

## Survivors

By Larry Griffin

Shana put some leftover chicken cutlets and biscuits in a Tupperware container and took it out behind the apartment complex to the woods. The homeless folk had been out there a few days. The apartment complex had been warning everyone to lock their doors. But there was a jittery energy in Shana when things were going wrong. Taking the food out to them gave her something else to focus on right now.

The sky overhead was overcast and the wind kept prickling at her arms. She saw the campsite up ahead, the men sitting or kneeling, smoking cigarettes. All of them with neon green and blue tents and heavy blankets. Some dogs were sitting around, tongues out. One guy said, “That for us?”

“It is.” She put her hands with the tupperware in them out, knelt down, placed them ritualistically on the ground in the middle of their circle. There were four of them there now, one fat and one very skinny and the other two more average body types. They were bundled in worn-looking jackets and vests.

One of them, stocky with bristly brown beard stubble, said, “Thank you kindly.”

“No problem. Might be joining you soon, after we get kicked out.” She rubbed her upper arm.

The guy who’d spoken first crinkled his brow, his mouth turning down. “You? Really? Nah.”

“Yup. We can’t make rent. My parents are dead and my boyfriend’s estranged from his. Nowhere else to go, I’m afraid.”

“Well, there’s room for everyone.”

She let out a laugh that turned into a sigh. “Have you all been holding up alright?”

The fat guy shrugged. “We make do.”

“Yeah,” the skinny guy said, his voice wavering, on edge. “Except for the you know what...”

There was a glimmer in the fat guy’s eyes, something hardened and secretive. “She doesn’t wanna hear that.”

Shana cocked her eyebrow. “I don’t?”

One of the average looking guys sighed. “A few of us have disappeared. One guy turned up dead.”

Shana felt her arm hairs standing on edge. “Fuck.”

“Yeah. Sick stuff. And there’s been some of us heard or seen some weird shit in the night. And not just here, but... you know, anywhere we’d settle. Anywhere we go.”

“The woods.”

“Yeah. We don’t know, though. Maybe they’re just going away.”

“Could be.” The fat guy didn’t sound convinced.

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There was nothing to do but wait out the clock. They had two weeks to move out. Austin’s job as a mechanic was gone, just budget cuts, the company had shrugged. Shana had been working as a secretary at the real estate place, and they wouldn’t give her a raise.

Shana had always been poor. She’d taken to stealing bread and snacks from the corner store by age eight. Her father was dead of a liver problem by the time she formed memories, and her mother chain-smoked after work in their cramped kitchen area until it caught up with her when Shana was 20, the asthmatic, rattling croak of her breathing finally giving out, died at the kitchen table on a Monday around 5 p.m. She had been a decent mother, supportive and sturdy, if terse and without humor. Shana cried at her funeral but she’d already been smoking herself for a few years by that point.

Shana had never had time to have ambition in any lofty sense. It had always been grueling shit job after grueling shit job. Never enough savings. All of it had instilled in her a fiery, hardening cocoon of distrust of authority. She bristled at her bosses by reflex, didn't laugh at their jokes or join everyone else for lunch, and somehow it hadn't endeared her to the majority of jobs she'd ever had. Sometimes she felt like there was a barrier up between her and most of the world, but she didn't know how to take it down. She felt at peace when she walked, particularly among the trees, when the smells of pines and raw earth could grace her senses. She liked to smoke while she walked. The nicotine and the movement of her legs made the rhythm that washed away all the frustrations of the world, at least for a while.

On a Tuesday afternoon after work, she walked to pick up the groceries. On the way back, coming up to an alley between a dusty looking pawn shop and the vacant shell of an old vacuum repair place, she heard the sounds of struggle, gruff male cries and some kind of physical altercation. The noises were coming from deeper in the alley. She slowed her pace and worried that the pounding of her heart would draw attention to her, stood there frozen for a moment. But she couldn't just hang in front of the pawn shop. She started to walk and tried to make it look normal.

What was going on in the alley made her stop again.

