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Slenderman

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SLNDERMAN

Laura Ely

January in Budapest was quiet, relatively speaking. Roslyn had a whole floor of the hotel to herself and didn't have to worry about sharing a taxi with one of the pimps who tried to recruit her as he filled the cab with a thick cloud reeking of garlic and pepper. Everything in Budapest carried a hint of garlic with undertones of body odor that perpetuated the Dracula myth. She found that the locals were more receptive to her this time of year, when they weren't as concerned about being gawked at by tourists.

The women and children were kind to her, feeding her and keeping her up to date with their lives. The men were cold and kept their distance. Maybe they knew or suspected that she was lost, tainted. She hadn't told anyone about the pictures, but the locals still largely believed in Kirlianography. Before last year she would have dismissed the idea as local superstition. Now she wasn't sure anymore.

Four years ago Roslyn had graduated from college with a degree in photography. She was immediately hired by National Geographic, something she had dreamed about since she was a little girl. She was paid to pursue her two passions: travel and photography. Her first trip to Hungary had been two years ago. She had fallen in love with the country and the people right from the start, taking every assignment possible to the area. She had explored the small villages, the historic buildings of Budapest, and was familiar with the gypsies living in the Carpathians. Every time she came back, she made sure to save time for a hike up to the remains of Vlad Țepeș' castle. She was fascinated with the history and the folklore that spawned what she had assumed was only local superstitions.

The local superstitions had become Roslyn's personal beliefs, ever since the unknown man had begun to appear in her photographs. Initially she thought he must be a local and it was only irony that led him to be in her pictures. She quickly realized that he wasn't only in Hungary. He appeared in her pictures in Egypt, Paris, Ireland, China, and Argentina. No one seemed to notice him. Standing alone in a steady stream of foot traffic, no one moved out of his way or even noticed he was there.

When she first started seeing him in her pictures, Roslyn didn't share the information with her editors or the locals she interacted with. When she realized he only appeared on her camera, she approach Crina, a local woman she had befriended on her first trip to Budapest. After Roslyn explained the photograph, Crina crossed herself. With broken English, she was able to tell Roslyn the tale of Slenderman: an abnormally tall, skinny man in a suit who can only be seen through photographs. Like most other Budapest residents, Crina had seen Slenderman numerous times. Death always followed his appearance.

Roslyn shrugged off the chills coursing through her as she made her way back to the hotel. *There's no such thing as Slenderman*, she told herself. It was just another

myth like Bigfoot. She tossed and turned all night, wishing the hotel wasn't so eerily quiet. The following morning she woke with a start to the furious ringing of the bedside phone. It was Crina. The neighbor's daughter had gone missing during the night. They had called the police, but there was no sign of the girl. Crina was hysterical and hard to understand. Roslyn only understood a few necessary phrases in Hungarian, none of them appropriate for the situation. She changed quickly and grabbed her camera, not bothering with the rest of her equipment. None of this was going into her portfolio. She had to see if Slenderman appeared in any more photos.

She took a taxi as close as she could to Crina's house and walked the remaining few blocks. The police had blocked off a majority of the neighborhood to traffic, but walls of people crowded the police tape. Pushing her way through the crowd, Roslyn made her way to the front where an officer stopped her. She tried to explain that she was a friend, but he didn't understand English. Finally Crina caught sight of her and waved her over. The officer stepped back, letting her pass. Crina's arms were wrapped around the mother of the missing girl, as if keeping her from crumbling to the ground. Roslyn stood back, not wanting to crowd the woman. She had never met her before and didn't want to give the impression that she was there to exploit their grief. Crina nodded towards her and quietly introduced the mother as Julia. Roslyn gave her condolences, but was at a loss as to what to do. She had dealt with grieving mothers through her work with National Geographic, but never had she seen such fear or certainty that a missing child would never return.

Soon the crowds dispersed, realizing they weren't going to see a corpse or heart-warming reunion. Crina and Julia were escorted into Crina's home where Roslyn set to making tea. Most of the police left with the crowd. The women were assured that they would continue the search and that the house would be under surveillance. The officer left them, ignoring Julia's protestations that they would never find her daughter, that she was a victim of Slenderman. A couple hours later, Julia's parents arrived to stay with her while the search continued. Crina and Roslyn muttered comforting phrases as they left. With a knowing look, Crina signaled for Roslyn to pass over the camera. When she had first arrived on the scene, Roslyn had subtly begun taking pictures of the crowd and the officers wondering if Slenderman would appear again. She and Crina held their breath as they scanned through the photos. The tension eased when there was no sign of Slenderman in them. They had two more pictures left to check when they heard a heart-stopping scream from Julia's house.

Dropping the camera, Crina and Roslyn sprinted in the direction of the scream. They stopped at the open doorway, cautiously approaching, wary of the darkness inside the house. Everything was silent. The only prints in the freshly fallen snow

were theirs. Luggage lay scattered just inside the door along with a woman's shoe.

Crina called into the house, "Julia?"

