

Squirrels

Jameson North walked the woods almost every day for going-on fifty years. He liked to walk. Each day, around mid-morning, he'd say goodbye to his wife Elsie and follow the meandering stepping stones from the house to the trees. Then he'd follow the trees out to the main road: Pine Tree Drive.

There wasn't much traffic. Occasionally a logging truck or lost tourist would pass by. Sometimes it was somebody he knew—Sheriff Austin, Ray or Martha Bertram, John Johnson Senior (his son was a deputy now, if you could believe it)—and they'd lean on their horn as they passed and he'd greet them with a brisk wave.

Little less than a mile down the road there was a parking space and a public bin (the spaces were usually empty, but the bin was always overflowing). There was a sign that had stood since the 1970s without being defaced. The sign informed tourists they were only a short walk away from the “World's Famous!” Woodsfell Falls. The trail had fallen into disrepair and was barely distinguishable except—for here and there—where handrails poked through overgrown bushes.

Jameson didn't need the handrails, nor did he follow the path (which not only lead to the Falls but also back around towards Blankville). Instead he turned right and strode a path of his own making: one that would eventually lead him home. It would have been easy to get lost if you didn't know the way: Jameson North knew the way.

What exactly were these walks to Jameson? He had never really thought about it. Jameson didn't consider himself a deep thinker, though he was, in a way. All he knew was that he found some comfort in the routine of this daily exertion, some communion with nature amongst the scattered pine cones.

Jameson was not far from the track when he realised something was different. He frowned although there were already such deep-set creases on his face that the expression was barely discernible.

One of the trees had been *hollowed out*; a large strip of bark peeled away to reveal a disturbing, unlikely interior. He stepped in to take a closer look.

“Oh... God...” he said and then he clutched his hands to his face.

Jameson stormed back to the house then, much faster than normal and was calling for Elsie to get the Sheriff on the blower before he'd even finished crossing the back lawn.

“What is it?” Elsie had asked. She was still beautiful after all these years.

Jameson was trembling and had trouble explaining. Elsie was concerned about her husband, but still she rang the Sheriff's office and spoke to the receptionist, Judy, who agreed to send the deputies out to speak with him. As she waited for them to arrive she made Jameson a cup of tea (which he didn't drink) and made a show of dusting the mantel. But she was really only keeping an eye on her husband.

When the deputies arrived—John Johnson (Junior) and Billy Howard—they sat down and chatted with Jameson in low, serious voices. Elsie left the room to make them cups of tea, but when she brought them back they were already rising to leave *and* they were taking Jameson with them so that he could show them what he'd seen.

"Make sure you bring him back in one piece!" Elsie shouted after them, holding a cup of tea in each hand.

"Of course, ma'am," said Billy and tipped his hat.

A few minutes later, the deputies stood in front of the disfigured tree while Jameson rested on a log a short way away.

"Squirrels," said deputy John Johnson. He was holding his hat between his hands and turning it slowly by the brim.

"I *told* you," said Jameson North.

Billy looked over John's shoulder and shuddered. "We should call the Sheriff," he said. "And one of us needs to take *him* home."

Which is how, no less than three hours after Elsie North had called the Sheriff's department on her husband's behalf, two deputies and Sheriff Austin himself found themselves only a short walk away from the "World's Famous!" Woodsfell Falls staring into a hollowed-out tree. Though to say the tree was hollowed-out may be misleading, for the tree was anything but empty.

"Jesus Christ," said Sheriff Austin. His first name was Alfred, but he didn't admit that unless he absolutely had to; people either called him Sheriff, or they called him Austin, or they called him Sheriff Austin. Nobody ever called him Alfred and if anyone ever tried to call him Alfie they'd probably spend a night in a cell.

Sheriff Austin peered into the tree.

Inside was a miniature bedroom. There was a tiny bed and tiny sheets and a tiny rug on the floor. There was a tiny red telephone sitting on a dresser and one of the drawers was half-open revealing tiny clothes that were neatly folded inside. Blood was smeared across the bedroom floor and at the end of the trail was a dead squirrel that appeared to have been trying to drag itself towards the telephone before it died. The squirrel was wearing tiny clothes. There was a slit in the pants for the tail to bush through.

Beyond the bedroom there was a corridor: lit with tiny blinking lights. There were paintings on the wall (abstract and impressionist) and a staircase that wound up and out of sight.

Below all that was a miniature cafeteria with a floor of black and white check. Tiny teacups rested on tiny benches. Outside the cafeteria there were doors leading to other rooms. There were stairs and ladders and, everywhere: squirrels, horribly murdered.

Some of the critters were wearing lab coats. Others were wearing cardigans and trousers or dresses. There was a squirrel in a security uniform holding a tiny rifle. The only thing they had in common was that they were all dead. Whether they had been killed or had killed each other was impossible to tell.

Sheriff Austin reached into the hollow and gripped the bark. “Give me a hand with this,” he said and John stepped forward. Together they peeled the bark away from the tree: once it started moving the rest crumbled away with little effort.

