

STALKED

Stanton looked down. Stanton coughed, spat and vomited some more. After several seconds he pushed down with his hands on the rim of the bowl and lifted his head. He could vaguely make out his features in the underside of the toilet seat. How appropriate he thought. He daren't think what a mirror would show. After flushing the remains of his only meal in three days down the drain he staggered to the sink and doused his head in cold water.

His only meal in three days. Stanton hadn't felt like himself for nearly a week now. Things had changed so much in such a very short time. It just wasn't like living anymore, not since not since, he tried to remember... not since... "DAMN"! Stanton thumped the smooth, green porcelain bowl and the pedestal shifted slightly from the wall. Why was this happening? Not a day's sick leave in seven years. The boss had said to 'take as much time as you need'. That was Monday, the day after his girlfriend had told him to 'stuff the relationship and you know why'! He didn't. On Wednesday he received the polite letter from work announcing the 'regretful decision to let you go'. Thursday had been the last time he had spoken to his best friend. In fact it was the last time he had spoken to anybody. Today was Friday and now now all he had was this virus or whatever it was. He had been sleeping almost solidly during the day, experiencing the most vivid nightmares he could ever have imagined and yet on waking he could not remember for the life of him. What had happened to leave him like this. He couldn't even eat, although to be honest this was the first time he had felt any hunger.

"you know why!". What happened? Stanton tried to remember again. It was the party, just another normal party. Nothing special. What happened? His friends were there. They were drinking, he was drinking. No. He was driving, no alcohol. What happened? He held his head. Why couldn't he remember? His girlfriend was there. They were talking, laughing. His friends, talking, laughing. What happened? She was there. He remembered now. She was there. He had left the party to walk in the garden. It was cold. She was there.

She was there. He had seen her eyes through the glass doors that led to the patio. Just her eyes. A pair of emeralds staring back into the room. Staring at him. He had followed them. Why? The party inside was warm. The garden was cold. *His friends, talking, laughing.* Why did he leave them? Those eyes, green gems shining through the glass, no reflection. Follow me. He had followed.

Those eyes. Beyond the patio, they beckoned. The grass was damp. The suede on his shoes darkened. The farther he went, the longer the grass, clutching at his ankles, pulling him on. Green tendrils urged him towards those green eyes. The lights and noise of the party receded. Stanton had walked on through centuries, a millennium from his friends, *talking, laughing.* Finally there. The gems were just inches from his own eyes. Out of the dark stepped a shadow, a beautiful shadow. Pale white hands caressed his cheeks, then gently pulled him towards full red lips, beautiful red lips, blood red lips.

Beautiful red lips. Stanton felt the breath drawn out of him. His girlfriend had been there, *talking laughing.* Now she was gone. Now these lips, *blood red lips.* Grass twines held his feet to the ground while vines of imagination held him tighter and tighter in a swirling mist of ecstasy. His eyes closed as he succumbed to this silent seducer. *His friends, talking ... his girlfriend, laughing.... emeralds.... those eyes ... centuries those eyes a beautiful shadow blood red lips she was gone.*

She was gone. They were all gone. Stanton had opened his eyes and immediately shut them as the sun burnt his pupils. Shielding his eyes with his arm, he had sat up. The bed of nettles was flattened neatly around him, evidence of his long sleep. *She was gone.* His legs, weakened, crumpled beneath him as he had tried to stagger to his feet. He clutched at his head. That was when the headaches had started. He tried again, stumbled, struggled, started to regain his balance. He squinted at the house and made the slow way back.

They were all gone. He had found the patio door open but the house was empty. Evidence of the party was everywhere, bottles strewn about, stale food growing like mould from the carpet. Only the absence

of people defied the existence of what had been. *He clutched at his head.* He hadn't been drinking. Stanton felt his pocket. The keys were still there. He drove home, quickly.

Stale food growing like mould from the carpet. He had been relieved to get home. Two disprins made for a late breakfast or early lunch and then he had put himself to bed. He slept and slept and dreamed. At first the dream was like any other, a vaguely pleasant re-telling of recent events. At least he was assuming the events had happened. Maybe there was no party. Maybe it was all a dream. Maybe the virus was giving him a fever. Maybe he would wake up tomorrow on the other side of the tunnel. Maybe he would go to work as before. Maybe he would see his friends, his girlfriend in the evening. Maybe he just had to go through one more day of nightmares and everything would be OK. Maybe.

