

A Doll's House

The road hummed beneath as Mike accelerated the little old Ford Escort along interstate 90 halfway between Bellevue and Ellensburg. The surrounding landscape was all but invisible under cover of night. Mike checked the time display on the car radio and saw that it was a quarter after 4 AM. He couldn't believe he had let them talk him into going to the stupid concert but it was hard to resist Sarah when she cranked up her feminine charms, making doe eyes and pouting her lips like a 1950s movie starlet.

Sarah was napping in the passenger seat and her useless brother Frank tapped away on his laptop in the backseat. Mike threw a glance at Frank through the review mirror. Thin white chords trailed from his ears and disappeared into the throat of his hoodie as faint sounds escaped past the ear buds lodged in his head, which bobbed in accordance with the rhythm and beat of some other obscure band only ten other people on earth had ever heard of. His face glowed from the light of the screen as he blogged about the night's musical experience. Mike rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the road. He thought calling what had happened at the concert "music" might be stretching the definition of the word.

He made a mental note to tell Sarah not to invite him along on another one of these adventures that she and her brother were so fond of making. He suspected it would hurt his relationship with her, but after tonight that that didn't seem like such a bad prospect as it had when she was hanging on his neck and he was being enchanted by the smell of her perfume.

They hit something on the road though Mike hadn't seen anything irregular lying out there. The impact jolted everything inside the car and Sarah was startled awake with a yelp while Frank cursed as his laptop tumbled off his knees and onto his feet.

Mike felt the car begin to lose control and removed his foot from the accelerator and began to turn the wheel in the direction the car began to veer. A moment later control was reasserted but that provided little comfort as the telltale sound of a flat tire made itself known. He directed the car to the shoulder and parked it, leaving the engine running as he focused on calming down.

After his heartbeat had slowed to a manageable pace, Mike said, “Is everybody okay?”

Sarah nodded but said nothing. Frank, irritated and plucking his laptop off his toes, said “Yeah, I just hope my computer’s alright. Why don’t you keep it on the road, man?”

“You and your computer are free to walk to Seattle and back next time if you like,” Mike replied, heat creeping into his voice. His impatience with Frank had increased over the last few months. He didn’t understand how the guy couldn’t devote himself to holding down a steady job while at the same time pouring endless hours into his blog, internet surfing, and his half-baked garage band, all while living in his dad’s basement – rent free of course. He was twenty-eight and without substantial ambition of any kind. In Mike’s thinking, guys like Frank were what was really wrong with the world.

Sarah chimes in, “Hey, hey, guys. Take it easy. Let’s just catch our breath a minute.”

Mike grumbled under his breath and turned away to fish out his cellphone. “No service,” he announced. “How about you guys?” Sarah and Frank checked their phones with the same result. “Yeah, that would be too easy, wouldn’t it?” he complained. Without waiting for a response he opened his door and exited the vehicle.

The passengers watched as Mike circled the car, inspecting each corner until he stopped at the passenger side front corner and planted his fists on his hips.

“Is it flat?” Frank yelled.

Mike's angry eyes came up and landed on Frank with a look that said, *Are you kidding me? How could it be anything else?* Frank opened his mouth to issue a snarky response but Sarah, seeming to sense this was coming, turned and gave him a warning glare that shut him up.

Mike knelt by the tire for a closer look, Sarah opened her door and got out. She rubbed her sleeveless arms which prickled with gooseflesh when they came into contact with the chilly temperature outside. Mike looked up at her and saw her losing her fight with the cold air and removed his own jacket and threw it to her. "Is it bad?" she asked.

"Bad enough that the car won't be going anywhere until it gets a new tire," Mike replied.

Sarah looked at the backside of the car, then back at Mike and said, "Don't you have a spare?"

"You're looking at it," he said tapping the ruined rubber with the index finger of his right hand. "Which wouldn't be a problem if our any of our phones worked because I could call Triple A, but it looks like that's out."

"What are we gonna do then?" asked Frank who had come half out through the open passenger door.

