

**[1]: A Forest by Another Name:**

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You wake – as you now always do – with a start, a rapid increase in heart rate, and a repetitive emotional motif you can only describe as a displacement from wherever and whenever you would call normal and safe. You are in a forest, just after dawn.

A crow on a nearby tree squawks. A horrific repeating and jarring insult to your ears that seems indicative of some previous memory of this place. You have been here before, you are sure of it! It is cold and damp, probably it is a morning dew, probably it is the chill of a cloudless night now spent. As you rise on creaking joints and muscles as stiff as frozen meat, you instinctively wipe the grime, drool and leaf litter from your mouth. You taste earth, slightly metallic and gritty on the tongue.

As last time, you've clearly been on the forest floor for hours – although previously you did not have the chill throughout your bones that now permeates you to your core and indicates perhaps days of unconsciousness within the fallen, tainted foliage of summers long-past. You lack physical energy and are in a state of rigor that can only be explained by the indefinite march of future into the present and the present into a boundless past – neither of which are in your power to alter.

A fine mist obscures your view to only a few meters. The trees seem to be too close, too

constricting, too sharp and angular. That shrieking crow that has been watching you flutters out into the haze and disappears, the vortices from its wings briefly creating a gaseous window a little further into the vagueness of brilliant white. As quickly as those vortices formed the mist reclaims the air forcing you into utter isolation. You stumble forward, the forest floor is soft with decay but sharp with stone. It seems to be unyielding and aggressive once the façade is stripped away. You feel the bacteria of natural decay entering the new wounds created by your shuffling, your gait as uncertain as your shreds of recollection. You had assumed you would be clothed, clearly not, for the mist seems to sting the flesh. Looking down you are reminded somehow of the past. You know you were here! It may just be the inexcusable behaviour of *déjà vu*, but could it be your long-term paranoia in some modern guise. Equal parts friend and tormenter. You remember... You were naked then too, vulnerable, exposed and as directionless as all others that are dragged out here. It is as if something else, something far stronger and far older is out there within the visual imprecision that surrounds you.

In the distance, in the misty white, its sound deadened as if by fresh snow, that damn crow squawks its orders to proceed. Should you follow? Tree after tree, infinite in its presentation of unidentifiable directions. Would a path towards at least some form of life be preferable to wandering lost in this repetitive nightmare? White upon white, tree upon tree. Even the bark of the trees is white. It is as inescapable as the black gashes upon the trees, which in themselves seem to mirror each painful slash of nature upon your skin. Periodic snow flakes start to fall. They are elegant, yet their symmetric beauty is rendered formless by the mists. A shiver takes hold of your body. Initially you would describe this as simply a reaction to cold, yet a certain feeling of premonition floods and clouds your rationality.

While it is a childish fear, the dark is just the absence of light. It is passive, it is inert and free of malice. Darkness can be subdued by action. But this forest isn't dark. It is light enough to see each new fragment of leaf, each new insect moving freely between your bloodied toes. It is light enough to be visibly conscious of your nakedness and the stones – that while perfectly avoidable – still seem to hinder and ruin. But unlike darkness, this mist is an active agent, it is potent, alive and vitriolic. It actively blocks and is malicious in its wilful effort to prevent you seeking safety. Nothing would subdue its act of imprisonment. It just moves, absorbing all effort and provides its own reaction to your ungainliness and your uncertainties. Holding your hand up, the mist curls around your fingers, embedding itself under your nails, in each crack and scar of your pitted, aged flesh and seemingly penetrating your muscles. It constricts and tenses not just your hand but your entire being. White upon white, damn tree upon damn tree.

Somewhere off to the left the crow squawks again. It is closer this time, but you cannot see anything but pure white. Undulations deceive you. Swirls of mist and vapour. You could be mistaken but you hear its wings and a slight creak of wood as it lands heavily. It squawks again somewhere on your right. Or is it now behind you? You continue forward using the trees to catch yourself as your feet alternate between slipping on mud and sliding on blood lubricated razor-like scree.

The crow, is it your enemy, your tormenter, your hunter? Or is it your friend, your mentor, your guide? The crow flutters to a branch to your immediate left. The mist has gathered but you can see the crow clearly now. You feel it looking at your nakedness, judgemental in its

sharpness and personified mannerisms. Yet it is clearly blind. It remains still but seems to point ahead with its innate, taxidermied rigidity. You feel thankful for its direction but apprehensive as to its motive, your comprehension of its actions stretched, distorted and deadened by this place. Your mind feels slowed and as cloudy as your vision. The featurelessness of the forest providing no marker, no starting point to aid to your cognition.

Ahead of you the mist is thick, unpassable, treacle like and insipid. The white of the air now punctuates the black of the forest floor. It accentuates the blackness, highlighting that this world is binary and discrete despite being endless, indefinite and formless in its expanse. The crow, silent, unmoving provides no comfort, no direction, no feeling of life other than yourself. It provides no resolution to your open question of if it is friend or foe, no clarity as to if you are being guided or hunted by it. Without eyes it seems to stare into you, forcing a message of despair to enter your mind despite its stuffed and posed conduct. The message is clear and simple. It is easy to understand even as this place worms its way into your mind, preventing you from thinking rationally, logically. You are alone.

