

In the Darkness He Smiled.

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The motel along the highway was eerily silent. At a quick glance a passerby would deem the place empty. No cars on the driveways, and the reception building was dark and deserted. But by the side of the road the tall neon sign was on, declaring "Vacancy" with bright yellow letters. The few vehicles that passed did not take up on the offer, not despite the fact that they were mostly heavy duty long haulers, and it was already nearing midnight. If anything, it seemed that they instinctively picked up their speed as they passed the lifeless little town.

But there was a guest inside room 16. Not that anybody had seen him arrive. He had phoned ahead to give the clerk his details and credit card number. When he'd emerged from the forest an hour after sundown, nobody had paid any attention to the stranger. He'd made his way towards the motel with a carefully measured stride, walking alongside the highway that also doubled as the main street to the miniscule town. Two bars, a gas station and a diner were still open, but the man had passed all these. He wasn't looking for additional entertainment. Back there, in the endless span of Pacific Northwest forest, he had plenty waiting for him. But now the man had decided that he'd earned a shower and a rest.

Room 16 had been ready for him as promised. The door was closed, but unlocked, the keys and the receipt waiting for him on the table. The room wasn't much to look at. A battered TV-set, torn carpet, a chair and a table, small fridge and a queen bed that looked cozy enough. In fact, so exhausted was he that it looked decidedly fantastic.

Carefully the man locked the door behind him and pocketed the key. Then he closed the shutters on the windows and turned off the AC unit. Without even bothering to take off his shoes, he fell on the mattress. The old queen gave a squeal of protest, but held firmly against his weight. In two minutes he was fast asleep.

4:04 AM he roused. There was no alarm, he simply opened his eyes, feeling refreshed despite the still stretching darkness. He did not look at the clock as he already knew how much it was. For sixteen years he'd been waking up at the same precise minute. The man wasn't too pedant about the time he turned in, but he never slept past the allotted hour. He did, however, allow himself some time to sit on the corner of the bed, contemplating the darkness. It was always at this same

hour when he had his usual doubts about the work he did. It was out of the ordinary, for sure, but it was also his calling. After dedicating himself for it for years, the work was all he knew and all he had. But those few minutes in the darkness were his way to repent. The past was never kind and future never predictable.

4:09 AM. The man was ready. He took the key out of his pocket and put it on the table. Then he walked out of the door. Without looking back, he again made his way to the side of the road. There were no sidewalks in this small town, but plenty of room on the shoulder. Empty soda cans, coffee cups, half-burnt cigarettes and candy wrappings decorated his path.

The man walked past the reception. Now there was a light on, but the clerk didn't see the passerby. He was too busy watching HSN. Like everyone else, the clerk made fun of the people who bought stuff on the network, but secretly ordered things for himself or his wife every now and then. It was acceptable as long as you remembered to hide the merchandise before you invited friends over.

These cares didn't bother the stranger. He didn't have the time to watch TV anymore. At the very best he could hope to catch a football game on the radio on Sunday. But even that was often too distracting. The work, always the work that kept him focused.

Step by step the man retreated into the darkness, as if escaping the lights of the tiny town. His figure made a shape against the deep blue sky, but there was no one to see it. One moment he was there, in another he was gone. Gone back into the woods where he came from. Gone back to finish his job.

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Larry steered the car into the slot right outside their room. Alice had done the check in and was already waiting for him to open the trunk. Larry yanked the key out of the ignition and stepped out. He gave a reassuring smile to Alice, but she didn't seem to notice. Together they hauled their luggage out of the rental and into the room. It wasn't much to look at. There was the queen bed, slightly bent out of shape but functional, the chair and the table, a small fridge with rusty hinges and a carpet that was old enough to put the pioneers in shame. Larry tried to find a hint of disapproval from her fiancée's face, but Alice kept it blank. *That woman would make one hell of a poker player*, Larry thought to himself.

When they had moved their belongings from the car, Larry asked her if she wanted to check out the old diner. 'It looks pretty seedy, but they gave it some good reviews on Yelp', he said helpfully.

'Maybe later. I just want to rest my legs for a while, okay?'

'Sure thing, hon. Want me to run over to the gas station to get a few beers or something?'

'You know what, I'd love a beer right now', she admitted.

'Ask and thou shall receive', Larry grinned.

'Well I am', she said, finally returning the smile.

'I'll be right back.'

Fifteen minutes later they were both sitting on the bed and sipping bottles of BridgePort beer. There was a bag of chips between them but it remained unopened. Neither of them were really looking at the show that was on. It was a rerun of an episode they've both seen years ago anyway. Both were lost in their thoughts.

'It seems weird', Alice said after a while.

'What does?'

'The way we... just, you know. Sit here. I wonder if he was having a beer too. Just like us.'

'He wasn't', Larry said affirmatively.

'How do you know?'

'They didn't find anything from the room except fingerprints. They never did. He never left anything behind.'

'Fuck. I don't know. He was *such a creep*.'

'Well, yeah. I mean, I guess you gotta be in order to do that sort of thing.'

'Are you sure this is *the room*?', Alice asked.

'I am. I made sure when I made the reservation. Number 16. The Weisman girl was his sixteenth victim. He was funny that way.'

'Funny? I don't think there's anything funny about that', Alice snapped. She was right of course. But Larry was obsessed. He'd been obsessed with the Willamette Woods Killer ever since college, when he wrote a lengthy paper about him. The prof only gave it B+, but Larry thought it was the best damn work he ever turned in.

