

Jokes

Like everything, we thought it was a joke.

It was late March when the reports began, people going missing and their loved ones turning up dead weeks later. We thought it was an early April fool's joke, a fucked up one of course. But April first came and went, and the reports never ceased. Instead, they infested the media, more so than politics and celebrity fodder. Everyone loves small town mysteries, and this is where it started. We were given a curfew, which of course did fucking nothing. We had idiots claiming it was a violation of their rights. A lot of them died, good riddance.

Then it started happening in other, bigger towns. People thought it was copycat criminals. The police thought nothing of it, of course, until their people started dropping too.

Then came the sightings of tall, strange creatures in the woods.

The news reported different things every day: The creatures weren't real, then they were; they were only out at night, no, they like the sun too.

They were easily identifiable. This was the biggest piece of bullshit reported.

It made everyone question everything. Suddenly your best friend of 10 plus years, your grandma, or your neighbor's akita could be a vicious cannibal. The latter caused much controversy, people began killing their neighbor's dogs if they barked too much.

We all, for the most part, became nihilists, it's what happens when the world ends.

I was in college when it happened. We were ordered to move home, or completely isolate within our dorms. I chose the latter, seeing as my family believed this whole thing was a hoax and refused to abide by guidelines put in place. I don't know where they are now, nor do I really care. I was able to stay with my friend, Mags, she also didn't have a family worth staying with either.

No, we never fucked. I know you're curious about it, but we didn't.

We hid at her apartment for a couple, until the landlord began knocking on the doors of tenants and shooting them if they didn't pay him immediately. We were able to sneak out of the bedroom window, luckily Mags lived on the first floor. She always complained about it, the walls were thin. We had to be quick, we left almost everything behind. When we made it to the apartment's parking lot, we discovered both of our cars had been broken into, but mine had the better gas mileage and more room. Plus a red truck is the perfect apocalypse car. We spent a majority of our days on the road, with no destination in mind.

"I'd kind of like to got to Montana."

"No," I said, "It's all nature there, it's these creature's breeding ground. We wouldn't survive a night there."

"I don't know, we've been doing pretty well so far. I think we could make it work."

That's why I hated her sometimes, she was always optimistic. Even in the midst of the end of the world, she found something to look forward to. I turned on the radio hopeful to find some sort of decent reception. Radio was still popular, only sometimes would we find music to listen to, mostly it was news and updates—where these creatures had been spotted, ways we could escape them if needed (there were no known ways to kill them), and the signs of turning (while a rare occurrence, were still important to know).

Cities, both big and small, succumbed to hysterics. Within only a couple of years the world was an even more desolate place, it was every dog for himself. We were able to find out more about these creatures as well, they preferred the night (though it was not unheard of to be attacked during the day). Sounds could trigger an attack, but it was the smell of blood that ensured your death. They weren't that perceptive of seeing, you could manage to escape their

wrath if you stayed still- or had some sort of distraction (we had flares and sparklers should this event occur). We didn't know if they could be killed, and I don't think anyone cared enough to find out. It was about surviving, not defending. Big corporations, really big anything, were taken down in dramatic occurrences. Every now and again we'd hear about it on the radio.

“Turn it off,” Mags would muse. “It's too depressing.”

“You do realize the situation we are in, right?”

“Yeah,” she'd groan. “Which is exactly why I don't want to listen to this shit.”

“But it's important.”

“I just want to listen to music.”

“We will, later.”

We met Luca at an outpost.

Mags and I had to pee and stretch our legs. She found Luca in the bathroom, huddled in the corner, he was malnourished. His pinecone eyes sunk into his pale face. His clothes clung to his skin, he stunk horribly. His blonde hair roamed to his shoulders and was black with dirt. The water still ran, by some miracle, in the outpost. Mags rinsed him as clean as she could while I stood guard outside. It was a futile effort, nothing could stop the creatures should they come, but it still gave us all a sense of security.

I had my apprehensions, and I know Mags did too. But it made the both of us feel better bringing Luca with us, we knew leaving him behind would only cause guilt and pain on our ends. You tell me, would you leave a five-year-old behind?

We were lucky to have found him when we did, Mags and I had raided a Walmart looking for scraps of food and hygiene products. We let Luca eat and drink as much as he could.

He didn't speak that much, just told us his name and age. If we ever asked him question, his eyes would go wide and he'd put his finger to his mouth, begging us not to speak. We knew through his mannerisms that he had seen a lot.

