

AN EYENING WALK

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GROWING UP IN OHIO, there are some things that you just know. No one is sure where they learned these things, maybe they heard them from an older cousin, or a kid from down the street, but nonetheless, you take them as fact, and they become ingrained into your mind. Some of these are obvious, avoid the teens standing in a circle at the park, always pay attention to the people walking by you on the street, but some are more sinister.

You know that you are not supposed to go into the woods alone, as you may hear the soft whispers of the trees that pull you farther and farther in, until you can no longer remember how to get home. It is common knowledge that if one sees a movement stirring in the cornfields, to look away and run as fast and as far as you can, from what, no one knows, but you know that it is always there watching, waiting, hungry, in the night, in the dusk. Though you are a smart, observant individual, there may come a day when you don't heed these warnings and signs that you have grown so accustomed to.

One fall afternoon, you are walking home from school as you always do, but for some reason, you are at the school a little later than usual, and dusk is beginning to set in. It's a crisp day, and you are wearing your favorite jacket to protect you from the elements, so you just barely register its bite through your clothing. After exchanging the proper pleasantries, you turn to go as the sun dips, bathing the trees in an amber light that contrasts the temperature.

A small seed of dread starts to form in the back of your mind, you *hate* walking home alone in the dark, after all, that is the first rule that you learned so long ago. Your house is not that far away, but the light is fading fast, almost as if it is racing you home. Should you take the long way, down the dark streets and past the small town cemetery, or do you walk down the familiar dirt road that will take you into your shortcut through the forest and around the edge of your neighbor's cornfield? You don't have much time to decide, so you choose the quickest route, if you're lucky, you might even get home before it's entirely dark, you reason, and you're not *scared*, are you? You're not a kid

anymore, it's not *that* bad. So, you take a deep breath and start towards your accustomed shortcut.

The dusty road beneath your feet affirms your choice as you approach the small forest. you *know* these woods, right? As the light fades, the already shady canopy begins to swallow the remain light, leaving you in a creeping, almost dark. The trees creak and the bark pops as the dipping temperature that starts to nip at your bare skin. The wind kicks up, whispering in your ears and edging you forward faster, farther onto the darkening trail. *Come in... come in... follow...* the breeze whispers and you feel as though you are being watched. Your heartbeat quickens, it's just the wind, it's just the wind, you think, but you know it's a lie. You can feel the presence watching you, and following, closer and closer. You don't dare look back. Your footsteps quicken, but not so much so that you would alert the thing following you, you know how this works, if you don't make too much noise, or run, you have a better chance.

Even knowing this, you try not to hold your breath as the clearing in the trees grows closer. You feel what you hope are branches clawing at your back and sharp, hollow hisses that cause your hands to tremble. As you take the last few strides out of the woods, you shut your eyes tightly, hoping that you've escaped what was following you. As you exit, you open them again, you're finally out of the woods, so you take a deep sighing breath in order to calm yourself and steel your nerve, as though you made it this far, the worst is yet to come.

Though you got through the forest quickly, it is almost completely black outside, and the corn sways menacingly as you enter the small breaks in between stalks. The papery husks scratch and snap loudly as you pass. You hear a heavy crack not far from you that dampens into the shushing of the corn husks as it darts towards you. You stop in your tracks as your heart races. The shushing stops, as if it is listening and looking for you, your heart is thudding in your ears and you know that there is only one way out of this, you have to run. You sprint forward, but your speed is hindered by the reaching, swaying stalks that seem to purposefully hold you back, aiding whatever is chasing you. And now you hear it, that guttural calling that reminds you of a wounded animal, the sound that would compel you towards it in any other circumstance. It gains closer and closer, until you can feel its hot breath on your neck. As you lose feeling in your limbs, you take one last bounding stride to safety, but your ankle is yanked back, and you are dragged deep into the cornfield never to be heard of again.

Many years have passed, and now *your name* is used in the stories the children tell, for now you are always watching, waiting, and raring to take the next victim just as all of the others have before you. *