Hidden behind the bark were yet more rooms and yet more squirrels. And other things as well.

Hundreds of tiny computer monitors, many of which showed crackling static. There was a tiny radio upon one desk and the Sheriff turned his ear to listen. He could discern no sound, except...

And there were more dead squirrels.

The squirrels appeared to have been ambushed. They were dead wherever they had been working: sitting in tiny office chairs with their tails resting at their sides, or slumped over desks, or sprawled across control panels covered with dials and blinking lights.

The Sheriff reached into the tree and grabbed one of the control panels. He tried to pull it out but it was fixed tight. A slight vibration—the hum of electricity—ran through his fingers until he let it go.

“Some kind of sick joke,” said Billy.

“Could it be Jameson?” said John. “He said himself he walks this way every day. He could have been working on this for... years.”

“Not Jameson,” said the Sheriff. The old man didn’t have the imagination. Then he heard the sound of a camera clicking and saw that Billy was holding up his phone to take photos of the tree. “Stop that,” the Sheriff told him.

“But...”

“Does this look like a crime scene to you?” the Sheriff asked. Billy was a good kid, but not a great policeman—not yet. He didn’t answer but he put his phone back in his pocket.

The Sheriff moved around the tree, kicking up leaves.

“What’re you looking for, Sheriff?” asked John.

“That...” the Sheriff pointed. “Is powered. So there’s gotta be a plug or a cable or *something* here. Somewhere.”

“Look up,” said Billy. He had spotted a lunchbox-sized metal box nailed to the side of the tree. Leading away from the box was a wire, almost invisible unless you stood in just the right place. A short distance away, affixed to another tree, was another box and then another. So the trail went, leading through the forest.

The Sheriff grabbed Billy by the ear and grinned. “We’ll make a policeman out of you yet,” he said. Billy squirmed away, but grinned like a boy.

“John, stay here.” said the Sheriff. “Billy: come with me.”

Sheriff Alfie Austin (don’t worry, he can’t hear us) and deputy Billy Howard followed the wire through the woods.

Occasionally they lost sight of the slender cable and stood around for a few minutes until they found it again. The Sheriff took to marking trees they had passed with a pocket-knife, carving rough roman numerals into the wood so that they would not get turned around. Several times they passed the tree marked *III*.

Eventually the wire lead them to a beaten-down cabin, cloistered amongst the trees. The cabin was leaning sideways and looked like it had been abandoned for some time. The Sheriff glanced at Billy, who shrugged. Together they started towards the house.

The windows had never been cleaned; nor, it seemed, had the curtains beyond them. Almost everything about the house seemed wrong somehow, as though it had been built by somebody who hadn’t the first idea how to build a house. In itself that wasn’t terribly uncommon—all sorts of abandoned cabins littered these woods until they either fell down or were set on fire.

There was a generator against the side of the building, encased in a metal cabinet. The generator hummed. The Sheriff told Billy to keep looking around. Then he went back to the front door and knocked three or four times—very loudly. A policeman’s knock.

Gradually the door drew open and in that yawning sliver of darkness the Sheriff felt the beginnings of inexplicable terror. He froze in place, unable to even shift his hand to his holster.

“Hello?” said a wet, wavering voice. Light flooded into the cabin. Stood there was a grotesquely obese man wearing a dirty white singlet. The Sheriff could not tell if he was wearing pants. The man’s head was a good deal smaller than his body and his eyes were set very far back in his head. His mouth flapped gummily, devoid of teeth. Rotten smells wafted out from inside the cabin.

“I’m Sheriff Austin,” said the Sheriff. He could not tell the man’s age. “What’s your name, Sir?”

“Drey,” said the man and smiled without opening his mouth; there was something insincere about that smile.

“Andre?” asked the Sheriff.

“Drey,” repeated the man. “Wanna come inside? See my things?”

“Thank you,” the Sheriff was surprised. Strangers didn’t usually invite him in until he specifically asked them to. Being a policeman was like being a vampire, in a way. Except, of course, he didn’t need actually need an invitation.

“Billy?” said the Sheriff.

“I’m here,” said Billy, returning from the side of the cabin. “Want me to wait out here?”

Sheriff Austin nodded and stepped inside the cabin.

As the door swung closed the Sheriff immediately regretted setting foot inside. Suddenly, he was closed in with the smell of rot and wrongness. Perhaps he *should* call Billy in to experience this—it’d make him a better police officer. And yet, perhaps in a rare moment of sympathy, the Sheriff did not do so.

Garbage covered the floor from wall to wall. Much of it was old and some of it was inexplicable—soiled nappies wedged between mouldering cardboard boxes containing cracked roof tiles. The wheel of a bike—no, it was a unicycle—with rusted spokes. A dank smell, unhealthy wetness, rose from the filth.

“See what I made?” said Drey, pointing to the walls. Old wallpaper was peeling in places where panels remained, but in other sections the bare logs that had been used to build the cabin showed through. Nailed to every wall were dozens of shelves and upon every shelf were arranged taxidermy animals.

