

THE FIRE-FLIES

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Most of the time, a Friday night in our little back-water town wouldn't be something to tell the grandkids about when I'm old and gray – that is, if I were ever going to have grandkids. But then again, this particular night didn't exactly turn out to be a normal evening of poking at a small campfire while smoking and drinking with my friends.

The booze and cigarettes were definitely a secret back then. Our parents would've killed us if they'd known. They had all somehow decided that we were innocent, promising young men who would never waste our time with such worldly, rebellious things.

Well, they were wrong. And even when they thought that they had learned the shocking truth – about me at least – they were still wrong.

And why was this particular night so different and worth mentioning, you might ask? Well, I wish I could say that it changed all our lives – but I can't. It only changed mine.

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On most weekends, Friday night after ditching the girlfriend meant one thing - it was time to head for Craig's house and join the boys for some back-woods smoking and drinking. So far, this weekend was no different. I was always excited as hell to get there – almost excited as I was to finally be rid of my nagging girlfriend. I drove my white Camaro way too fast down the dark, winding road that led away from the town proper. I didn't want the other guys to get tired of waiting and take off without me.

Screeching through the turn, I finally left the road and sped my car down Craig's driveway. He lived half a mile back in the woods, so his driveway was what most people would call a road. I finally came flying up to his house and made my usual entrance. I stayed on the accelerator until it would seem to have been too late, then crammed the brakes almost through the floorboard and came sliding up to the big oak tree beside his garage. Craig, John and Terry were jumping into Craig's Bronco to head down the dirt road behind his house. As usual, I was just in time.

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“Well imagine that. Charlie shows up just as we've given up on him,” Craig said through the open doors of the Bronco as I trotted up.

“Yeah, whatever. You’d wait on me ‘till you starved to death.” I gave him a smart-ass grin as I jumped into the back seat. “I’ve got the smokes, as usual – since I seem to be one of four smokers and one of one buyer. So who’s got the Southern Comfort?”

Craig held up an unopened bottle of our favorite poison and shook it. “Stop your bitching. You’re probably gonna drink more than anyone else anyway,” he said as he cranked the engine.

Craig drove us down the narrow dirt road that snaked through the woods. It came to a dead end about half a mile from his house, but there was a small clearing where it abruptly stopped at a wall of trees. Our little hang-out definitely wasn’t the Taj Mahal, but it was all we needed. When we pulled up, Terry jumped out and immediately began the process of bringing a fire to life. He always seemed more than a little infatuated by fire, so we left that part to him.

While all this was going on, Craig selected the cassette tape that we’d be listening to for the evening and I began handing out cigarettes. John took his cigarette with obvious regret, blessing us once again with his normal routine of pretending that he didn’t want to smoke. He loved a good cigarette as much as the rest of us, but would never have admitted it. He was even worse when it came time for the booze.

Terry lived up to his reputation as a pyro and a small fire soon crackled in the otherwise dark forest. Craig, knowing the routine, had to physically stop Terry from going to the nearby trees for more logs. If left to his own devices, Terry would build up a fire until astronauts could see it from the space shuttle.

Within just a few minutes, we were all sitting around the campfire, smoking like chimneys and passing around a bottle that we knew would go dry way too soon.

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An hour later, it was around 1 o’clock in the morning and our little gathering had degraded to the level that it always seemed to reach – four drunken teenagers stumbling around, telling dirty jokes and accidentally dropping cigarettes on the dry pine straw. Much to Terry’s dismay, we were still sober enough to put out the little fires that we subsequently started.

Our humble little fire began to die off as the minutes slipped away. Terry had become intoxicated enough that he no longer cared about the fire, so it was left to dwindle. A few stubborn flames still danced around on the glowing embers, but everything had grown dark enough that fire-flies were now visible in the nearby trees.

Something that darts around through the night, blinking like a tiny yellow lighthouse, can have mesmerizing effects when an empty bottle of Southern Comfort is

lying in the fire. We had all reached the point where stumbling around gives way to standing still, slightly swaying like a tree with feeble roots. No one said much at this point. We had all slipped into our own form of contemplation, staring at the fire-flies while trying to keep our eyes open.

