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## Deliverance

Marie Lachance's house was not haunted. It was at least eighty years old and stood in a secluded part of town, nearly surrounded by woods. When Marie and her friend Laura were looking for a house in which to spend their senior year of college, their last year before becoming full-fledged adults, they'd come across this one and been struck by its beauty. It was a quaint Cape Cod with hardwood floors, huge windows, and crown moldings sculpted with leaves and flowers, never mind that they were crumbling a bit. But Marie felt an uneasiness deep in her chest when she walked inside it for the first time. There was something wrong with this place. But Laura loved it, Marie couldn't deny that it was beautiful, and the rent was reasonable, so in the end, they signed the lease.

As time went on, her uneasiness intensified, mutated. She felt something sinister in the corners of the living room that the lamplight didn't reach, in the shadows of the stairwell, along the upstairs hallway where the bedrooms were, that threatened to creep out and consume her. There was no explanation for this all-consuming feeling than that of a haunting. She grew terrified of being alone in the house. When she was there, Laura was there too, and sometimes her other friends, Maisha and Marcus: necessary protection. They never quite understood her problem with the house, but they didn't argue, and stayed with her anyway.

One February night, Marie, Marcus, and Maisha sat in Marie's living room. Laura was home for the weekend, and Marie stifled her anxiety about sleeping alone in the house. She'd done it before, but it never got easier. Marcus lay on the couch, taking up the entire length and then some. A book was open on his stomach. Maisha and Marie sat on two worn, floral armchairs. Maisha was drinking tea and Marie had her computer open on her lap. There was a comfortable silence.

Marie broke one of those silences by slamming her computer shut. "I keep getting rejected from these stupid internships," she said.

"I'm sorry. They don't know what they're missing," Maisha reached for Marie to comfort her.

"What am I going to do when I'm out of college with nothing to show for it?" Marie leaned over and grabbed Maisha's hand, squeezing it.

Marcus spoke up from the couch. "You haven't heard back from everyone yet. But if you don't get one, you'll figure something out. All this worrying isn't good for you."

"I know, but what if I don't? What if I can't find a job and have to go back to my parents? I'm scared I'm too late." Marie said as she buried her face in her hands and sank lower in her chair. "And I really don't want to sleep here alone."

"You're still scared of this house?" Marcus asked. Marie only nodded.

Maisha shot Marcus a look. "How about we get you out of here for a minute? Wanna go on a drive?" A drive. That was a nice idea. Marie nodded again.

Marcus sat in the passenger seat and Maisha in the back, as Marie wove through the streets of their quiet college town. The chatter from her friends and the quiet music on the stereo put her at ease. There wasn't much traffic, so they coasted down the main streets, through neighborhoods, out to where the road turned to dirt, and back again. On a well-lit street where the buildings were tall Marie heard the sunroof slide open and felt a rush of bitter, cold air.

"What are you doing?" she said to Marcus, a shiver coursing through her body.

"It's beautiful out there! We can see the stars now. Let's just appreciate it."

The wind bit at Marie's cheeks. Her fingers burned with cold and stiffened around the steering wheel. Marcus was right — it was beautiful. The cold was refreshing, too. They reached a red light, and Marie took everything in. The sky above them was an expanse of black velvet, the stars little bright pinpricks, the nearly-full moon bright and radiant. The buildings along the street were brick, and some had large windows illuminated with warm, yellow light.

Marie was from Philadelphia, where the skyscrapers seemed poised to swallow you whole, but here, none of the buildings had more than four stories. Still, she *felt* Philadelphia, the exhilarating, glittering city she barreled through as a high schooler, in the same car but with different people, taking everything in with a zeal that only sixteen-year-olds have. She was older now; she had a different role, saw a different world. A world that was beautiful, but also ruthless, severe, bleak. She was getting closer to that severity, and she wasn't prepared. No amount of beauty could protect her.

The light turned green and she stepped too hard on the gas, the car pitching forward. She realized, too late, that she was overthinking, that her anxiety was going to get the best of her. She gripped the steering wheel harder. Her face stung with the cold.

"Marie? Are you crying?" Maisha said from behind her.

Marie raised a hand to her cheek. She *was* crying. The stinging was from the tears rolling down her face. A wave of fear rolled through her chest. She couldn't keep doing this.

"I need to go home now," she said, her voice unsteady as she held back a sob. "I'm sorry."

"You're good! You're good," Marcus said, placing his hand on her shoulder in reassurance. "Just drop us off at my building. I'll take Maisha home."

"Yeah, it's alright! I hope you feel better," Maisha said. "It's going to be okay. You know that."

Marie wiped at her face with her sleeve and thanked them, hoping she was being coherent. She needed to be alone, and she was grateful that her friends recognized that.