The man in the alley was not totally *there*. She could sort of see through the figure like it was smoke fading in the sun. The attacker wore a brown windbreaker and old khakis and boots stained with mud. It was stabbing a vagrant with scruffy facial hair, and the vagrant was making strained, gurgling whimpering noises, was covered in slick crimson blood all the way down his torso. The attacker was moving its arm frenetic and consistent like a machine, the wet knife sounds interspersed with the vagrant's tortured groans and pleas. The blood on the concrete was splattered in a way that looked like butterfly wings – that detail bore into Shana's mind.

She let out a ragged gasp and the figure, he or it or whatever it was, turned to her. Its face was wrong, nose was too low, mouth too long, eyes small and beady, oversized pulsating black pupils, no whites. It let the vagrant drop to the pavement and started to walk toward Shana. She

felt her heart leap in her throat and started to run, dropping the bag she held, oranges and produce and a box of cigarettes falling, rolling on the ground. Her converse slapped the pavement for the next four blocks toward home. The cigarette fell from her mouth and she trampled over it, leaving black soot and embers smoldering on the pavement. She could hear the ragged animal panting of the man or thing behind her, could smell the nasty scent of it, like burnt food, sweet but repulsive.

But when she got to the final block and a half, her apartment door visible, she finally turned her head and there was no one there anymore.

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She came in breathing hard and slammed the door. Austin had been sitting on the couch scrolling on his laptop. His face was drawn in the sober scowl he got when he was focused on a problem. When she slammed the door, he looked up with wide eyes. “Hey, babe – whoa. Everything alright?”

Breathing hard, she held up a hand. She fumbled in her purse for her phone with clammy, shaking hands and dialed 911, speaking too fast. The operator sounded droll, told her they’d take care of it.

Austin had stood up by then, wide eyed. She told him what had happened. He got up and was holding her by the end of it. She leaned into him. She didn’t usually do this kind of thing, let men take care of her. But she felt like the world had become unhinged.

Austin said, “Are you alright?”

“I think so. I am now. So you really haven’t been hearing anything at night? Seeing anything?” Because Shana had been. When she’d wake up at 4 a.m., throat dry and in need of water, this becoming a habit these days, she’d see *something* out the window. A vague, shadowy shape of a man or something close to one. In the sunlight, hours later, she’d convince herself it

was just her sleep-blurred eyes perceiving a tree or a bush. But there was a primal, deep part of her brain that knew that wasn't true.

“Nah. I've been fuckin' exhausted. My head hits the pillow and I'm gone.”

“I know, baby.”

Really, she kept stopping herself when she thought of telling him how it had been growing up in this town. People had always disappeared here. This had been a constant going back to her childhood. Disappearances and random deaths. Sometimes the details would come out, bloody things, horrible ways people were killed. Just drifters, the cops said. But Shana couldn't imagine just any random drifters doing those kinds of things. As a child wandering those streets, stolen bread rolls and candy in her pockets, she'd see things in the woods or in the vacant alleys, things she'd convinced herself for years were just tricks of the light. It was hard to explain what it was - a sort of peeling-back of a curtain, another world beneath their own that was more sinister.

She didn't want to go down there. But she felt like she was always close. Once at around age nine or ten, she'd been on the streets after school killing time. She didn't like going home because her mother would always be there smoking up a storm in front of old *Andy Griffith* reruns or game shows, sometimes alternating that with talking to old high school friends on the phone. The house by the dinner hour would become a carnival of the sounds of canned old-timey TV voices, the smell of burning, the sound of her mother's nostalgic sobbing on the phone.

So she liked to walk the streets then. She'd go to the library or to the mall where she could usually nab a cheap pizza slice. Or she would just walk by the woods and watch for critters, squirrels or raccoons or even deer, hoping to meet their eyes, understand how life was for them. It was all just killing time.