They all fell silent, each hoping someone else would offer a solution. None was forthcoming.

After a few moments Mike suggested, "We could start walking and keep an eye on our phones to see if we get enough cell service to make a call."

Sarah groaned and Frank looked wearily at both sides of the road which were lined with an unceasing line of forest. "You want us to walk out here in the dark, man? Is that safe?"

"What are you, eight?" Mike retorted. "It's probably safer than sitting and freezing in the car waiting for God-knows-who to ever come by. At least with my way we keep warm because

of the exercise.” He intended that last bit as a subtle jab against Frank who wasn’t really heavy, but was fairly sedentary and just a little too pudgy for the skinny jeans he had the audacity to wear. Mike concealed a smile and turned his face to the tire as a suspicious look stole across Frank’s face.

“I don’t know,” Sarah said timidly, looking at the darkened road behind them and then ahead as well. “I don’t think we’re very close to anyone that can help us.”

“Well, I’m going to walk,” Mike said confidently but with more gentleness than he’d used with Frank. He knew that he only had to sound decisive for Sarah to likely fall in on his side of things and follow him. The only drawback to that plan he could foresee was that Frank would never stay behind with the car alone. He was too much of a coward for that, which meant he would be tagging along and muttering whiny complains most of the way. Still, it was in Mike’s estimation the best plan available to them.

“Are you sure about this?” Sarah asked.

“Are we still talking about this?” Frank interjected. “Shouldn’t we just wait for the State Patrol to come by or something?”

Mike ignored Frank and said to Sarah, “Trust me; it’s a better idea to move and keep your blood circulating than to just sit and do nothing. I’m going.”

She bounced on her heels, looked away to the darkened trees, and shivered as she considered his words. Finally she relented and said, “Alright, I’ll come with you.” She looked back at him and said, “But won’t you be cold without your jacket?”

“I think I’ve got a spare one in the trunk,” he said. Then with a smile he added, “If not, I’ll just have to huddle close to you.” He pulled her close and planted a gentle kiss on her forehead. She rested her head on his shoulder as she leaned into him.

They'd known each other for a few years, but had only been friends for most of that time. Only in the past six months had they wandered into becoming an "item" and it had been more of a good time than a bad, though they certainly had their disagreements – mostly concerning a certain dead weight sibling whom she insisted on including in much of their life together. He was willing to endure him for the sake of her, or at least he had been at first.

Frank cleared his throat, interrupting their moment, and causing Mike to throw him another withering glare. Ignoring the visual reprimand he said, "So, is there a verdict? What are we doing?"

Sarah pulled her warmth away from Mike and announced, "We're walking."

Frank grunted in frustration and muttered something about her always siding with *that guy* as he ducked back into the car and began to gather his things.

Mike looked to the road ahead, which disappeared in the dark out beyond the headlights. A strange sense of coldness overtook him but had nothing to do with the temperature of the night. It was a cold which rose up from inside him as he observed the darkness. He dismissed it as some primal instinct to be leery of the dark and moved to the open door by the driver's seat. He reached inside for the trunk release and heard the satisfying popping sound as the trunk came open.

When he reached the open trunk he began inspecting the contents in the barely sufficient trunk light and moved items around. He found his extra jacket and a heavy duty flashlight. He tested the flashlight, found it in working order, and tucked it under his arm as he wrestled the jacket on.

When he went to the front of the car he found both Sarah and Frank waiting for him. Sarah seemed to be staring absently into the woods and Frank had his laptop case slung over his

shoulder and he was rubbing his arms to keep warm. Mike moved past them and heard them fall into step behind.

They walked in silence for a while, each ruminating privately over their own thoughts. The only sound was their feet against the pavement of the interstate which was a mostly steady rhythm and eventually faded into a familiar background noise. No one was in the mood for talking.

“Did you hear that?”

Mike and Sarah stopped and turned to see Frank standing a few yards behind them and staring off into the woods. When Mike directed the flashlight toward Frank’s face the man didn’t even flinch. Instead he absently lifted a hand to block the beam of light. A deep concern was etched into his features as he intently studied the darkened forms of the trees.

