

"There's nothing here," reported the bald man. "The whole house is empty. Nothing but junk." He dropped a bag at my feet.

"Of course there's nothing here," said the big guy. "He was lying."

I turned to face them and the big guy was pointing his rifle at me. I raised my hands. I wasn't lying. There was more here before! Food, furniture, everything! I never thought I was that afraid of dying, but my ears began to ring.

Then behind him, I saw her standing in the front doorway. The bald man saw my eyes and turned to look at her. He turned back at me with an eyebrow raised.

I was relieved. See? I wasn't lying. She must have moved all the stuff.

"Behind you," I said to the big guy, my hands still raised, his gun still trained on me. "She's there!" I could barely hear my own voice. I looked at the bald man pleadingly.

The big guy didn't turn from me, but glanced over at the bald man for confirmation. He just shook his head. "There's no-one there," the bald man assured him. My nerves shot straight back up and the ringing nearly deafened me. He wanted the big guy to just kill me.

I saw her say something, but I could hardly hear anything.

They both spun around, surprised. Okay, I was saved.

After a second, the big guy spoke. His voice was just barely loud enough for me to make out what he said. And then it was as if I'd received a blow to the head. My vision grew blurry, and I stumbled back.

He had asked "Who's there?"

The girl scowled. She moved closer and spoke again.

The big guy raised his gun straight at her for a moment, then moved it just to her side. His voice raised to a yell. "Come inside slowly!" But there was uncertainty, fear in his voice. He'd pointed his gun correctly the first time. Somewhere inside he knew she wasn't hiding behind the doorway. Her voice had come directly in from him.

She started walking towards him. I watched but said nothing. Her eyes glanced at me once, twice, and then she turned her head and watched me as she moved.

The bald man was very perceptive. He looked back at me, and he saw where my eyes were. Following her approach. The color left his face in an instant and he dashed away from the big guy's side, just as she reached him and held out her hand. I closed my eyes and heard a loud thud. When I opened them the big guy was lying on the floor.

The bald man turned to me. But I couldn't understand what he was saying at all.

The girl must have spoken again. He recoiled from her and cried out loud enough for me to hear.

"I'm sorry!"

He hesitated for a split second, eyeing his companion, but then took off and ran out the door.

The girl watched him leave then turned to me. As if being pushed, I backed up against the wall.

And as she approached, the pressure increased. I sank down to the floor. And she bent down to meet my face. She touched my forehead gently. The crushing pressure in my head finally released, the ringing stopped, and at last I could hear more than my own breathing. And she spoke again.

I understood then.

"I can't hear your voice," I said to her. She smiled warmly and moved her fingers slowly down my eyelids.

When I opened my eyes, it was night. And she was gone.

Because she'd left me unharmed, I felt safe enough to stop and take the big guy's equipment, trying to avoid looking into his open eyes. Then I emptied the bag of junk the bald man had collected.

It really was mostly junk, but among it was a framed family photo. And there she was inside it, sitting between her parents, looking at me. Smiling warmly. I dared to take it with me.

On my way back home, I almost tripped over the bald man, lying on the path barely a mile from the house with his throat open. It didn't frighten me as much as it maybe should have. It seemed in some sense natural to me that I'd find him here dead. He didn't have much that I wanted, but I took it anyway. I wiped and pocketed the knife that had been used to kill him. At this point the hairs on my neck raised and the terror I should have felt from the beginning set in. I nervously scanned around with the big guy's powerful lamp, but saw nothing but the pines separated by pitch-darkness. No, I looked again, and there was a face. A pale man peeking out from behind one of the trees. I shouted at him in anger, demanding to know who he was. He didn't respond, nor did he move. He continued watching me, expressionless. I turned and sprinted off for as long as I could. When I had to slow to rest, I heard no-one chasing me, but I kept the flashlight trained on the road. I didn't want to know what might be around me lurking in the dark. I continued home as quickly as I could. When I finally reached the gate, the guards stopped me to make sure I was okay. They didn't question my new rifle or other gear. They must have known it'd meant death for others, but in my few months in the fort, I'd proven myself trustworthy enough. I made it to my tent against the wall and collapsed into my sleeping bag.

I dreamed I was lying back in that house. On either side of me were the men who had come with me and died that day. The pale watcher from the woods was standing over me. He screamed at me, his face contorted in anger. But I could not hear his voice, and the fear I should have felt was absent. More and more similarly pale men began surrounding me, screaming silently. Then I was on my feet and saw on the floor the knife they'd used to kill the bald man. I snatched it up and I swung at them. They were unfazed and launched themselves at me, slapping at my chest and face. I quickly realized with dread that my efforts were for nothing; the knife passed through them like air. I began to imagine the pain I myself should have been feeling, and then I felt it. Every flailing limb connecting with my head. Every finger, looking to cut and gouge. I knew I was going to die. But as I inhaled to take my final swing, the girl appeared. There, in the doorway as she had before. She spoke, and we were alone. She smiled at me, and I opened my eyes.