"Ari," she cried into me one night while Luca slept. I may be a jackass at times, but I couldn't help but cry along with her then. We stayed quiet, as to not wake Luca or beckon any of the creatures to us. Sometimes, if we were lucky, we would be able to sleep in an actual bed. Some motels had been abandoned, having Luca with us helped garner sympathy. We'd still have guns drawn on us in the beginning, it was protocol. We had to prove we were living- our birthdays, the name of the street we grew up on, the name of our favorite pet; the questions used as bank security questions now determined your morality. Those who had turned couldn't answer those sorts of things. They could speak, sure, but they didn't know their lives, they were shells of their former selves.

We were a merry little trio, even if it was silent most of the time. We discovered Luca liked music. Anytime it came on, we could see a faint smirk on his lips. He'd stop immediately if he caught us looking at him, so we had to sneak looks at him through the rearview mirror. I wondered what his life was like before, had his parents like music? Were they musicians? Perhaps there was an older brother, or uncle. Was he the eldest sibling? What happened to his- no, I didn't want to think about that.

"This is Johnny Cash," Mags beamed and turned up the radio while we were driving one day. "God, I haven't heard this song in forever... *Love is a burning thing*," Mags lowered her voice as she sang. We turned at the sound of laughter. Luca was covering his mouth, but we could see the open smile on his face.

“You like our singing?” Mags said as she continued to sing, causing Luca to laugh even harder.

“Silly you!” Luca beamed.

“No, you silly!” Mags laughed back. “Come on Ari, sing with me.”

We had made home at an abandoned cabin in Colorado. It was in the mountains, sure, it was dangerous to live in considering it was isolated in the wild. But it was peaceful. There were skid marks in the driveway, and moldy dishes—the owners left in a hurry. There was some canned food, the water was connected to a well, and the electricity was solar paneled. It was too good to be true. Which was why it wasn't a shock when Luca developed a fever.

It was winter. It was one of the beginning signs of turning.

“It's just because of the season, or maybe he is dehydrated” Mags tried to rationalize. We'd steal medicine and remedies in hopes of healing, but nothing helped. It only made things worse.

“Maybe we can find a hospital...”

“Mags, they're all gone, you know this.”

“Well then what the fuck are we going to do?” She cried.

“I don't know.”

“Fuck,” she breath and clutched her head. “I can't do this. Tell me we'll be okay, yeah?”

I stayed silent. “Tell me, Ari!”

“I CAN'T, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?”

“I want you to tell me this is a dream.”

“What?”

“I want you to tell me that this is a dream, some fucking nightmare that I’ll never wake up from,” she turned to me with tears in her eyes. “I can’t do this anymore, Ari. I can’t.” She collapsed at my feet and sobbed.

We decided to let nature take its course, we made sure Luca was comfortable, and kept him company. The turning wasn’t contagious, as far as we knew, so we didn’t mind holding him as he cried in pain. That was another symptom, a ravenous hunger.

Mags and I would take turns driving to the nearest town to get food, which was scarce as it was. One of us would stay behind and watch Luca.

It was my turn when it happened. I was able to score some canned goods, and more medicine for Luca. It wasn’t much, some canned sweet corn, green beans, and apricots. I tried looking for canned peaches, Luca liked them, but apricots were the only ones I could find—it’s hard to be picky in the end of the world. We would have to become more creative with our food sources sooner or later. I had hunted in my previous life, and I wouldn’t have minded the idea of doing so, the only problem was the blood of the animal would make for easy prey. The creatures would get the corpses before I could.

When I arrived at our “home”, Mags and Luca were gone.

I knew bad things were to come, sure. Should I have gone and looked for them? Probably. Would I have been able to change the outcome of it all? Probably not. So. I remained at the house in the off chance they would return. It was stupid of me, I know. I suppose I should’ve just left. But imagine yourself in my situation, you would’ve done the same thing. Don’t try to deny it. You realize the idea of being alone is scarier than confronting these things.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but it was dark outside when I woke up. Mags and Luca still hadn’t returned, I refused to believe they were dead. I opened the can of sweet corn and ate

half of it, staring outside and waiting for them to return. There was a field connected to a small, wooded area in the backyard. You could see the clearing, even though it was far away, from the kitchen window. We'd sometimes see deer eating in the field. Mags and I would take turns standing guard, watching the clearing for any of the creatures to come. We'd been lucky, too lucky, we'd never had to come face to face with one of the creatures before.

From the clearing, I saw Luca running and crying. I grabbed onto my gun and waited for him to make it to the house. I knew Mags was dead at that point, as much I didn't want to believe it. It was dark out, so I didn't see the blood on his face and shirt.

I thought it was him, so I unlocked the door.

Silly me.