Mike and Sarah exchanged questioning glances and then moved as one back to where Frank stood. “Seriously,” he said, “did you guys hear that?”

Mike stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. Sarah said she hadn’t heard anything either. Frank looked at Mike then at Sarah and said, “How could you have not heard it?”

“Heard what?” Mike demanded, and what was left of the remnants of his patience began ebbing away.

“Sounded like...like kids playing.”

Sarah asked, “You mean like teens or something goofing around in the woods?”

Great, Mike thought. That’s all we need right now. A bunch of stupid frat boys getting high out in the middle of...

“No,” Frank said insistently, interrupting Mike’s internal complaint. “Little kids.”

Mike sighed and began to wonder if Frank had smoked something “exotic” at the concert earlier. He’d always pictured Frank as a bit of a stoner but he wasn’t about to bring that up in front of Sarah. She thought of Frank as her angelic little brother and any suggestion that he had serious problems aroused an irrational defensive posture from her. There was enough trouble to deal with as it was without adding unnecessarily to it. That could wait until daylight and after they finally made it home.

“It’s probably nothing,” Mike said. “The dark can make things seem weird. Let’s get moving.” He didn’t wait for a protest from either of his two companions, but turned around and continued down the road. Sarah followed immediately and then Frank joined too, though his footsteps came hesitantly.

“Uh, guys?” It was Frank again. Mike turned around again and was about to issue a few unfavorable observations about Frank’s backbone, but when he looked behind him he saw only empty road.

Sarah was beside him and gasped when she realized her brother wasn’t there.

“Frankie?” she called out uncertainly.

Mike swept the flashlight left then right, unable to catch sight of Frank. There was a lot of space on either side of the road before the landscape became forest and there was no place to hide. “Where’d he go? There’s no way he could have run off without us hearing him or being able to spot him.”

Sarah clung to his side and he heard her breathing turn rapid. Her voice took on a high pitch note of worry as she asked, “Mike, where is he?”

He shone the flashlight in the direction of the woods where Frank had been staring only moments before. He freed himself from her grasp and trotted beyond the edge of the road and

stopped halfway between the road and the tree line. He used the light to scan the tall grassy ground and found a dark shape. He threw a look over his shoulder and saw Sarah standing at the edge of the road covering her mouth with her hands. He looked back at the dark shape on the ground and slowly started to approach it. When he saw what it was he bent down and grabbed it, lifting it up. He shined the light on it so Sarah could see what it was.

Dangling from his right hand was Frank's laptop computer case. He jogged back over to her and they examined it together. They could find nothing wrong with it, save that it was missing its owner. They looked up at each other and Mike saw that Sarah's eyes were wide and her nostrils were flaring with fear. He didn't feel much better than she looked, though he tried to assert control over himself, knowing that freaking out wasn't going to help anyone.

He slid the strap over his head so that it lay diagonally across his chest and said, "Okay, it looks like he ran off into the woods. We can't leave him or..." he caught himself when he realized what he was saying and didn't dare finish the thought seeing the state his girlfriend was already in. It was clear from the expression on her face, however, that she finished the thought for him. Her jaw dropped but all that came out was a small and squeaky vocalization.

"Let's get after him," was the only thing he could think to say. He waited for her to respond and when she nodded her head he pointed the flashlight back to the woods, he found himself walking with her huddled close to his side.

When they reached the edge of the trees they found a large gap in the trees and a somewhat wide dirt path. Mike couldn't remember noticing the path before, but he shrugged it off, assuming he had been too concentrated on Frank's disappearance. They passed through the opening in the tree line and commenced down the way.

They called out his name, but if Frank heard them he gave no reply. Mike listened as Sarah's pleas to her missing brother become more and more insistent as they moved farther into the forest. He tried to keep his own voice even and calm to balance out the swelling terror which assaulted them both.