Meanwhile, he was drifting off to sleep again and the dream was inevitably about to repeat again. *Just another normal party.* There was a lot of smoke. Faces he knew would drift past him and then fade in to the haze again. They were friends of his, at least they had been, yet he could scarcely recognise them. The dream was distorting them, twisting their features into things grotesque. They were like demons. *His friends, talking, laughing.* The laughs were mocking him, driving him from the room, driving him out through the patio doors and in to the garden. As he stepped through, the demons within disappeared and his friends were there again, *talking, laughing.* He wanted to be back with them, desperately wanted to belong. The door was shut fast. Outside it was icy cold, the wind whistling around his ears as he tried to listen to the laughter inside, to pretend he was a part of it. The wind howled at him, the howls of laughter ignored him. The wind cried and screamed in his ears as the laughter screamed beyond his reach, beyond his control. Now the wind was laughing at him and the howling was on the inside. The wind laughed and screamed and screamed and howled. Inside it seemed to echo as his friends screamed and screamed and howled and screamed. *Beyond his control.* Something was happening in there. Stanton couldn't help. His fists slammed in vain against the glazing. He screwed his eyes up to see inside. The smoke in the room was heavier than ever. A face would appear, filled with terror then disappear from view. Next would be a demon with a hideous visage of blood lust. They were dying. What had he done? What *had* he done? His girlfriend's face pressed against the glass, against his own face, pleading, crying, blaming. *She was gone.*

She was gone. Sometimes the dream would stop there and he would wake sobbing. His tears mixed freely with the sweat that oozed from every pore in his body. Sometimes the dream continued. *She was gone.* She was there, with him in the garden. He floated backwards from the window. Soon it was out of sight. Time slowed. He drifted around to face the eyes, the emerald eyes. He felt calm again. *Pale white hands caressed him.* He forgot the horror behind him. Just for now it didn't matter. He didn't need them anymore. All he needed were the emerald eyes and they were there, reassuring him, pulling him in. *Beautiful red lips, blood red lips.* All he needed.

All he needed. Stanton awoke. He felt strangely contented. The eyes were still with him, looking down at him from the ceiling. He could forget the illness, his job, his friends. None of them mattered. Something within him begged to differ. He leapt from bed and stumbled to the bathroom. Once there, he barely managed to lift the seat before vomiting heavily into the toilet.

Stanton coughed, spat and vomited some more. This was madness. He couldn't lock himself away any more. Returning to his bedroom, he brushed aside the curtains and looked out. Night had already fallen. Again. He had missed another day but he needed air. He had to get out of the house. He pulled some clothes on, picked up his keys and opened the door to the outside world. Although he had been shivering in bed, the air outside felt warm, at least it didn't feel cold. He didn't bother with a coat.

He didn't bother with a coat. As he walked toward the park, reality momentarily touched him as an icy wind blew across his face. Stanton pulled his shirt collar up in a vain attempt to keep the chill from his neck. The crunch of snow beneath his feet sounded like the crushing of small bones beneath the boots of some giant demon. A flash of nightmare interrupted his vision, *emerald eyes.*

The crushing of small bones. There was movement up ahead. He thought there was movement ahead. The stars were so bright tonight. He squinted. Someone was there. No. Where were they? He was sure they were there. Iced vapour blew from his mouth as his breathing got deeper and deeper. Stanton's heart started to pound. His head started throbbing again. There was the figure, dark against the starlight, on the other side of the trees. Almost waiting.

Almost waiting. Stanton started to run. Faster and faster. The nightmares attacked him again, *emerald eyes*. Suddenly he felt like a raven, black as the night, flying with the wind, flying low, flying towards more and more trees.

Flying with the wind. The attack came. It was so fast. Everything was a blur. Stanton could hardly control what he was doing. Every move was instinct. Control had gone and he succumbed to fate. There was almost no pain. It was a strange feeling, a numbness. The stars seemed to dim briefly. The grey clouds were washed with red. Blood started to run down Stanton's face. He could taste the blood in his mouth, stronger and stronger, flooding his throat, drowning out the taste of the vomit. Now it started to taste sweet like wine just opened. More followed, it flowed, it gushed, ever more and more then nothing.

Sweet like wine. Stanton looked down at the limp body in his arms. The two punctures stood out on the girls neck where his fangs had broken the soft skin. The nightmares were now reality. He had made his first kill.

The End

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