

Kevin Wang

You know, sometimes at night, when the dim light of the moon breaks through the cloudline far above, if you listen really, really carefully you can hear the faint rustling of leaves.

In most places, you know, it's real easy to just chalk it up to the wind, or maybe a lone possum or raccoon hunting through the night. Sometimes, if you're real lucky, you'll even catch a glimpse of a black bear or a cotton-tailed deer scroungin' around for berries or maybe that unlucky hunting raccoon from earlier. Maybe some days, in places I can only imagine, people even step outside in the night to watch the moths flutterin' around the porch lights and listen to the faint howls of coyotes from the depths of the forests as they howl their hearts out to each other in their little coyote way.

But out here, in Carbon County, nestled in the deepest foothills of the great Appalachians, there's only one reason coyotes howl: to yip one last goodbye and warning before the end.

Y'know, back in the old days, when the coal mines flowed freely and the suits in Congress still cared 'bout us, things weren't so bad. We still had people then, bustlin' main streets filled with visitors, miners, and every which type of person you could ever imagine. But the mines dried up. People moved away, the money stopped flowing, and red lights turned into red stop signs turned a prayer that you could finish up whatever you were doing before the red sunsets faded into darkness.

And with the people leavin', I guess that's when *it* started to come out at night. It wasn't a huge problem at first, y'know. We only really noticed that the number of possums we caught in our traps were startin' to go down a lot, and that wasn't a huge deal. You know, matin' seasons and good harvests and bad winters and all that. But then, the raccoons started goin' away, and then the rabbits, and then even the deer. Any little critter we still managed to catch in a trap looked scared out of their minds, not even darin' to squeak or shake in their cages. Hell, some of 'em even looked happy when we showed up with our guns and knives, like they were waitin' for the end. I know it mighty creeped out a lot of older folks, and then even they left Carbon County too, grumblin' about grumpkins and gremlins in the night.

But you know what the creepiest part was? The moths, oh god the moths, they all disappeared. Just like that, from a million moths bein' annoying and flyin' around you to none at all.

I mean like, you never notice what you had till you're missin' it, right? And I guess we all never noticed how normal watchin' the moths flutterin' around at night was until we would step outside and there weren't any left. And it wasn't just the moths, either – even the damn mosquitoes stopped showin' up. I used to have to gamble when taking a step out to the porch, prayin' that none of the little monsters would show up and turn any bare skin into a pincushion. But lately, when I still felt brave enough to take a step outside, I would pray to see an itchy red bump on me at all.

And what's worse, the woods, they got dead quiet, like the whole forest was afraid to make a sound. Normally, when you take a step out into the woods at night, you never feel alone – the birds and the crickets and the frogs are always singin' their little choir. But now, they up and either shut up or disappeared, petrified by *it*, I suppose.

That's when what remained of the workers and their families also headed out of town screaming about wantin' to live in the city surrounded by people, I suppose. Hell, I don't blame 'em. If this hadn't been my pop and my grandpop's land for a hundred fifty years, maybe I would've turned tail too. But no, I stayed.

And then, I started seein' em too. At night, usually right after a rustlin' of leaves, I would see red eyes starin' out at me, like they were just waitin' for me to check for mosquitoes out on the porch one more time. They were big, bulgin' eyes, orange-sized or sometimes bigger, starin' back at me. Sometimes one set, sometimes two, sometimes dozens. And in the night, they would just stay there, watchin'. I had to go and stock up on more guns and ammo after that one...

Sometimes I thought that was all they did – watch, but then, at church or while passin' by the few people still walkin' the main street, I started to hear stories about kids who stepped outside at night and never came back. The Barkleys next door, the O'Charley's on the other side of town, the Finnegan's a few miles away. Now days were filled with wailin' mothers and paranoid dads too – nobody walked around without at least a shotgun on their backs.

But the kids didn't stop disappearin', and soon enough so did their weepin' moms. But people also started reportin' that, on those disappearing nights, they remembered seein' those big red eyes, followed by hundreds or thousands of moths again.

You know, when I was a kid, my grandpop used to tell me about the Mothmen, great hulkin' moths that fluttered in the high forests of the Appalachians and would take anybody who got too close. I didn't believe him, of course – it was just an old wives' tale meant to scare the hell outta the little kids around the fireplace, I thought. But now... there aren't any more fireplaces, and there aren't many more kids around either.

Sometimes I wonder... maybe I was wrong. I don't know why; maybe the mines, maybe the people leavin', but I wonder if those stories about the Mothmen were real. And I heard all types of stories – that they control normal moths, that they're 9 feet tall with wings that'll blot out the moon, that they swoop in real low and take little critters into the nights, that they take kids and turn 'em into the next generation of Mothmen. I heard that back before America was here, that the Native Americans used to do combat with 'em, that they pushed the Mothmen back deep into the mountains after many bloody wars.

But the Native Americans here are gone, and the bulgin' red eyes in the woods watchin' my porch lights just keep multiplyin'. Nowadays, sometimes there's hundreds of em, thousands of em, just watchin' and waitin' with their stupid red eyes. Sometimes I hear a great rustle from the

leaves, like that of a thousand synchronized wing-flaps, and the desperate howl of a coyote before the woods return to silence.

Yesterday, I heard the news that the rest of the Barkleys had disappeared in the night. Their windows were smashed, their tables and sofas and lamps had all been destroyed and flipped over, and there were smears of blood everywhere leadin' to the windows. Apparently their gun was fully outta ammo, as there were shotgun shells everywhere. I guess bullets don't work after all, huh.

There was only one bit of evidence remainin' in their living room: a great moth wing, 8 feet across and colored dark brown like the tree trunks. But any other evidence of whatever took 'em, along with any evidence of the Barkleys, is gone.

I'm afraid, grandpop. I've started barricadin' my windows from the inside, and most remainin' neighbors have been high-tailin' it out of town unless they've had the land for generations like me. But these things, Mothmen or whatever, I know plywood won't stop 'em. If bullets won't, well...

If anybody reads this entry, I just want people to know... if you ever have the misfortune of entering Carbon County and having to travel real close to the Appalachians, bring an assault rifle. And a prayer.