Above them the sky was inky and starless, invisible clouds shrouded the heavens and refused to allow the light of the moon to aid their search. On both sides the trees seemed to bear down on them while thrusting countless wooden fingers upward to scratch at the dark ceiling of the night. All around the sounds of nocturnal life prowled and threatened to undo their nerves. Beneath them the dirt path crunched rough complaints as they treaded upon it.

"Hey," Mike said nudging Sarah gently with his elbow and then pointed out ahead of them. Up ahead the beam of the flashlight reflected off something that wasn't part of the natural landscape, something reflective and yellow. It was too far away to discern what it was but the introduction of this new element brought a small but fresh wave of hope to them. They broke out of their slow gait and sprinted forward to uncover this new element.

The thing began to slowly take shape the closer they came to it, but it was still blocked by vegetation for a while yet. Finally they moved past the last leafy obstacle and illumination from the flashlight splashed over the whole of it. It was a dirty metallic yellow traffic sign attached to a green metal post. The sign read: **Dead End Street**.

Mike and Sarah stared up at the sign, trying to make sense of why it would be in the middle of the woods the first time they heard the sound. An echoing childlike laughter bounded out of the darkness, breaking their concentration on the sign.

"What in God's name was that?" Mike demanded, hearing the surprised fear in his own voice. He listened intently, concentrating on locating the source of the sound, but unable to keep

from being distracted over the incessant and seemingly overloud beating of his heart. The woods were silent, failing even then to produce the regular insect noises they had been hearing. He wondered when they had stopped and why he hadn't noticed. The night felt unnatural without those noises to provide a backdrop.

Then another sound arose. It sounded like something was skittering quickly through the dead, fallen leaves of the forest floor, making a half circle until it came to a sudden stop somewhere near the part of the path they had already travelled. Whatever was out there blocked their retreat.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and his face began to feel heavy, threatening to spill tears from a well of terror. The emotion had come upon him so rapidly he hardly had time to identify it before it went to work dismantling him piece by piece. When he looked at Sarah he saw that she could tell he was not doing well and that contributed to her own inability to pull herself together. Tears streamed down her face and she gasped in ragged breaths.

Mike pulled her closer as he shined his flashlight in the direction where the noise had ceased. Only darkness was there, drinking up the beam of light and showing them nothing in their attempt to see. The skittering sound came back again, though only tentatively this time. Whatever was causing the noise stayed just out of reach of the flashlight beam, yet Mike was sure it was close...much closer than was comfortable for him.

He and Sarah retreated a step and in response the mover in the darkness advanced with them, staying ever beyond the reach of their vision. They moved back again, and again the thing came closer. Curiosity overruled Mike's screaming inner terror and something within him demanded to see what was tracking them. He took another step backward and waited until he heard the first stirring of the night-shrouded thing move after them, and then Mike broke free of

Sarah's grip and bounded forward a handful of steps. Sarah screeched his name behind him but he ignored her surprise and focused all his attention ahead.

The bare light fell on their pursuer and gave it definition. Before them stood a young girl in a blue and white dress that reminded Mike of the dress that Dorothy wore in the old Wizard of Oz movie. Her skin was pale white and her hair was so inky black it seemed to be made of the fabric of the night itself. Her eyes were likewise black, like little obsidian orbs set in her skull and they were set too far apart. But her most disturbing feature was her mouth.

It was unbelievably wide, nearly reaching her ears and she was smiling like she was the happiest little girl in the world. When she opened that wide maw he could see a few rows of shiny black needle-like teeth.

She tilted her head, as if contemplating him and advanced a step farther into the light. She laughed and it was the sound of childish laughter they had heard moments before. Three, perhaps four similar laughs replied from the darkness and the blood in Mike's veins went cold. Two more little girls, similar in appearance to the first, stepped into the light on either side of the first girl. They moved two steps toward him. Now that they were closer his mind latched onto a new detail.

They were not pale-skinned creatures as he had first thought. In fact they had no skin at all. What they had instead was finely woven white fabric. They were like living dolls out of some demonic nightmare. His brain struggled to put together what he was seeing when Sarah released a shrill scream, breaking him out of his spell of confusion.