She was walking by a particularly desolate stretch of woods, with the only thing to the other side of her a barren rise of concrete where the cars on the highway screamed past six feet up, no exits for another half mile. So it was just her and the woods. The trees formed a kind of nature-cathedral where the silence seemed to have presence. There were some occasional twitters

of birds and crunchings of twigs, which were gone as fast as they came, leaving echoes. Then there was the shape, a black blur, seemingly detached from the world, like it was drawn hastily over the trees and the Earth. It had come into her field of vision just for a moment and was gone. It had been a quick run back to the house that day. She got the sense she'd been too close to something that day, got the sense of what was in the dark of the world.

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Austin was going to the career center every day and would interview for various cashier jobs, store clerks for gas stations, janitorial positions, anything. He'd applied for a writing job, editing a mid-size online magazine, but they were still interviewing other candidates, were taking their time. He'd always written as a hobby, had said he wanted to do it professionally, but the mechanic job had paid better. He'd never really been unemployed before and there was an edge to him now, something curdled and defensive. But even his rage was measured and polite. He never took it out on anyone. It was only really visible if you knew him like she did, if you saw the furrowed brow, the way he gripped the steering wheel in the car. And she couldn't figure out how to comfort him, because they were both mired in all of it, the savagery of the economy, chin-deep.

Shana went with him to the center on her day off. She sat in the lobby while he filled out various applications, a Clorox smell lingering behind her nose, with the annoyingly bland eggshell colored walls and the light muzak playing over a tinny, outdated speaker. The place was full of people, all of them looking shrunken, huddled. One woman kept coughing. Another woman had a baby in a carriage on the seat next to her, babbling softly. All the noises together were making Shana's eyes itch in their sockets, making goosebumps on her skin.

She got up and paced and went into the bathroom as an excuse to move. She looked in the bathroom mirror, saw the bags under her eyes. And there was something else there, too, the thing only vaguely man-shaped, making odd, strangled breathing noises like a dog with a

breathing problem. It had glowering black eyes and was only kind of there, but moving closer, a predator on some other realm and plane, and it was there for a second and then gone like smoke dissipating.

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When they moved out, they took their couch and some of their other things to a storage unit, where a buddy of Austin's had given them a deal on the price. As they drove, Shana watched the city roll by, the cracked sidewalks giving way to tufts of grass like nature was reclaiming the ruins, the homeless milling about, towing rusted shopping carts, the wheels making clanging metallic noises. The cars passing by them were old junkers full of scrapes and dents, sometimes with windows covered in tarp and duct tape. Shana and Austin drove down the main road, past storefronts with some of the places emptied and full of dust, big box stores with gleaming rows and rows of vehicles and carts, patchy and bleached grassy fields in the late summer sun.

They had an agreement to stay on Shana's friend Randi's fold-out couch in her spare room for a few days. Randi worked as a nurse, was always gone anyway. Shana would walk the carpet in the early morning while her coffee brewed, feeling the soft fabric between her bare toes. Austin was always gone looking for work. He'd come back in the early evening with the reek of desperation. He didn't talk to her enough anymore. She went to work and went home, whole days disappearing as if she'd been hypnotized, pockets of memory rendered smooth and ineffectual with the repetition of her desk job.

Randi spent her nights on the couch watching *CSI*, and when Shana joined her, Randi would talk about finicky patients and annoying interactions at work. They would talk occasionally about their old days in high school, always holing up in the bathroom between classes with cigarettes, gossiping about boys and what they'd do with endless money or time. Back in those days they'd always just assumed things would turn out excellently and that they'd

have everything they needed, and now, sitting opposite one another on Randi's couch, there was the definite stench of failure, a pall that neither of them needed to mention.

Even this would be temporary. Randi had been honest; they had to be out in two weeks because her mother and stepfather were coming and needed the spare room. Shana told her that was fine, but there was a dread in her like a sinkhole, deeper and wider by the day.

To escape Randi's pitying gaze one of these aimless nights, she walked to the gas station up the block for some cigarettes and beer and a pack of chips. She exited the building and the night was lit by the anemic blue overhead lights of the station, flickering and twitching, showing all the old stains and the wear and tear of the stucco and the cracks in the pavement, the dead cigarette butts, the shards of glass reflecting the lights like demented little mirrors. The man approached her tentatively. It was one of the guys from the encampment before. His beard had grown out but his eyes were gaunt, and he looked thinner.