Up ahead, still too clouded to tell, you see a slight change of colour. Something darker, something out of context, something altogether different from the forest. As you edge closer – a stone working its way into your cracked and shredded heel – you make out a shape you ordinarily would have been happy to see. It looks like another person? Sitting, perhaps? But... Perhaps it is nothing?

No... Despite the mist, it becomes slightly clearer. Is it a new enemy, a new tormenter, a new hunter?

Yes, an arm, a head, the silhouetted outline of an adult. Your saviour, your rescuer? A friend in this place of utter isolation? You step forward, the mist closing behind you, obscuring your feet and the trees about you. It cuts you off from the crow, your guide, your mentor. It is a woman, tall, naked, old, decayed, dead. Her throne in this place is simply her own mud encrusted haunches, yet the mist and the forest itself seems to support her weight.

You stand motionless, the only sound being the wind within distant, leafless Birch trees. You become utterly conscious of your own breathing, your own heart thudding, your body shivering. You try to edge backward, attempting to get back to the crow, back to safety, out of this forest of nightmares incarnate. The decay of the woman's body stings your eyes, the flesh is open, angry and red under layers of dirt and putrid decomposition. Her joints angular, broken, unnatural, and ridged. The flesh seems punctuated and split by tendrils, roots and branches as wizened as your imagination of her death.

Yet she seems strained and contorted as if by muscles that still retain life. She looks taxidermied or embalmed but in a low-quality sort of manner. She is posed with her chin looking towards a reddened area of wet long-dead leaves.

You try again to move backward, your vision fixed upon the decay of humanity before you. The mist seems to prevent you moving, it yields only slightly, seeming to prefer to flow between you and the dead woman than let you move physically. But... as the mist starts to obscure the horror sat ridged and decaying before you, the woman moves her head. She stares at you like knives into your heart. The chill of the forest, of the mist becomes a distant

memory as her eyes bore into you. Your soul seems to chill and freeze, your heart rendered as ineffective and as lifeless as hers. You stand motionless, contorted by your own fear. There is no sound, there is no motion in the mist and time becomes an irrelevance. The eyes – as dark as the decay of the forest floor – prevent your flight, hold you ridged, trapping you in an isolation deeper than the mist ever could. The brilliance of the whites of those eyes rips at the blackness of the pupils. There are no longer shades of grey, subtleties of choice. Her stare distils all down to the simplest of constructs. Black versus white, darkness versus the light. Free will becomes purified into action versus inaction. You yearn for the freedom of that mist again. You yearn to be free of her eyes, of the putrifaction that she seems to be filling you with. You cannot look away as you too become a taxidermied manikin, an empty vessel, an honorarium to a life now gone.

The mist gathers about the dead, unspeaking body before you. It obscures the feet that have become necrotic and as black as the mud. It removes some of the grim visual detail from the cadaverous apparition before you. Could it be that the mist is your saviour, your friend, your guide? Or is this entire place, the woman, the mist, the crow, all to entrap you within a hallucination of unbounded, infinite horror and directionless torment in equal measure?

While your eyes are still locked to hers, you perceive a change. Not a change of physical ability or visibility of this world, but a change in the demeanour of death. She smiles, toothless, wide and silent, and with it all means or hopes of escape are cut. You are solidified. Your choice of action versus inaction now settled.

There is no longer the comfort that one feels from one's own breath or heartbeat. The silence,

her stare, the mist become new tombs, new walls of isolation. Somehow the forest becomes brighter, light scattering off the water vapour and snow. It becomes a renewed blockage to your vision, more intense, more vitriolic and far more vapid than before. As the light obscures the woman, your eyes becoming useless as cells become saturated, her stare still rooting you to the spot, her smile and eyes of pure hatred become the last things you see. Both become etched into your vision by the light of the forest and the uniformity of white. You try, with all remaining bodily spirit to move. In any direction, in any time and with all remaining cognition. But the forest itself is now your tomb.

What can you do? You cannot move. You cannot penetrate the forest using any action you can muster. You feel weak and drained, yet you feel bloated as if by the gases of decomposition. You feel no beat within your chest and no air passes your stained lips. You slump towards the floor, supporting yourself with the inactive skeletal geometry of your haunches and the dry, flaked scales of a nearby tree. You strain against gravity to get back up, but you cannot and succeed in only intensifying the tension and elastic tightness of your now lifeless form.

Pain rips into your consciousness, shredding your once lucid mind. Yet... you feel new life beginning. It worms its way from your memory outward following the vessels, capillaries and arteries that once carried your life. It breaks the confines of your flesh, ripping, splitting, tearing its way out of your skin. You feel it enter the darkness of the forest floor. You taste earth, slightly metallic and gritty on the tongue. A memory enters the remains of your perception, a memory of a single flower, small, delicate and pure. Its petals white and clean, brushed by light breeze, a kiss upon the flower's beauty.

All becomes quiet and time becomes featureless. The light of the forest diminishes as it yields into a bitter, cold unforgiving and endless night. In the distance, its sound deadened by the forest about you, the solitary squawk of the crow reaches your ears, its tone high and piercing in a single order. It is calling forth new visitors to the forest you now own.

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