The animals were dressed in costumes ranging from military regalia to period dress. Most of them were squirrels, but the Sheriff also saw a malevolent-looking rabbit and the demon like head of a moose hanging askew from the wall.

“You made these?” asked the Sheriff turning in a slow circle. “*All* of them?” His eyes were still adjusting to the darkness of the cabin. What light filtered in through the windows was as dirty as the windows themselves.

“Drey,” said the man and smiled broadly, this time revealing that empty, gummy maw. Drey waddled to the corner of the room where there was a seat piled high with old newspapers. He flung them awkwardly onto the floor in a single spasmodic motion and they spread out in a pool of faded headlines: *Wrath of God... Cuba Blockade... Wrapped in Plastic... Gorbachev Seeks...*

“Want do sit?” Drey asked the Sheriff.

The Sheriff hoped his grimace did not show. He shook his head. “How long have you been living here, Andre? Do you go into Blanksville much?”

“Drey stay here,” the man did tipped himself sideways in such a way that it almost resembled a shrug; but it was not a shrug: it was a man tipping himself sideways in the approximation of one.

“These woods are state land,” said the Sheriff. “Do you understand what that means, Andre?”

“State land.” Drey repeated. The words sounded unnatural coming from his mouth.

“It means that you can’t just go around... putting things inside of trees.”

The Sheriff blinked as he realised he’d been staring at one particular shelf. The squirrels on the shelf appeared to be taking part in a military march. Had one of them moved? Of course not; it was merely the shadows in this place. Or maybe it was a living creature that had somehow found itself here, in this cabin of horrors. The Sheriff could not imagine the horror that a living squirrel might experience if it were to discover such a place.

“No skiwwel,” said Drey. “State land.”

“Yes,” said the Sheriff, doing his best to not breathe through his nose. “No more squirrels, Andre.”

Drey was shuffling towards the front door, his legs shifting rubbish like a snowplough. “No skiwwel,” he said without looking at the Sheriff. Then: “You go now.”

The Sheriff could tell by Andre’s tone of voice that the man was losing patience. Further berating him today would not achieve anything. He’d need to come back with a social worker, at least. And he’d need to check the land records to find out who this cabin actually belonged to, if it belonged to anyone at all.

“Thank you, Andre,” said the Sheriff, stepping outside. The door slammed shut behind him. The Sheriff took a few steps and inhaled deeply, savouring the stirring scents of the forest. “Billy?”

Billy quickly appeared by the Sheriff’s side and Austin told him what he’d seen inside the cabin—all those tiny taxidermied squirrels dressed up like little people.

“A crazy taxidermist,” said Billy. “Well then, I *suppose* that makes sense.”

“He shouldn’t be living alone in the woods like this,” said the Sheriff. “It’s unsanitary and it’s unsafe. But I don’t think he’s going to want to leave. Did you find anything?”

Billy nodded. “Generator runs on petrol,” he said. “There’s a few gallons of it stored in another shed out back.”

“Good work, Billy,” said the Sheriff.

When they made it back to James he was facing away from the tree. His face was pale.

“I can’t look at it any more,” he told them.

The Sheriff described what he and Billy had discovered, which prompted James to ask: “Have you ever seen anything like it, Sheriff?”

“Like *this*?” the Sheriff glanced back over his shoulder at the tree. “No.”

The Sheriff took his own patrol car back to the station and Billy and John went together. The radio was blasting golden oldies, interspersed with almost deafening bursts of crackle. John reached for the knob and switched the radio off. “Billy?” he said.

“What?” Billy raised an eyebrow. He did not take his eyes off the road.

“Something doesn’t sit right,” said John.

Billy flicked the indicator and switched lanes. “What do you mean?”

“Sheriff says the squirrels were... stuffed, right?”

“It’s called taxidermy,” said Billy.

“Well back there I... *felt* one of them.”

“You *felt* a squirrel?” Billy was grinning now. “Did you ask for its consent? I’m not sure you should say anything else John, or I might need to take you in for questioning.”

“It was dead,” said James. “But it wasn’t stuffed.”

John could still feel the dead squirrel in his hand. He had been able to feel its bones and the shapes of tiny organs. It had *squelched*. When they got to the station he told the Sheriff, but Austin shrugged it off.

“The man is crazy,” the Sheriff said. “Maybe he’s experimenting with new styles. Or maybe he’s just lost it altogether. Either way, I’ll make some calls tomorrow and see what we can do about it. In the meantime: not a word. We don’t want to turn that devil-cursed squirrel tree into a tourist attraction, y’hear?”

Billy stayed to work the handover shift with deputy Gilles, who would arrive shortly. The Sheriff and deputy John went home.

The Sheriff did not sleep well that night. He dreamt the whole day over again, but this time when he spoke to Andre he noticed something that he hadn’t seen before... something *glinting* in the man’s mouth when he had smiled. Something *moving*.

And now—trapped in a dream from which he could not wake—Sheriff Alfie Austin saw a tiny, furry face protruding from the back of Andre’s throat: a living squirrel staring at him, chittering.

Chittering.