"Hey, man. You alright?" She slowed her gait.

"Yeah. I mean, you know. Relatively."

They'd been scattered from their previous camp at the complex for a few days. He'd found the body, his buddy's chest ripped open. Blood and guts everywhere, ribcage exposed. Like he'd been gored by something. "I'm scared," he said.

"You think there's some... like, a killer?" Shana felt the handles of the plastic bag she held digging into the insides of her fingers, the weight of the beer sagging close to the pavement.

"It's *something*. Something crazy, you know? We'd see things out there. Stuff that didn't seem really real."

Shana felt a chill up her spine and it went through all of her like an electric shock. She licked her lips, remembering some of the things she'd seen. "I think I've seen it, too."

"There's nowhere really to run from it. We got nowhere to go but outside. And it's *outside*."

"Are you going to be OK?"

“Maybe. Can’t really sleep too well. Maybe I’ll try and go real far out of town. Maybe just find somewhere big and bright and open.”

#

She told Austin what the guy had told her, about the murdered man. Austin said, “Shit, baby. You knew this guy?”

“I met him the one time, anyway. When I took them the food.”

“And you think there’s something out there?”

“I mean, maybe? I’ve been seeing things.” She felt dizzy and tired admitting this. She felt a stab of fear about how he’d look at her. There was always the slight judgment, the disbelief, even if he tried to tell her he believed her. At the end of the day he was a practical man. An atheist in the strictest sense, believing nothing he couldn’t see.

“I thought you said you’d get something for that.” If there was judgment there, it was poisoned with concern.

She shrugged. “It’s more than just that.”

He paused for a little while. He told her the writing job wanted him to drive out to the next city where they were located, to really spend a few days working with them and seeing how it went. He said they’d pay for a hotel room for both of them for that time. “And I know you’re still trying at your job...”

She spoke almost too quick, the want to get out of that place a powerful rush of fire in her. “No, they’re never going to give me that fucking raise. We can go.”

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Two days later, they set out to drive to the city. The fields unfolded before them. Great expanses of grass and far-gone trees with their branches hanging low as if weighed down by

dumbbells. The clouds moved in, bulbous bruised shades, awful weighted humidity, lightning flashing blinding-white against the mass of darkening gray. Shana allowed herself to fall asleep a little, leaning back against the seat, and the world became a pleasant soft fuzz for a while. She woke and the whole sky was a great swathe of angry, tempestuous indigo, so blue it was almost black, so vivid it hurt to look at, and it took her a moment of sitting in that great shade to realize they were in a storm. There was a rumbling all around them, and then the water started to come in big heaving goblets. Soon the sound of the torrent had filled the whole car, a raucous rattling and pounding against the roof and the windshield, like the fists of giants.

Through the smog of it all she could see a figure huddling under a rusted bus stop. She squinted and saw it was the homeless man from before. She told Austin to stop the car. He looked at her with his face full of concern and asked why. She said she recognized the man at the bus stop, and they should help. Austin looked at the pitiable amount of space they had with their boxes of books and appliances and bathroom things cluttering the back seat. He said baby, I don't think we have the time. Shana stared him down. She said, we need to do this. Austin looked at her like she was crazy, but he shook his head, swore, swerved the car around in the rain, a dangerous U-turn, wheels screaming against the slick black road. He pulled up to the bus stop. The man there came into focus. He had wide eyes. He looked even more haggard than the last time she'd seen him just a few days prior.

She got out of the car and was immediately drenched, not even two steps out. The sky was a swirling mass of blacks and blues and cracks of lightning. The loudness of the world startled her. And there in the woods she could see a *presence*. It was indistinct at first, seemingly a collection of wisps of smoke. As it came closer it took human form. It was the figure from the alley, its little beady eyes fuming, wide mouth twisted like cracks in a sidewalk. It brandished the knife, sparkling like diamonds as the rain hit the blade. She could still sort of see through it, could see the angry sky and the dark clustered green of trees. Up close she smelled the burnt-food smell again. He jumped toward them and Shana pushed the homeless guy away. The see-through figure knocked her to the ground. She felt squishy mud slick on her back, the rain on her

legs and her shoulders. The figure's face was even more alien up close, with a sweaty sheen to its skin, its mouth stretching almost all the way across its skull, its mouth a toothless black hole. It breathed and she smelled a scent that she associated with old tombstones, dry and mildewy. The knife was inching closer. She felt an existential terror, wanted nothing else in the world but for that knife not to touch her, sensing something in its sharp point that was not of the world. But she wasn't strong enough to push the figure off.

