back light at him from the other side of the room. Stepping into the light was another clown, her hair long and white and a grisly smile slashed into her cheeks. She smiled wickedly at him, her features seeming to contort, growing more animalistic and feral.

She licked her chops greedily and began to take slow, stalking steps toward Alex. His heart skipped a beat as he saw the glint of something sharp and metallic in her grasp. He readied to turn on his heel once more, before he could, he heard a sharp voice calling out directly behind him, nearly causing him to start.

"Just what do you think you're doing? We don't know what Hexi wants to do with him yet. Last I checked you didn't call the shots, ya beast. Piss off, eh?"

The white haired clown growled under her breath and spat on the ground, putting her hands on her hips impatiently, staring down the new figure. Standing right behind Alex was yet another clown. This one sporting curly purple hair and a bored expression. Her features were softer and less feral, somehow more human looking than the others. Alex swallowed the lump in his throat and turned to properly face this new clown. Perhaps he could reason with this one, after all, she had just stilled the other more aggressive figure.

However, upon turning around, his heart sank. Stopping him in his tracks, the purple clown swung down a blunt object mere inches away from him. It was an old baseball bat, wrapped in barbed wire and slick with unspeakable gore. She didn't need to say anything. Her cold, merciless expression and the swing of her bat spoke a clear warning.

She grasped his wrist in a vice grip far too tight for someone of her size, and nearly dragged Alex from the tent, back out into the midway beyond. Back where the deranged ring mistress stood waiting exactly as before, having not moved an inch since his failed bid for freedom. Still wearing the same unsettling grin, she spoke up once again.

"Hey now, no need to get spooked like that! We're all friends here! It's perfectly safe so long as you stay in line!"

Alex tried his best to fight off the strange hypnotic feeling that overtook him whenever this woman spoke. In defiance, he hissed back his own retort.

"Perfectly safe? Is that what you call that hellscape in there?"

The woman simply released a sickly cackle as if he had said the silliest thing in the world. Her grin grew even wider, and she stared unblinking as she continued.

"Some new friends didn't want to stay, even after the big warm welcome we gave them. It really hurt my feelings... It's an awful shame... After all, I've heard the woods out in these parts are terribly dangerous. Who knows what you might run into on your way back out..."

Alex's pulse quickened as he spotted several more pairs of the catlike eyes glowing out from the misty trees beyond the stalls. He shifted his weight from side to side as cold panic began to rise in him. His eyes darted to and fro, desperately trying to think of some sort of escape plan. That's when he suddenly remembered the knife in his pocket!

Something in his gut told Alex that the ring mistress was the key to all the madness around him. If he could strike her, perhaps he could break whatever weird spell was seemingly effecting this place and get the hell out of there.

Trying his best not to meet her gaze, Alex shoved his hand into his pocket and clenched the small blade. In the blink of an eye, he had whipped it out and was primed and swinging a strike aiming straight for the woman's skinny neck. However, before he could close the gap, she caught his eye again, and whispered the sentence that nearly stopped his heart.

"Careful now. A move like that would be simply tragic for poor little Ellie..."

He froze on the spot, as if turned to stone in that very instance. Not just caught in the woman's trance again, but also staring just behind her. Peering from out of the main tent was the little pink haired clown with brown eyes and a crooked front tooth. She was staring right at him, the saddest expression on her face.

"Please Alex. Don't go. I'll be all alone without you..."

Her sad little words trailed off, and struck Alex in the heart like a crossbow bolt. His resolve had been fractured, and in a flash, the ring mistress was upon him again. She smiled her sickly sweet smile once again and slowly began to approach Alex. His head felt funny again, and just like before he found

himself contemplating his desires to leave in the first place. The voice of reason was growing fainter and weaker, until he could barely hear it at all. The strange clown Ellie reached out a gloved hand, encouraging him to take it in his own. He felt as though he were now nearly drowning in the uncomfortably warm and heavy feeling that was enveloping him. And then the ring mistress spoke one last time, cooing sticky sweet words into his ear.

"What do you say, friend? Would you like to stay?"

Tears welled up in Alex's eyes as he felt himself completely give way to the overwhelming sensation. His eyes seemed to glaze over as an unnaturally wide grin began to stretch across his face. And slowly, he nodded his head.

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Once again the local news flashed across the screens of town residents. The strange disappearances had ceased nearly three weeks ago. Just as suddenly as they had begun, they had stopped. No signs of foul play, not a trace of evidence. Police left scratching their heads at the mysterious phenomenon. Ellie and Alex, and many others were never seen nor heard from again. All of them gone; as if grains of sand blown away by the wind. And somewhere, far off in the distance, a carnival song warbled into the night.