She stayed calm enough to drive, only sniffling and letting tears out, but when her tires crunched to a stop on the gravel driveway by her house, she started to wail. She thanked God she'd closed the sunroof, because Marcus and Maisha would have heard her from across town.

Marie stared through her tears at the dark front door. The porch light wasn't even on. Another wave of fear tore through her chest. There was no way she could walk into her house right now, her house whose air weighed so heavily on her shoulders that she thought her back would break, her house whose foundation seemed to be made of despair, her house that she *knew* to be haunted by something sinister. Something evil. She couldn't go in alone. The dark windows on either side of the door were a pair of empty eyes, staring her down, threatening her. She quickly broke eye contact.

The thick growth of trees behind the house caught her attention now. She'd never paid those trees much mind, but now, she was fascinated. They practically beckoned to her, promising consolation. She knew what to do. First, she grabbed her coat off the backseat floor.

Marie had never been in the woods alone, at night, in the bitter cold. Still, better than the house. She shuffled between trees, leaves crunching under her feet. She could see the silhouettes of trees, slightly darker than the sky. They were massive, covering all of the space above her with their skeletal, bare branches. She found a rock to sit on, and the tears that had dried up when she got out of the car started again. Marie buried her face in her hands, hunched over, letting each sob overcome her completely. She hoped no one heard her.

This anguish that had gripped her so tightly was nothing new. It would take over, albeit in milder forms, whenever she lapsed into weakness or worry. She would stifle it, but she had been letting the pressure build up inside her, and now she was paying for it. She was a glass bottle on a stove, about to shatter as her contents evaporated.

The real world was so close and Marie wasn't ready in the slightest. Everyone she knew had a path laid out neatly in front of them: Laura had an offer from the company she interned for, Maisha was going to be a teacher in her hometown, and Marcus had gotten into law school in New York. Marie was going to be nothing, unless something changed soon. She was terrified of having nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to be with. She felt utterly devoid of hope.

The tears kept coming. She trembled with each sob, feeling her tears almost freeze on her cheeks, the cold searing like flames. Her lungs burned. What was she going to *do*? Live a life of boredom and failure? Her body was fully numb with cold. She wanted to recede into the forest floor and never come back up again.

After a long time, maybe hours, Marie ran out of tears. Still she remained, bent in half, her arms wrapped around her thighs. The cold, though it sank deeper and deeper into her body, seemed distant, removed. She was still. The thoughts in her head became an incoherent jumble. This had conquered her.

Marie was so tired. She'd spent all of her energy on her despair. Surely there was nothing left now. The idea of curling up right there and going to sleep appealed to her. As she grew ever colder, ever more still, reason finally prevailed over her muddled mind. She was going to get frostbite, or hypothermia, or she'd die of exposure. She needed to go inside. She hated that house, but she was finally too exhausted to care.

Every joint ached as she rose. She dusted off her pants, fixed her scarf, shuffled through the woods. The journey took an eternity, even though it couldn't have been more than thirty yards. Marie climbed the steps to the porch,

swaying with fatigue, and stopped at the door. She shook with a hideous shiver, but before another thought could cross her mind, she fumbled for her keys, unlocked the door, and swung it open. She was here.

The kitchen, with its white walls, tiles, and countertops, glowed white in the moonlight. Marie always felt the safest here — there was no darkness where things could hide. She padded over to the staircase and started climbing, paying no mind to how the boards bowed and creaked under her weight. She felt her way down the hallway and into her bedroom, then shed her scarf and coat and kicked off her boots. Her bed wasn't made; the covers were pulled back from when she'd gotten up that morning. She was dizzy and cold and so incredibly exhausted. Maisha's voice echoed in her head: "It's going to be okay. You know that." Did she? She crawled into bed. She slept.

Marie usually kept her curtains closed, but that morning they were open. The yellow morning sunlight enveloped her room, gently rousing her. She lingered between sleeping and waking for a while until she finally came to herself. She stretched, arms over her head. Piles of clothes and books were strewn on the floor, sheafs of paper covered her desk, and her easel stood in the corner with a drop cloth over it. It was a Saturday; Marie had nothing to do, but that didn't have to mean she was *going* to do nothing. She picked her phone up off the floor and checked her notifications. There was a voicemail from Maisha.

"Good morning Marie! I just wanted to check on you after last night. I really hope you're feeling better. If you ever need anything from me, please let me know. And I really hope you know that it's going to be okay." Marie smiled. It was, wasn't it?

When the voicemail ended, her phone buzzed again. An email from one of the places she'd applied to. *Hello Marie Lachance, We are interested in scheduling an interview for the internship position at…*

Marie put her phone on the pillow beside her and slid out of bed, the floorboards frigid under her feet. Outside her window, the trees seemed to glitter green in the sunlight. Maybe she was going to be okay. Marie realized, then, that the air felt a little lighter.