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John was the first to break the silence. “Holy freakin’ shit!” he yelled as his body went rigid and he pointed toward a clump of trees.

John could have been called a lot of things, but superstitious and easily frightened would be near the top of the list. Add that to the fact that he could get twice as drunk as the rest of us on half the liquor, and it’s no wonder that he was the brunt of jokes from time to time. We were all used to seeing John overreact, so everyone began laughing at him simultaneously and calling him whatever names our drunken minds could create.

It didn’t help John’s case when we all finally turned to look where he was pointing and realized that he was losing his mind over a couple of fire-flies. Two of the harmless little bugs were apparently flying around in unison, giving the appearance of demonic eyes creeping through the trees.

“Dude, you need to cut back on the liquor. You’re not getting your usual three swallows next weekend,” I said to him. This renewed the laughter, but did not seem to bother John. He continued to stare at the fire-flies with a look of horror on his face.

“Those are demon eyes or something, man. Fire-flies don’t do that shit.” John pointed again. “Look, you bastards. Fire-flies don’t do that. Those are eyes!”

This of course brought our laughter to a roar. As we all wiped tears from our faces and turned back to look in the direction that John was pointing, we noticed that the fire-flies were no longer blinking. They were shining continuously while hovering in the darkness.

I admit that I was a little freaked out when I saw it. Hell, I would imagine everyone was. But that’s not something that any of us were going to admit – especially not after having made fun of John like that.

It was while we were all staring at the odd spectacle that everything turned into a blur. The small, yellow points of light seemed to streak from where they were, through the area of our campfire, and stop far on the opposite side. The rapid movement, which was almost imperceptible, was accompanied by an unnerving sound. I had never been shot at, but it must have been what a bullet would sound like as it zipped and popped past your head.

Probably more out of fear than anything else, we all began laughing again. Well, all except John. He was standing between us and the fire, so he was mostly just a silhouette – but I’ll never forget the look on his face. As he turned to face me and the other guys, his eyes were practically bulging from their sockets. His mouth was gaping, moving as though he was trying to say something – but nothing came out.

As he stood there staring at us in shock, he began to sway from side to side. That’s when I looked down and noticed his torso. Actually, I noticed our campfire that I could now see *through* his torso. John was in shock because whatever it was that zipped by us had flown right through him, blowing a clean hole the size of softball through his upper abdomen.

After a moment of silently calling to us for help, John’s eyes rolled back in his head and he fell backwards onto the fire. The large amounts of blood gushing from his body quenched the fire and left the rest of us in total darkness. For what seemed an eternity, no one said anything – we were all still in shock from watching our friend fall dead in front of our eyes. The tape in Craig’s cassette player had long since run out. The only sounds were those of the blood hissing as it dripped onto the hot coals and the faint rustling noises being made by John’s corpse as it twitched.

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Saying that the following moments were surreal would be one hell of an understatement. It would’ve been understandable for the rest of us to freak out and run screaming into the woods, but that didn’t happen – not yet, anyway. We all just stood there, not making a sound, as we stared at the hundreds of fire-flies that glided through the surrounding trees.

“Two of those things aren’t fire-flies,” whispered one of the guys. I think it was Terry.

“No shit,” I whispered back while turning around in circles, scanning the nearby trees. “What was your first clue?”

“Jesus, what is happening? We have to help him!” Craig yelled, shattering the silence. I don’t know why it worsened my fear when he spoke aloud. I’m sure that whatever did that to John didn’t need us to yell in order to find us.

“Keep it down!” I whispered. “You saw what happened. There’s nothing we can do for him!” We all huddled together, facing away from each other so that we could look for signs of whatever had killed John.

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It's impossible to keep from blaming myself for what happened next. I wasn't able to give any warning, though I saw it in plenty of time. We were all scared out of our wits, practically on the brink of falling into a hysterical rage, but I should've had the strength to speak up. I shouldn't have been so gripped with fear that I was paralyzed and unable to say anything. If I could've at least tapped Terry and Craig on the shoulder to get their attention, maybe they would've looked – maybe they could've seen it in time to run.