He whipped around and threw the flashlight beam in her direction, but when the beam landed on the spot he'd left her he saw that she was gone. Her scream was gone too, cut off

midstream as it were. He lashed the flashlight back around and found the trio of girls a few feet closer, smiling their needle smiles. He did the only thing he could think to do.

He ran as he'd never run before.

A short while later with his lungs burning and his heart desperately struggling to find a human pace, he entered a clearing. He whipped around as he hadn't allowed himself to do during his flight from the strange and terrifying things which had chased him. Both hands clutched the flashlight like he was trying to strangle the life out of it and they shook fiercely as he trained the device around him in an urgent arc. There was no sign of his pursuers.

His legs became like trunks of trees, rooted and unwilling to move as his body screamed for rest. His mind was another story, however.

His mind spun like a rotating steel cage filled with thousands of plastic bingo balls all bouncing off each other and creating a tumultuous but ultimately meaningless noise. No single thought would sit still long enough to be addressed and mastered with any kind of attempt at rationality. He was eventually able to gather his senses and move slowly into the clearing.

Soon his flashlight landed on the corner of something. When he began exploring it with the light he discovered it was an immense three-story brick mansion. He periodically checked his surroundings for the strange patchwork devil girls while searching out the exterior of the building. All the windows on the first floor as well as the front door were bricked off by gray cinder blocks. He was halfway around when he heard what sounded like the muffled scream of a woman come from the inside of the mansion. It was Sarah.

He ran around the structure, frantically searching for some way into it but there was nothing on the front. On the backside he discovered a large crack that he thought he might be

able to squeeze through. He felt around the edges of the crack with his finger and shined the flashlight inside but was unable to see much. From some distance away in the woods he heard the little childish laughter of those demonic things, though he did not think they were close enough to see him. Then again, what did he know?

He began pressing himself through the crack. It was not an easy fit but he managed to shimmy through it after a minute or so of effort. His chest and back hurt after he was through to the other side but he tried to pay them no mind so he could concentrate on finding Sarah. He also briefly wondered if this was where Frank had gone. *No, not gone, but was taken*, he corrected himself.

He played the light in his hand slowly and methodically around the room, trying to ascertain the nature of his surroundings. The place appeared to be just as old and rundown on the inside as it was on the outside. The wallpaper was peeling away in many places, revealing cracked plaster beneath it and sometime beneath that he could see wooden slats suffering from black mold and rot. He knew he shouldn't spend too much time in there breathing the filthy air, but he needed to find Sarah first.

His heart skipped a beat when the flashlight beam fell across the desiccated remains of a person laying half on the floor and half against a wall. The body looked to have been dead for quite some time. It was not skeletal as of yet but the dried and broken flesh which still clung to the bones was in an advanced state of decay. The skull was turned upward with its jaw open in a soundless scream while its empty eye sockets looked at some point on the ceiling.

The clothes on the body were mostly a shambles, shredded to tatters at points. Mike took a step closer to the body and saw that the flesh was missing and bone was exposed beneath the places where the clothing had been torn away. He could see hundred if not thousands of

pockmarks in the bone and he thought he knew what had made them. He recalled the rows of needlelike black teeth in the wide mouths of the nightmare patchwork girls from the forest.

The one piece of clothing the corpse wore which remained mostly intact was a leather apron which bore pockets around the middle filled with little tools of various kinds, none of which he recognized. They reminded him of sewing needles. He wondered, *Was this their maker?*

When he inspected the wall by the head of the corpse he noticed scratch marks, as if the person had been clawing at it while he, or perhaps she, died. Mike shuddered at the thought of being overrun by those little monsters and being gnawed on by them to death.

He turned away from investigating the dead so he might search for the living. He found a door leading out of the room and into a hallway. It was empty.

“Hello? Sarah?”

“Mike!” Her response came from above sounding shrill and desperate. He flashed the light to his right and discovered a staircase which he bounded up without thought.