The knife made contact. Razor-sharp heat against her skin. She felt blood trickling down her torso. The thing began to press down harder and she cried out against the thunder and the storm.

There was some commotion above her, unseen. The homeless man and Austin both threw themselves on the shape on top of her, throwing it off. She was suddenly unburdened, just lying there in the mud, rain still hitting her. Austin appeared over her. He extended a hand, pulling her to her feet.

The figure was still there, breathing hard from its wide, irregular-shaped mouth. It began to lope toward them again. The knife, wet and dripping with Shana's blood, was out in front of it. It swiped the knife and caught Austin on the arm, and he cried, fell back. There was more blood, him holding his arm out, red dripping in the rain.

The homeless man lunged for the figure, grappled with it. The figure swiped the knife. The homeless man bent back, avoiding the blade. Austin was struggling to his feet, bleeding. Shana took a breath and lunged for the figure, shoving, putting all her weight into it, shoving with her palms and hitting its chest, her hands coming back slime-coated and muddy. It felt like she was touching a water balloon about to burst, wet and not totally solid. The figure let out a grunt of surprise and fell back, flailing on the ground, confused and in whatever passed for pain for this thing.

Austin told Shana and the homeless guy to get in the car, the three of them running, scrambling, Austin's hands wet and trembling trying to turn the key in the ignition. As they drove, they could see the figure running after them. It was fast, legs moving like a cheetah,

seeming to glide. Austin put his foot on the pedal, all the way down, and they lost it after a while, and all that was behind them was the raging storm.

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The homeless man's name was Mack. She had seen him around town a few times since they arrived, and they had exchanged phone numbers. Today she met him in the shelter of the awning by the bakery when it rained, and they sat on the bench and watched the rain sluice down off the awning, pooling in the gutters. He said he was looking for jobs.

“Good. That’s awesome, man.”

“How’re you all doing these days?”

She sighed. “Good. Austin’s doing his writing thing. I’m doing grocery deliveries and stuff for now...”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. There was the unspoken thing between them. Finally, she brought it up: “Have you been seeing *it* at all?”

Mack shuddered at the thought. “Uh, sometimes I hear it. I just keep moving. I try and stay at the shelter when I can.”

“I hope you can get away from it.”

“What d’you think it *was*?”

Shana leaned her head back, enjoyed the cool air that the storm had brought along, like a hitchhiker of the weather system. “I don’t know if we’ll ever *know*. It was from some other place and it was hungry. It took whatever it could get.”

Mack let out an uneasy chuckle. “Tenacity. I guess that’s what it takes.”

She felt a great heaviness in her bones, felt the ache of helping move their things and of trying to get used to the new bed they’d bought, its contours and creases still unfamiliar. But she was sleeping a little easier.

She didn't want to say that she still saw the thing outside her window sometimes. She was prone to waking up at 3 or 4 a.m., getting water, lingering in the kitchen. It was just in the night that she'd get the inkling, curious and insane, to open the door. She'd step outside, bare feet on the concrete, the bumps pressing into her flesh. And out there she could see the shape, indistinct then, melding with the milky dark, but there with its hate-filled bizarre eyes, angry that it could not come closer. She would close the door and go back to bed.

There was another storm on the horizon, the sky turning a venomous shade of obsidian, the clouds jagged gray streaks like a child's crayon contours. The air had a giddy humidity to it and there were the occasional groaning thunderbooms far off. Mack said he had to go. She didn't ask where and he didn't offer. And after a while she didn't see him anymore.

End.