

Peripherals
By Kyle Holmquist

"You just have to tell yourself it isn't there," Marissa said for the fourth time. Her footsteps slapped the carpet - she was pacing across the living room now.

"Yeah, well that's kinda hard when I see it every time I'm alone..." Ethan replied, his voice filled with resignation as he re-adjusted his position on the couch.

"Well, you never really see it, right? Isn't it always in the corner of your eye or whatever?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"I keep telling you," Marissa moaned in exasperation. "From what I've learned, that's just like, a trick of your mind, you know? It might even be something with your eyes."

"Yeah, maybe..."

"You need to see an optometrist - it could be floaters! You should really get it checked out." She stopped pacing and moved towards him, looking him in the eyes.

"Right," he said. "You taking off now?"

"Yeah baby, I'm sorry to leave you alone, but I have class tonight." She kissed him on the forehead.

"Don't think too much about this stuff, okay? It'll make you crazy." She walked to the door and he heard it shut behind her, then the slide-click of the deadbolt as she locked it.

Marissa's scent lingered behind for a moment as Ethan sat on the couch, staring at nothing. He stayed there for a few minutes as thoughts coursed through his mind, flowing from one momentary daydream to the next.

"Right," Ethan said aloud to himself as the reveries dried up and staled like bad conversation. He stretched his shoulders until he heard two familiar pops and stood up. He found himself next in the kitchen, staring at an open cabinet and felt the greedy chewing of his empty stomach as it gurgled its demands.

"Leftovers?" he queried the endless pit. It gurgled again in response and Ethan, taking this as a sign, proceeded to open the refrigerator. Yellow light spilled from the open door as a faint chill swept the hair on top of his bare toes. He bent down and peered inside. Chicken, broccoli, and rice sat behind the blurred malaise of plasticware. A brown paper bag sat, its top rolled, its bottom lumpy and sagging. "CARNE" was written in black marker, just above the giant grease stain that dominated a quarter of the thing.

Ethan's eyes darted to the back corner of the fridge and saliva instantly started pooling beneath his tongue as he spied the box of leftover squid ink pasta with seared scallops.

"Hell yeah!" he exclaimed happily as he reached in to pull the box out. He gripped it tightly and extricated himself from the cold box. He turned as he closed the refrigerator door, the light snuffed out as the sound of glass clinked through the air.

Dark black writhing clawed itself into Ethan's peripheral and he screamed.

"FUCK!" he yelled as he threw his arms into the air, turned and scurried over to the kitchen table. He heard the box fall to the floor behind him and turned, terrified of what he'd see.

But nothing was there except for the black tendrils of his pasta splattered all over the tiled floor. Ethan sighed, ashamed of himself as his stomach gurgled reprehensibly. He stared at the pasta a moment before moving to clean it up.

After getting the pasta into the trash, Ethan opened the cabinet he'd first been looking into and pulled from it peanut butter, jelly, and bread.

The lonely corner of the sandwich was all that remained among the scattered crumbs on the abyss of white plate. The TV was on, but Ethan wasn't really watching it. His feet sat propped up on the coffee table, his eyes fixed on the ceiling fan that beat softly on its lowest setting. He stared so intently at the rotating blades that they took on almost a kaleidoscopic effect. He had to blink away the burning of his eyes though and couldn't stare at the thing any longer.

"Damn, I'm bored," he muttered as he grabbed the remote and turned off the TV. He stood up and shuffled over to the dark, wooden bookcase that stood near the TV. He hunched over and peered at the books, noticing the dust that layered the tops of so many of them. He found the one he'd been reading and sat down to read it.

As he split the book open to the place of his bookmark, he brought it to his face and smelled the old familiar musk that he'd always loved so much. His eyes were closed and he opened them as he pulled the book away from his face and he saw it again, the thing in the corner of his eye, creeping, writhing to the center of his vision.

