

Winter

Trees standing like soldiers to attention surround me, reaching out with gnarled fingers to stroke me. Grab me. Scratch me. Whispers stalk me. The grey wind snatches at my hair, smothers my sobs.

Frosty leaves crunch under my feet and snow crystals land on my skin. "Come on," I say to myself. "Keep walking. It'll warm you up. Of course there are no spirits in these woods..."

The chill wind sends shivers up my spine. Not from cold, but from the still presence in the air. It's the same effect as always. I notice things and things notice me: a pocket of cold air, whispers no one else can hear...

I wrap my thin jacket around me. "You could have chosen something warmer," I mutter to myself. "If you must go wandering in the woods on your own in the middle of winter. What were you thinking?"

The raw air forms a chilling twister around me. They're back again then: the winter spirits, desperate to be heard. I close my eyes and sift through the clamouring voices to find the closest one. Instantly, the cacophony dies down; there is just one whisper. One pair of freezing white eyes staring with solemnity out of the darkness...

I turn abruptly and catch a glimpse of a white hand disappearing into the tangle of naked trees. I stumble back, struck by terror yet fascination. The spirits never make themselves visible. Eyes. Really close to me again. Within touching distance. A presence. I don't want to turn around but I know that I will; that I have to.

Two icy eyes, translucent white skin stretched over a thin skull. I scream, but the sound never leaves my frozen lips. My breath chokes in my throat. I don't wait for explanations. I run, eyes wide and heart thumping in my chest like a bass drum.

I glance behind me. Nothing. Just the whispering trees.

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I fall shivering from my bed onto my bedroom floor, and grope for the light switch. "Just another dream," I tell myself. "I always dream in winter."

I catch a glimpse of something in my peripheral vision, just a glimmer of white at the window. I feel something cold settle on my eyelashes. I turn to the mirror – ice creeps over its surface. Icy eyes stare into mine.

The winter spirits have come to take me home.