He called her name again, and again she responded. He was beginning to get a better sense for where she was. She was somewhere on the second floor and close by at that. After two more calls and responses he came to a closed door in the second floor hallway. He tried to turn the door but it was locked. He didn’t bother trying again.

He stood back from the door and rained down kicks upon it until it flew inward on its hinges and slammed against an interior wall. Mike dashed into the room.

It was some kind of work room with a long table covered in patches of white cloth and tools and what appeared to be a large black chunk of coal or some other black substance. Mike didn’t know nor did he care what the stuff was, but he was overwhelmed with a sense of dread

just looking at it. He turned away. All he wanted was to find Sarah and get out, and as luck would have it she was in the room too.

She was crouched and huddled against a corner of the room, facing the corner like a naughty child under discipline. Her hands covered her ears and she rocked back and forth, crying. He took a step toward her and heard the sound just in time.

It began as a soft hissing noise but soon developed into a larger version, lustful and hungry. Mike ducked, turned, and backed into the room at the same time. He located the source of the eager sound and it took the wind out of him. It was Frank but not as he had been. Both cheeks had been slit to make his mouth wider and the normal teeth had been replaced by the same black needles Mike had seen in the mouths of the things that had attacked them in the forest. His eyes too were now obsidian black like theirs had been. His skin, while not white cloth like theirs, was as pale as milk.

Frank lunged for him.

Mike stepped backward quickly, his hand flailing along the table searching for anything at all to use as a weapon against Frank. His fingers found a wooden handle and wrapped around it, regardless of what it might be attached to. Mike brought it around in a defensive arc and right before it crashed into Frank's face, he saw that it was a rusty metal single-hand sledge hammer.

The steel connected with Frank's face and tore flesh and smashed teeth. Blood and black fangs sprayed out of Frank's mouth but this did not deter him. He shook his head as if shaking off a minor dizziness, and then his eyes reacquired Mike.

Mike saw that Frank's face was now a tortured mess. The hammer blow had destroyed his cheek and disconnected the left side of his jaw. Nevertheless that mouth hung open hungrily. Mike could tell he was about to make another lunge. Not wanting to give him the chance Mike

stepped forward and brought the business end of the hammer down on the top of Frank's skull as hard as he could. This produced a sickening crunch and Frank collapsed to the floor like a garbage bag full of raw meat.

Mike took a step back and just stared at the felled man for a few moments. Frank was dead; there was no two ways about it. One of his fingers twitched once but that was all there was to indicate the life was sapping out of his body.

He looked at the hammer clutched in his white-knuckled fist, raising it up to his face to inspect it. It was covered in blood and there was a small patch of Frank's hair sticking to it. Sickened he threw the tool away like it was ridden with the plague. The object hit the floor and blood splattered outward, but he was done thinking about it as he turned back to the huddled form of Sarah.

He came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. She was trembling powerfully and he wondered if she was going into shock, but he needed to get through to her and get out of there. He helped her stand and turned her around.

Her wide brown eyes were streaming tears and her lower lip quivered as she sucked in ragged breaths. She glanced down at the fallen form of her brother and then shot a look back at Mike. Her eyes were wild and showed no understanding of what had just happened in the room while she had been off in her own little world.

"He's dead," Mike said with as much care as he could, but he also let his voice remain firm. "We have to get out of here as fast as we can or we're going to be dead too."

Her face was a blank slate. He didn't think she had understood a word he'd said and was about to repeat himself when she nodded her comprehension. He took her by the hand and led her back out into the hallway and toward the stairs. He was about to take his first step down

when he heard that hissing noise again, which was followed by the sound of children's laughter, only this time he could tell it was not just a handful of them. He and Sarah turned slowly and looked back down the hallway. All of the doors had opened and a large number of the patchwork nightmare girls packed the space wall to wall. He didn't bother to count but he saw that there were probably more than fifty of them. There were even a handful actual people, men and women, who had been changed like Frank, perhaps other travelers who strayed into these unfortunate woods.