Ethan panicked and let out a cry, shoving the book away from himself to the end of the couch, he blinked furiously and turned away from the terrifying thing, but it was already gone. His skin crawled as he turned his head all about the room, trying to find where it hid, but he was alone in the room. His heart pounded in his throat as he gulped the sticky, nervous saliva that had gathered in his mouth. He breathed hard, thinking for a moment about what to do next.

Ethan pushed his shaking hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

I 'm scared, the text message said.

His phone buzzed. Then it buzzed again. And again. Ethan answered it, holding it to his ear.

"Ethan, are you okay?" Marissa's comforting voice issued from the other end.

"I-I don't know... I just keep seeing it."

"Ohh, baby I'm so sorry. But, you know it isn't there, right? Just keep telling yourself that when you see it."

"Yeah, right..."

"I'm so so sorry, but I have to get back to class."

"Oh, yeah totally. I understand. I'll let you go."

"Okay, I love you. Maybe try to take a nap or something."

"Yeah, maybe I'll try that. Love you too." Ethan hung up the phone and let out a long sigh. He sat back on the couch and turned on the TV. He browsed around for something to watch and settled on an old favorite - The Goonies. Ethan turned himself sideways on the couch and eased into a state of supreme relaxation as the movie played.

After about half an hour had elapsed, Ethan's eyelids began to slowly sink. As his eyes prepared to shut completely, a loud noise in the movie caused him to suddenly jerk, eyes wide, but still a bit drowsy. He looked around the darkened room and paused the movie before making his way to the bathroom.

He flushed and shut the light off in the bathroom as he left. He shuffled back toward the couch.

A violently squirming mass of unrecognizable shapes edged into his sight and he froze.

"It's not real," he said as it crept further into view. "It's not real, it's not real!" But it felt real. And now that he was still and quiet, he could hear the sucking, squelching sounds of its movement like the squawking of horrible birds.

The blackened mass encroached on the center of his vision and he could no longer be still. He shook his head violently and moved as fast as he could from where he stood.

He looked back to where he had been and the thing was gone from his sight. But he could see the barest dark shadow in the corner of his vision and he knew it wouldn't be long. He shook his head again and kept moving. He refused to stay still.

That's how it gets to you, he thought and kept changing places, making sure his movements were sporadic and random. As he darted around, he paid close attention to the corners of his eyes. The writhing thing kept edging further into his peripheral and he forced himself to move even faster, to move even more fervently.

As Ethan kept up his wild, jerking movements to keep the thing out of his sight, he started to feel a burning in his chest and was suddenly aware of the shirt that stuck to his drenched skin. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep this up forever. He grabbed the bottom of his shirt and pulled up as hard as he could, to peel it from himself.

The shirt's collar caught on his head so he pulled twice to get it off and stumbled forward as he did so. The top of Ethan's head collided with the corner of the wall and he groaned loudly in pain as his hand shot to the spot that had been struck.

When he opened his eyes fully again, the great swallowing blackness was no longer in his peripheral. Now he could see it as he had never before, in all its terrible shape and form. The noises that screeched from it otherworldly but sickeningly familiar. It sprung toward him, a jagged clawed mass and he jumped out of the way with a cry.

He had to get away. He had to keep moving, He had to find some way to keep out of its reach. He looked up and saw the fan high in the apartment's vaulted ceiling. Ethan sprinted across the living room

and snatched an extension cord from the wall. He kept running and managed to toss the end of the cord at the ceiling fan but it fell back down.

The black mass had now filled most of Ethan's left eye, so he kept moving to the right, always to the right. The faster he moved the slower it caught up to him. He threw the cord again and it made contact with the fan's blade, but it caught on nothing.

"Dammit!" Ethan exclaimed. He was really starting to panic now. Tears were welling in his eyes and he could feel himself slowing down, his breathing ragged. He knew he only had one chance left. He tossed the cord up into the air and it caught the blades. He twisted the cord around his waist and felt a rush of success as the cord's slack tightened. He held on as tightly as he could the cord tightened around his chest and he was hoisted into the air.