'Relax honey. Tomorrow we'll do something nice.'

'Oh yeah, because a visit to a rotting old van in the middle of the woods is always nice. Especially if a serial killer mutilated a teenage girl in it. I can hardly wait!'

'Listen, it'll only take an hour. I just want to snap a few shots, then we're on our way. We can make it to Crater Lake by noon, easy. And you've been waiting for that, haven't you?'

'Well yes, I have, but can you please stop acting like you're doing me a huge favor. It's only fair that I get to have a say on our itinerary too.'

'Of course', Larry nodded.

They drifted out of the conversation. Evening went by and they never did go out to the diner. Later Larry made another trip to the gas station and brought a couple of sandwiches and a Hershey bar for dinner. They barely exchanged a word between them as they ate. Larry knew that Alice wasn't really mad at him, so he gave her a rest. This whole trip had been strain on her. For more than a week now they'd been crisscrossing the Pacific Northwest, tracking the steps of the infamous Willamette Woods Killer. Sixteen victims during the years 1976 and 1992. Most of them young girls under the age of 15, although at least one had been older, and two of the early victims had been boys. Not all the murder locations were known and some of the bodies were still missing. Allegedly the killer couldn't remember them all. Indeed, despite his confession to all sixteen murders, the prosecutor had decided to take only seven of the cases to court. That had been plenty enough for capital punishment. The State of Oregon had executed the killer in 1997.

Alice was of course right in saying that it was weird to be here, in the same room where the killer had stayed only few days before his capture. The night at the motel had always been a bit of a mystery to the authorities. Why had the killer come here in the first place? After kidnapping the 11-year old Martha Weisman from her front yard in Eugene, the killer had been driving around central and southern Oregon for days. On the 14th of September, 1992, he had abandoned his van into the forest and walked into this small town. Nobody had seen him come or go, not even the owner of the motel. But the visit had been instrumental in capturing the killer. The credit card he used to pay for the room had belonged to his mother. As it happened, she'd been dead for almost a year at the time. Some amateur investigators even suggested that the killer had dispatched her too, but Larry didn't believe it. Likely the mother had been the only person in the world that the Willamette Killer had ever loved.

Using the credit card had been a very foolish and very uncharacteristic for the killer. For fifteen years he had been operating, leaving the same amount of bodies behind. It took the police four years to even acknowledge that they were dealing with a serial case. The Willamette Killer hadn't made any major mistakes. The authorities were having a devil of a time to get on his trail. The cooling-off period between the murders varied from seven months to almost eighteen.

The killer always kidnapped his victims first, but the disappearing took place within a huge area that covered three different states. The actual murders usually happened inside the Willamette National Forest, but not always.

In 1992 the killer finally changed his MO. For reasons that would always remain unclear, the night before his last murder he stayed in a motel and used his mother's credit card to pay for it. While Martha Weisman spent the night terrified and alone in the woods, few miles away the killer slept comfortably on a queen bed in room 16. Few hours before dawn the killer returned to his van. By morning Weisman was dead, hacked into pieces with a small splitting axe. It had been September 15th, exactly one week short of her 12th birthday.

Instead of hiding the body and cleaning up the van, this time the Willamette Killer had simply walked away from the scene, leaving everything just as it was. Even the axe had still been attached to the victim's skull. Three days later a hunter had found this grisly scene. He alerted the authorities, who immediately launched an investigation. When they found out that a dead person had rented a motel room in the nearby town, the hunt was on. Couple of days later the Willamette Killer was behind bars. Police had found him in his house on the outskirts of Bend, Oregon. He'd been fast asleep at the time of the arrest. The evidence indicated that he had walked the 70 mile trip from the murder scene to his home.

Larry thought about this as he was brushing his teeth. Alice was already sleeping. Larry himself had always been a bit of an insomniac, but lately it'd been worse than usual. Maybe this trip was getting under his skin, too. Larry knew that he had to go through this if he ever wanted to write a meaningful book about the murders, but he was still surprised how much of an ordeal it had become. The resource material was simply so fucking dark. It had been his ambition to get inside the killer's head, but now it seemed like maybe he'd gotten deeper than he could handle.

Larry turned off the bathroom lights and returned to the bed. Again he pondered at weirdness of simply being in here, at this motel and in this particular room. For several days now he had been to the same places as the killer, but this was somehow different. How was he suppose to *sleep* here? To leave himself completely defenseless? If the ghosts of the past needed an opening, was there ever a better one than this?

You're being ridiculous, Larry told himself. Sure enough that was true. But still, sleep was a long time coming.

At precisely 4:04 AM Larry awoke. He did not drift away from sleep, it just ended like somebody had turned off a switch. Without looking at the clock he sat up. His thoughts were a mess. Past, present and future were hopelessly tangled up in his brain. For a few minutes he remained unsure of even who the hell he was. The images of tortured bodies, desolate clearings deep in the hearts of the woods, a guilt so sharp it was like the axe he had used for... doing what, exactly?

It's not me, he thought. *It's not me that is doing the work*. And that was true. It wasn't him, it was something else. Something that was moving through him. That was why he should accept it and shake off the guilt. *Sometimes we are chosen*, Larry thought. Simple vehicles of a bigger plan. It's a destiny we must embrace or else we shall perish. And he was ready for that. Ready for a new beginning.

Larry stood up from the bed. He saw his own reflection on the mirror across the room. In the darkness there was something on his face. Something that looked an awful lot like a smile.