In all the months that I've spent reliving that nightmare, I've yet to come up with the words to describe the creature that I saw behind those yellow eyes. The raw, inescapable fear that it cast upon me is the single language that could be used to describe such an apparition – and there are no words in that language. Had I died while standing there, my soul would have remained suspended upright, trapped in the grasp of this.... thing. Only the deepest, most wretched levels of hell could spew forth such a being. If Satan were to vomit a dog, it would look similar - though more pleasing to the eye.

I believe the creature sensed my fear, realizing that I alone had seen it. I alone could be tortured with the vision of its hellish features. I think that's why it spared my life on the next pass. It wanted me to tremble in fear, with its form seared into my brain as I watched my friends get slaughtered.

I remained paralyzed as the eyes once again blurred into a streak, moving within inches of my body and tearing through Terry's chest with a wet thud. It came with the same zip and pop as the first time, when it had taken John - but being so close to the impact this time had allowed me the nightmare of even fowler sounds. I could hear it slam through Terry's bones, and I could hear the sickening spray of blood and various other body parts splattering against Craig.

My moment of paralysis came to an end as Terry's body slumped against me, sliding down my stomach and legs to the ground as what was left of Terry gargled out a plea for help. I could hear Craig screaming wildly as he began running into the woods, and I immediately followed suit.

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I heard Craig's frantic voice echoing through the trees as he ran into the forest behind me. In a moment of lucidity, I realized which direction would take me back to the house and began to run – in the opposite direction from that which Craig had chosen.

Using Craig's Bronco, which was still sitting near our camp site, never occurred to me. My only thought was that of running like a frightened animal – I *was* a frightened animal. Another thing that didn't occur to me was John's corpse, which lay directly in my

path. When my foot hit his cold leg, I tumbled face-first onto what was left of my friend. Ashes and blood now covered my face and hands as I clawed my way back to a standing position. I continued running, not bothering to look around for the creature that I knew must be watching my every move. I could still hear Craig's voice echoing through the night as he fled in the opposite direction.

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I never saw Craig again, and neither did anyone else for that matter. His body was never found, but it was assumed - judging by the scene at the camp site - that he had met a similar fate somewhere in the darkness of the forest. I can't help but think that he saved my life by running in the wrong direction. I suppose the creature wanted to save me for last, since I had seen it and carried a greater fear than the others, but for some reason had failed to reach me after going for Craig.

Regardless, I somehow made it back to Craig's house with my life. His parents were awoken by the sound of my screams and the crashing thud that I made when I ran head-long into the front door. When they ran into the living room, they were greeted with the sight of my unconscious body lying on top of their door, which had been ripped from its hinges.

Approaching their house, feeling sure that the creature would catch me before I could make it inside, was the last thing I remembered of the ordeal. According to his parents, I woke up after several minutes and began screaming something about still being able to see the creature's eyes - that it was in me - that it was inside, tearing holes through my soul. Then, after flinging myself into the walls of their living room and clawing frantically at my own skin, I slumped once again into an unconscious heap.

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Sanity has been a relative term since that night, including the weeks I spent in a murder trial - I was the defendant. I don't recall the proceedings in a way that you would think of normal memories. I can see the picture in my head, but I don't remember being able to say anything in response to the allegations. I was completely insane. I simply sat there, staring at all the yellow eyes. They were everywhere then, and they're everywhere now - everyone I see has yellow eyes.

I was the only survivor, and I showed up at Craig's house in an insane rage, covered in blood. It was decided that I had gone mad and took the lives of my best friends. A murder weapon was never produced that I can remember, but I'm sure they came up with something - someone had to be guilty, and everyone else was dead.

I'm still strapped to this bed, like I have been since the day they brought me here. I can't help it – every time they attempt to release me, I lose control and go for their eyes. I have to claw out the yellow eyes – they all have them – they're *all* the beast.

Or maybe I'm the beast. I don't feel it ripping holes through my soul anymore, but that could be because it simply ran out of soul to shred. Maybe it was just discarding the parts that it didn't need while it prepared its new home. I'm just glad there's no mirror in my room anymore.