I couldn't remember what she had said, but I remembered clearly that I could hear her voice. It was the beautiful sound.

The older guys had never warned me about that place. But that wasn't their job. I should have just known by them never going there.

There was no point in reporting the bandits' deaths, so I didn't. Even if they cared for their own, whatever camp they were from would never try to retaliate against our fortress or its territories. The next day I told the men I'd gone up to the house alone.

"You saw her, right?" one whispered to me as we sat around a fire. I said I had.

He nodded. "A lot of young people see them."

"Young's got nothing to do with it," another man added. They began to argue.

"Them" Yes, I knew I had seen others in the woods, even before that night. Never on the trail, never even close enough to make out their appearance. Until last night, when I saw that terrible, pale face. I asked if anyone had ever been attacked by them. The answer was no, they never bothered anyone. They only watched. One brave man claimed he'd even left the trail and went after one. When he arrived at the spot, he found they were gone. He returned back to the trail unbothered. Maybe they had been intimidated by him, but they certainly weren't by me. The pale man had barely been a few feet from me. But I was alive. Why then, did they kill the bald man?

Someone had spoken while I was thinking and I asked them to repeat themselves.

"I just said it's strange that they never make a sound. The ones on the other side of the mountain never stop muttering to themselves."

"They never make a sound..." The screaming mob, whose voices I could not hear, flashed through my mind.

"Who are they?" I asked. "Vultures?"

"They're nothing," one younger man replied immediately. "Just apparitions. Ghosts."

"How do you know?"

"I shot one. I got tired of him looking at me. Round went like through him, like he wasn't there. Fuckers smiled at me, this sick smile. But still he didn't make a move. I bet they can't touch us either."

"Why even take the chance, though?" another asked him.

As they began arguing about munitions supplies, the implications of his claim clicked in the back of my mind. But I wasn't ready to confront them yet. I asked about the girl, and her strange house. I got few useful answers. None of the other men had ever entered the house. They saw the girl standing at the doorway, but did not call out to her or approach her, citing the "bad feeling" in their gut that allowed men to reach their age in such a world. I didn't tell them that I had been inside the house twice, and had seen something entirely different each time.

After everyone finished eating (I had no appetite), one of the men approached me and led me away from the others.

"I've heard her," he told me at once.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just looked at him. He continued.

"If you go back and get something for me, I'll tell you what she sounds like."

"Some deal," I said. "I'm not going back through those woods. Go yourself."

His voice broke. "I can't bear to hear her like that."

Familiarity? Something clicked. I hadn't recognized him at first, because he wasn't smiling, and he appeared to have aged more than he should have.

"Please," he continued, "I don't have much. But I'll..."

I interrupted him. "A picture?" I asked.

He nodded and his eyes filled with hope.

I told him to wait. I went into my tent and returned with the picture. He saw it in my hands as I approached, and a sad smile grew on his face as tears dripped from his eyes.

"This is you," I said pointing at the man in the photo. "And your wife... and your daughter?" I pointed at the girl.

"Yes," he whispered.

I didn't ask him anything else that night. I told him to keep the photo.

But I was still curious about something he had said.

"Like that."

Sleep didn't come to me as easily as the previous night. I thought about what I'd learned of the watchers in the woods, those nonviolent observers. The veteran scout who'd chased after one only to find nothing, and more damning, the young marksman who swore his bullet passed through another. If they really were just spectres, or spirits, and peaceful ones that that, they certainly hadn't cut the bald man's throat. There was no reason his belongings would be left alone. There was no reason the knife was left behind.

A few days later, I returned to the house with the photo. The old man didn't want to keep it after all. He just wanted to see it once more before he died. It made more sense for her to have it. I spotted five or so of the watchers. As usual, they were so far from the road, it seemed ridiculous that I'd ever seen one so close. Maybe I hadn't.

When I finally arrived, the girl was standing in the doorway, smiling. She said something, but I pointed at my ear and shrugged. She laughed silently. I handed her the picture, and her smile faded.

"I met your father," I said. "He misses you."

She whispered something, but didn't look at me.

"I brought something for you," I told her.

I took my bag off my back and took out a pencil and a pad of paper. She couldn't help but laugh at the solution and clapped her hands together. I heard the clap.

She took them from me and jotted down her words. She held up the pad to me.

"Why did he leave me here?"

I didn't want to tell her exactly what he had told me. What would be the point in telling her that her father had to drink himself to sleep each night? That her voices haunted his dreams? Her voices.

"Not one voice," he had whispered. "A pack of hungry wolves if they could talk. Deep, horrible. Evil. I understood every word, but I couldn't understand why they were coming from my little girl's mouth."