Ethan looked down at the floor of the apartment and saw the black, vile thing down on the ground as it screamed into the air at him, enraged that he'd escaped its clutches. A wave of relief washed over him and he sighed happily.

"What's going on here?" Marissa asked. A crowd of people stood around, looking at the apartment from behind yellow tape that said POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. She pushed through the crowd up to a uniformed officer. "What's going on here?" she demanded again, this time to him.

"Nothing to see here, ma'am. Please move along."

"But this is my home!" she cried. "I live here! What the hell is going on!?" The officer paused for a moment and asked her for identification. She produced it from the wallet in her purse.

"This way, ma'am," he said as he lifted the tape for her to duck under and cross. She followed the officer to another man, dressed in a suit. He introduced himself to her as Detective Faraday. They went into a covered canopy and sat down as the detective got all of Marissa's pertinent information.

"I can't let you onto the scene yet," he said to her. "I'm sorry."

"Wait, the scene? What do you mean you're sorry...? For what?"

The detective sighed and seemed to steel himself for what he had to say.

"Well, it's not official yet, but we're calling it a suicide. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Suicide?" She cried, "You mean he's dead?" Tears filled her eyes and she began to sob.

"I'm afraid so... I'm really, really sorry for your loss. There was no letter left behind. He was found hanging by his neck from the ceiling. But... There's something odd I wanted to show you if that'd be alright. It'd really help us out. I understand if you can't."

Marissa reigned in her tears and sat up in her seat.

"No, I... I think I can do it. I want to help if I can."

Detective Faraday looked at her with understanding in his eyes.

"Alright, thank you." He slid a tablet in front of Marissa. "We obtained CCTV footage from your apartment complex, who was kind enough to assist us in this matter. Now, from where the camera's

positioned, you can see part of your townhouse, and from that footage we could see into one of your bottom floor windows."

"Okay..." Marissa said apprehensively.

"Oh, don't worry, we only obtained footage from tonight. And it just so happens your blinds were open." He pressed the play button on the tablet and a video started. It was of the outside of their apartment, just as Detective Faraday had said. Marissa leaned closer to get a better look.

"So, here's you leaving for class..." he said. "And then we just fast forward a little and now we can see Ethan." The video played over the course of the evening. Marissa watched as she saw Ethan from the window in short bursts, jumping, jerking, and yelling around the apartment's living room. As Marissa watched she became more and more horrified by what she was seeing until suddenly the lights in the apartment went out.

"Weird, right?" Detective Faraday asked. Marissa nodded. "We were wondering if you could explain any of Ethan's behavior here."

"Well," she said slowly. "He had started to see things, like in the corner of his eyes. He thought the things he was seeing were more than what they really were and they started to scare him."

"I see," said the detective as he scribbled on his notepad.

"But even he knew they weren't real," she added quickly. "We'd both been talking about him going to see an optometrist."

"Okay, thank you, Ms. Greene. Is there anything else you can tell me?" he asked. She shook her head.

"That's everything I can think of..."

"Well, I really appreciate your cooperation. We'll let you go now and we'll likely be in touch with you very soon, so please expect our call," he said. Marissa nodded and turned to leave.

Marissa approached the police line. It was much later now, and most of the crowd had dispersed, with only a handful of curious onlookers remaining. As she stood, ready to lift the yellow police tape up to duck under it, a bit of conversation caught her ear.

"You don't know what it is?" a man's voice asked.

"No, I've never seen anything like it," replied a woman. "We're not sure what it is."

"Well, what was it like?" he probed. "You gotta give me something here, Rodriguez - I'm hanging by a thread!"

"Alright," she said. "It was like this weird, black film covering his eyes. We'll have to send it to the lab for analysis, but seriously, it's like nothing I've ever seen before."

Marissa's quickened her pace and ducked under the police line as she walked to her car as quickly as she could. Once in her car, she let out an anguished wail and the sadness poured from her. But once she had cried enough, the thought of what had happened gripped her. She checked her peripheral vision, unsure if she could see the encroaching shadow of darkness.