Her voice echoed back at her, followed by silence. She exchanged a frightened look with Roslyn before stepping over the luggage into the living room. Roslyn took out her smartphone, using the camera flash to shed light on the scene. A creak sounded on the stairs behind the women. They whirled around, taking a picture of the empty stairway. Looking down at her phone, Roslyn noticed the pair of legs at the top of the steps. They were a man's legs covered in suit pants. Roslyn grabbed Crina's hand and bolted for the door. The last thing Roslyn saw on the blinding screen was the blank face of a man, void of any features.

As they ducked into Crina's house, police sirens sounded from a distance. Crina slammed the door shut behind them, hitting the deadbolt into place. Sirens sounding in the distance grew closer and soon the kitchen was filled with flashing lights. Crina and Roslyn watched through the curtained windows as armed police entered Julia's house. A short time later they regrouped on the front yard, having determined that the house was empty. Crina approached the police to share what they had witnessed in the house and ask why the surveillance team that had been assigned earlier hadn't responded. Several of the officers exchanged nervous glances before the sheriff explained that the surveillance car had been found abandoned about a block away.

"You can't stay here tonight. It's not safe," Roslyn said. "Come back to the hotel. We'll get a room for you there until this is figured out."

Back at the hotel, Roslyn helped Crina settle into the room next to hers. After saying good night, Roslyn headed back to her room with no intention of going to sleep. She downloaded all her pictures from the day to the computer so she could enlarge them and clear away some of the blurriness. Slenderman was in every single one of them. She didn't understand how she and Crina could have missed it earlier. He towered above the crowd with elongated arms frozen mid-gesture. Flipping through the pictures was like watching a movie in slow motion: in each shot he was closer and closer to the front of the crowd. In the final shot he was reaching for Crina and Julia.

She rushed next door to Crina's room. Crina needed to see this. She pounded on the door.

"Crina! Open the door! He was there the whole time."

Crina opened the door hesitantly, her bloodshot eyes betraying her stoic face.

"He couldn't have been. We've already been through the pictures."

"Just come see," said Roslyn. "Something changed when I put them on my computer."

Crina obliged, following her into the room and her desk. "What are you playing

at, Roslyn?”

Roslyn gaped at the computer screen, blank except for one small dialog box confirming that all files had been deleted.

“He was there!” Roslyn cried, “In every picture. I don’t understand.”

She pushed buttons trying to make the pictures reappear, but nothing worked. She told Crina about how he had approached them, reaching for her and Julia. Crina shook her head, clearly pissed.

“This isn’t funny, Roslyn. You don’t have to believe in him, but don’t patronize me. I know he took Julia and her daughter.”

Roslyn shook her head in disbelief, her eyes brimming with tears.

“I believe you, Crina. I was there. I saw him at Julia’s.”

“We need sleep,” Crina said. “We can discuss this in the morning”

Tears streamed from Roslyn’s eyes. A moment ago she had had proof. She pulled the memory chip from her computer and put it back in the camera, hoping that the pictures would still be there. She had no luck.

The following morning Roslyn woke to find her door wide open. She pulled some clothes on in a panic and hurried to Crina’s room. After pounding on the door for five minutes with no response, she went to the front desk to request a spare key. Her hand shook as she unlocked the door, afraid of what she might find on the other side. She had to swallow the lump of bile that formed in her throat. Roslyn knew she would never see her friend again. Bloody footprints covered the carpet, too big to be Crina’s. A puddle of thickening blood soaked through the bedding. The walls were splattered like a macabre impressionist painting. The fear overwhelmed her. He had been here and Crina had been alone. Roslyn’s heart was racing and she desperately wanted to sit down, catch her breath, and to wake up from this nightmare. There wasn’t a clean surface in the room to rest against without touching the cooling blood.

Roslyn stumbled into the hallway and sank to the floor. Sobs wracked her body as footsteps thundered up the stairs. She had a brief moment of panic that Slenderman had come back for her before the vomit she had been holding back came spewing out. The shift manager rounded the corner, before he became aware of Roslyn sitting on the floor shaking. Roslyn didn’t have the words to explain to him what lay on the opposite side of the door, but she repeated “rendőrség, police” until the manager was able to understand her broken Hungarian.

Within an hour, the police arrived with a crime scene investigator. They questioned Roslyn about the past twenty-four hours. She complied as much as she dared. The police hadn’t responded well when Crina had told them about Slenderman, so she left out the information about the missing pictures.

Roslyn didn't know where to go. She didn't dare stay at the hotel. She packed her bags quickly and left the building. She had local friends who would be willing to house her, but she didn't want to involve anyone else who could become a victim of Slenderman.

She made her way to the train station near the airport and contemplated going home, but the police hadn't cleared her to leave the country. She barricaded herself in the handicap bathroom, throwing the deadbolt and pushing the trashcan against the door. She felt relatively safe in the small room. She approached the sink to clean the blood off her face and hands, but felt compelled to record this moment: the blood, the fear in her eyes, the bags showing the sleepless nights. She dug through her bag for her camera and set it up for a self-portrait. After the blinding flash, she scrubbed her skin until it was as red as the blood that had covered it. Sitting down on her bag, she pulled the image she had just taken up on her camera. The camera fell out of her hand, crashing on the ground.

When the station guard managed to break the door down the following morning, the image was still displayed on the camera: Roslyn, covered in blood, with the hands of a faceless man around her neck.