Whatever it was he was unable to stand, I could not hear it. Evidently, neither could she. But she'd saved my life. I wasn't afraid of her.

She invited me inside, and once again I saw a perfectly clean and alive home. Fully furnished, with working lights. It was not the empty, dark house I'd returned to with the two bandits.

"How is this real?" I asked her.

She shrugged and lied down on a sofa where the big guy's body had fallen just a few days ago. I sat down at her feet. The bald man's body had also disappeared from the trail, but she wouldn't know about that. I asked her where the big guy's body was.

She answered with her notepad. "They took him away."

I knew who she meant, but I didn't want to believe it. I asked her who she meant.

"The ones who live in the woods."

As I had feared, it was those supposedly-ethereal watchers, who could not be shot with a rifle, who had dragged a body from this very house. I found myself hoping that the young man had missed his mark after all, but I knew he hadn't. Only the best shots were given rifles. It was a useless hope, and I had to go forward with the assumption that the watchers could touch us, but we could not touch them. The nightmare of them swarming over me came to my mind, though so did my effort against them with the knife.

The vision I'd had that night of heroically cutting my way through them became an impossible fantasy. Still, I remembered that as frightening as they were, no-one had ever reported being attacked by one.

I talked to her for a while, and she answered my questions as best as she could, which wasn't very well at all. She couldn't understand any better than I or the others why the house acted the way it did. She didn't know why some could see or hear her, and others could not. I did learn, however, that she had killed neither of the men I came with that day. The big guy very simply dropped dead. The fantasy of a deadly touch I had conjured vanished.

She hadn't gone after the bald man either; she never strays far from the property. She was afraid of the woods. Afraid of the others. For a moment I believed the bald man must have been killed by them, and

they became much more dangerous to me. But I remembered they never approached the path. I remembered the knife lying just next to his body. It wouldn't make sense for them to discard it. It was surely his knife. He had killed himself. The same sounds that caused a healthy man to suddenly die from a heart attack had caused another man to slit his own throat. Directly or not, she had killed them. I told her so.

She nodded.

Sometimes she would forget and try to speak to me, and put her hand to her mouth to excuse herself. It was charming, and I tried not to imagine what she sounded like. The voices that repulsed her own father. That were a death-sentence to anyone else. A few times, I was conscious of the sounds of nature outside--the wind, the birds, and I'd remember that I wasn't truly deaf. My deafness to her felt like a thin barrier between myself and a nightmare I couldn't understand.

After a while I asked her if she wanted to see her father again. She nodded, but wrote something else.

"They won't let him come here."

I didn't ask who they were, but I knew she must have meant the others I had seen. I asked if she'd go to him instead and she scribbled her answer.

"He'll die if I leave."

I assumed she was still talking about them. They'd go to the camp and kill him? I asked her if I was safe on the trail and she nodded.

"If you want, I can bring him a message," I regretted the words as they came from my mouth. Why was I volunteering to be a courier?

Thankfully it didn't matter.

"They won't let you."

That was enough already. "Who are they?" I asked.

"Who are they?" I asked her. I had guesses, but didn't care to know why they took the bodies of dead men.

"I don't know," she wrote. She added: "When I talk to them, they don't answer me."

"Maybe they can't hear you," I offered.

"They can hear me," she asserted.

I believed her. Wouldn't that be reason enough to not answer her, though? No, that didn't make sense. If they feared her, why would they enter her home to dispose of bodies?

"Why do you think they don't they answer you?"

She looked away from me and stared at a radio sitting on top of the table.

"I think they hate me."

She wrote again.

"I can't leave."

I lied again. "He's too weak to come out here. But if you want, I'll give him a message."
She started to speak but stopped herself with a grin, and wrote her message to her father.

Like an animal, like a monster, he had told me. Not my girl, not a human at all.
So horrible, it'd make a father refuse his child.

She looked at me with hate in her eyes screamed something. Thank God I couldn't hear her.

Like an animal, like a monster, he had told me. Not my girl, not a human at all.
So horrible, it'd make a father despise his child.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" I shouted back at her. She glared at me. "Look, I brought you something else," I said.

I took my bag off my back and took out a pad and pencil. All her anger evaporated and she started laughing and clapped. I heard the claps.

She reached out and I gave them to her.

"You can't leave here?" I asked.

She didn't need to write anything for that question, she just shook her head.

"What happened to you?"

She did an exaggerated yawn. Why did I ever bring the paper and pencil?

She invited me inside, and once again, I saw a perfectly clean and living home. Not the empty, abandoned house I'd returned to with the two men.

"How are you doing this?" I asked.

She shrugged and lied down on a sofa where the big guy's body had fallen just a few days ago.

None of my questions would be answered.

stay with me.