Mike let out a curse and darted down the stairs towing Sarah behind him. They reached the bottom of the stairs and ran into the room which Mike had entered earlier from the outside through the large crack in the wall. He got busy shoving Sarah through the crack. He noted with relief that she had a much easier time fitting through than he had. It was his turn next.

He pressed and pushed himself through the crack slowly yet desperately. He was just slipping out when he felt a sharp pain in his left hand. He screamed in agony yet continued to wiggle through the crack. When he was on the other side he looked at his hand and saw a small chunk was missing and blood dripped from the hot wound. When he looked at the crack he saw one of the little patchwork nightmares standing in the gap, blood dripping down its chin as it chewed on the small piece of his hand.

Rage clouded his mind and he stepped forward and kicked the little monster in the face. He felt its teeth crack and break under the impact of his leather boot, which brought a short-lived sense of satisfaction to him. Soon, however, that one was replaced by another hissing cloth creature and it bared its angry black smile at him.

“Run,” he yelled at Sarah, but when he turned he saw she had already had that idea. She was becoming smaller and smaller in his vision and so he ran after her. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the ravenous monsters were pouring out of the crack in the wall.

He couldn't allow himself to think about all of them chasing after him or he would falter and fall prey to them so he pushed his body as hard as it would go. He focused on Sarah whom he could see up ahead of him and he was catching up to her stride by stride. It would only be a few moments more before he was able to move up alongside of her. He only hoped he could help her to move faster because she would need...

Out of the woods four more of them pounced and they all landed on Sarah, taking her down in a shrieking tangle. He reached them in two heartbeats and kicked one of them off of her but the others had already gone to work on her, biting and tearing. She was gone before he could do anything else. The only thing left for Mike to do was to run.

He could hear them behind him, though he dared not look back. He was too focused on the burn of the run in his lungs and leg muscles. He was beginning to feel dizzy too; the small wound on his left hand ached with a ferocious intensity.

He was out of the clearing and into the woods again. All around him he could hear the echoes of children's laughter. It sounded like there were hundreds of them out there, though he couldn't see any of them. He could still hear the group of them behind him chasing, though. They didn't seem to be gaining on him, however, which was a relief.

He felt dizzy, though, he noted, now somewhat absently. Dizzy. Dizzy.

Despite all this he ran as fast as he could. He ran his heart out.

Morning sunlight streamed into the car but was blocked by Officer Hendricks' aviator sunglasses. The state police officer, bored out of his mind, patrolled the interstate looking for trouble that never seemed to materialize. In truth, he wanted nothing more than to find someplace quiet to park his car and take a nap. One little rest wouldn't hurt, would it? He decided not to because it would reflect poorly on him and the last thing he needed was another bad performance review.

Up ahead he saw the Ford Escort pulled off to the shoulder and slowed when he saw the figure emerge stumbling out of the tree line, fall, get up, stumble a few more feet, and then fall again. The man had fallen into the concealing tall grass.

The officer pulled up behind the parked car, radioed in what was happening, and got out of the patrol car. He trotted over to the edge of the road and saw where the man had fallen. He heard the moans coming from the downed man and said in his best heroic voice, "I'm coming, hold on."

Hendricks dashed over to the fallen man and saw that he laid face down on the ground. He knelt beside him and began to take stock of the man's condition. There was a small chunk of flesh missing from his left hand. The flesh around the wound was darkening and looked infected. Other than that he didn't appear to be hurt, only filthy, but he'd never be able to tell unless he could get the guy to roll onto his back.

"Sir, can you hear me?" There was another moan, which Hendricks took to be a response, so he continued. "This is state patrol officer Hendricks, and I'm here to help. Can you talk?" There was another moan which Hendricks took to be a negative. "Alright, I understand. Just take it easy and we'll get you..." but he was interrupted by the sound of children's laughter echoing out from the forest. He looked up at the tree line and said, "What the...?"

At his knees he heard the man on the ground roll onto his back. When he looked down he was staring into obsidian black eyes and an unnaturally wide mouth filled with row upon row of black needle-like teeth. If he wasn't mistaken, the man was smiling.