

The old man in the window is probably scarier than he looks.

by Jake Hull

Every day you walked home from school the same exact way and everyday the old man sat in his window. He watched with eerie eyes from a house which was older than he was and likely predated every house in the neighborhood. You walked home the same way every single day because until bending around the corner and hurrying down the old man's long street your friends walked with you.

You enjoyed the company of your friends but as they broke off to walk their shorter routes home you came up to the corner. It loomed -- unavoidable.

The house squatted on the corner like some grotesque gargoyle, watching all the passers-by. The curtains of the top left window were always drawn, eyelids that never winked or blinked. The man sat in that window and sat like a slimy eyeball.

You never could stomach the way the old man looked at you or that he had installed himself up in that room to watch from behind the eternally frosted window. So you always walked on the opposite side of the street — just far enough for his face to ever remain indiscernible, dreadful. Really, you never liked the way you assumed he looked at you. It doesn't take much to convince yourself of someone else's ill will.

You asked about the old man in the house because as much as you

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knew that others suffered his oppressive stare it didn't change the feeling you had when you walked by his house. Truthfully that was the only evidence you had of his malfeasance — a feeling.

You felt like it was you that his eyes wanted to drink. You felt his wrinkled eyes, eyes that had spent too many years ogling pedestrians.

You shuttered when you felt the house grimace as you turned the corner every day and you cringed at the silent sound of dead-skin paint peeling off in long curls. You felt uneasy, unsafe, and unsettled; a kettle full of oil and mud boiled in your gut.

You had asked about the old man but not a single person had anything to say except your friends who only agreed that the creeping paranoia was mutual. Everyone avoided that man and his unfriendly house but for you there was no better, safer way to return home.

By the end of every day's march you nearly sprinted up your driveway; you were so gleeful to rejoin the comfortable aura of your home where the vinyl didn't slide or slew off the sides. Windows slept like children.

Your house was chestnut brown and the foster's hollies smelled like sweet citrus. And inside, eager walls wrapped their arms around you. The old oppressive house might be a mountainous hurdle to launch over every afternoon but your home would always be there.

As time went on you tried to ignore that evil house. You tried to ignore the man. You changed your clothes to keep up with the seasons; you even cut your hair and donned a big wool hat in winter. But you never could shake the specter of the stare, it's 'there'ness.

You were growing so weary of the leery old man in the window. Only one thing was worse than having to endure his wanton eyes --

the thought of being on his side of the street. You didn't want to know what that haze of a face really looked like. You were scared.

So every day after you parted with your friends you started rounding that corner a little faster and striding down the street with long steps. Your eyes followed your feet, head down, and marched for five blocks without looking up. You still felt him but now you didn't have to see the haggard house or the apparition in the window.

One day, a day that differed from all the rest, you decided you had to find another way home. You were fed up with everything: school, your lazy friends who never wanted to walk home with you, and most of all you wished to be rid of that old house's haunting presence.

There was a trail in the woods that sprouted about fifty yards before the corner. You hadn't been on that trail before but you figured it would slice through the neighborhood and spit you out somewhere closer to home, well past the old man. It was the thickest week of winter and you were in no mood to deal with unsolicited stares. Hurrying home was the only thought you had.

From the outside coldness bit at you; inside thirst's tiny teeth sank into your throat.

You pushed aside the branches at the threshold of the trail, like walking through some otherworldly gate. Although walking through the woods hovered just above the bottom on your "things you would tolerate with little coercion" list, that day the idea of a forest stroll catapulted well above scouring toilets or doing summer reading.

Emaciated elderly trees waved their old arms and scratched long whisper scratches against each other; it was more bearable than the imposing limbless house.

You crunched your way through the path, snapping twigs and stirring all the rotten leaves on the ground. You felt light-headed and more than a little anxious. Paranoia and misgivings tugged at you.

You spun your head around looking in all directions to see if you were being followed — you weren't but you thought you were, you felt you were. Your lungs were pushing and pulling the cold air in. Faster. You sped up, trying to bring your legs to your lungs' frenzied pace. The features of the trail were losing their edges and the wooded world became blurry and misleading. You blinked a few times and shook your head. You were so thirsty.

You forced a frenzied, frantic search in all directions to regain the trail. There were houses in the distance but you didn't recognize any of them from the back. You had walked the same route every day and you knew the faces of those houses, you could even recall the cold visage of the old man's house and the indistinct face that peered out from the top left window but you hadn't ever seen the houses from behind.

You were mapless in an oozing maze.

Then breathing betrayed you. The breaths were filling your chest with cement. Olympic pool-deep sucks of air shrank, shallow as the kiddy pool. Lungs full of dripping lead labored to drag ropes of fresh air in.

The stares of all those old trees were tightening a vice-grip around your ribcage -- turning, turning, and tightening the screw slowly.

The houses in the distance thawed like ice cubes, their blurry exteriors melting into the same image of an old peeling house. The top left window of each house swallowed the surrounding walls, tripling in size.

You ran — any direction would work.

The old man was staring out from the impossibly innumerable and identical windows; his hazy face, a sea of flesh-colored paint splashes, chased piston-precise after each lifted heel.

He squeezed around you and refused to let go. You wanted the warm walls of your cinnammon house to roll you up in the lushness of peace but instead you sank.

The old man would finally get more than just a look at you. He was close enough to devour every inch of skin.

You fell. Into a current of pale acrylics and water colors. Torrential.

Your body landed on the leaf covered canvas. Strewn.

Your hair fell around your head like a worn out paint brush. Frayed.

The easel world stilled. Your awareness jolted to life -- peaked -- and for a brief second though that you were almost enjoying the tranquility.

Good things hardly last though; someone poured a river of black paint all over this masterpiece of fear. You were unconscious.

That day when you decided to take that trail you had thought about all the things that had made your day miserable. You poured over the unfairly low results of the tests and papers that teachers gave back. You considered the general stupidity of your friends and imagined how you would be such a better friend if one of them was in your shoes. You even steamed about the blandness of lunch. But what you didn't think about, what never crossed your mind was the choice you made after lunch when you had decided you weren't in the mood to take your insulin.

Some days you just didn't feel like it and even though the doctor told you that it "could lead to any number of crippling complications", you were so frustrated with burdens that you never asked for, volunteered to bear.

When you passed out in the woods you would have frozen to death that night but you had been watched -- not that day but every day before.

The old man had watched you pass by every day for longer than counting matters. That day you didn't walk by and he noticed. He left his window seat and left his old corpse house to go looking for you; yes, he actually went looking for you. When he found you sprawled on the forest floor he picked you up so gently, so carefully. He took you to the hospital right away because even though he watched you, he didn't know a thing about you.

Your parents came immediately but the old man had already disappeared. He had returned home to his old unfriendly house without giving a name. Who knows what his name could have been? He certainly wouldn't have said, "Oh, I'm just the old man every one's scared of. The one in the awful house that frowns."

When you woke in the hospital you had too many questions for your parents and doctors to answer. But you were safe.

The first day back to school you walked home with your friends. You saw the trail and decided scrubbing mildew and scum would reclaim their positions on your list, high above visits to the forest gallery of hallucinations.

You came up to the house on the corner, the one that scared you more than anything else, and you careened deftly to the other side of the street where you could be far enough that the old man's face would always be indiscernible, wicked, menacing. There was only

one thing below 'walking through woods' on your list of activities to avoid: being any closer to the old man than across the street.

