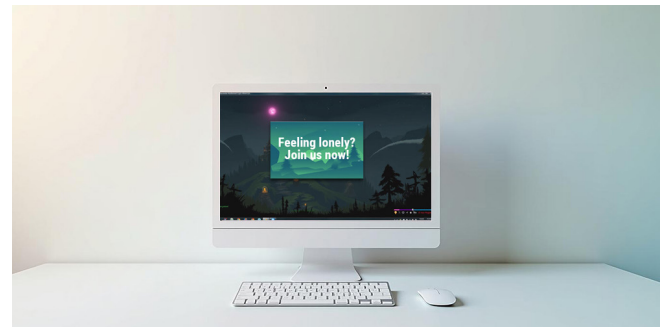


You Won't Last

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It was a misclick. A bright green pop-up called to me, flashing wretchedly for my attention. 'Feeling lonely? Join us now!' I'd seen a billion pop-ups exactly like it, screaming fake promises, telling me I could save my future if I just 'clicked here!'

I usually ignored them. I would press that minuscule X in the corner and return to my virtual world. But I misclicked.

I got a parcel the next day; inconspicuous, if not for the little lime-coloured ribbon that read 'Thanks for clicking!' I was hesitant to open it, but curiosity got the better of me.

I sliced the box open in my bedroom.

I will admit my bedroom is quite boring. I don't have so much as a poster to cover the white walls that surround my bed, the only portion of personality on display being a wooden cross hung above my bed. However it is the most private area I have, and I had a sneaking suspicion that I wouldn't want my parents to see whatever was inside the green gift.

I pulled the cardboard flaps apart and was welcomed by the piercing shrill of what sounded like a newborn baby amplified by a concert speaker.

There was a creature inside that box. At the time, I had wondered how it was alive; the box didn't have any holes in it after all, but looking back, I don't think something like that needs oxygen. It was pale, with veins visible through its olive skin. It looked almost like a foetus, but it was far too large, and it was still... moving. I felt a savoury liquid seep into my mouth, like blood, but without the metallic taste. Seeing it for the first time, I was just as intrigued as I was disgusted. It was, by all means, nauseating, slimy and just generally horrible to look at. Yet, I found myself compelled by it, some mix of feelings I did not understand.

It looked at me. It looked even though it did not have eyes. It was then I decided to close the flaps, now covered in mucus, and tuck it gently into the cramped space beneath my bed. I told myself I didn't want to see it again, but it was a stupid lie.

In the night, I woke up to an awful smell, like rotten eggs. I flicked a switch and found the whole floor enveloped by some kind of green gas. My first thought was what my parents would think happened to the carpet, but after I removed myself from the sleep-induced haze, I turned my attention to the package. Reaching in and holding it, the gas sprayed gently onto my arm. I felt the vapour stain my fingers a horrible bruised green as it began to corrupt my skin. I wanted to investigate further, but my common sense won over, so I crept down the hall, out of the house, and threw the box into the red bin.

It was under my bed again the next night.

I was terrified. I wanted to run around the room, jump up and down and grab my parents' attention. But I couldn't do that. Bring it up with my parents? Please. It's embarrassing. Heck, it's shameful! A sin! They'd pour boiling water over my skin. Let the corruption wash off me.

I had to get rid of it.

It may have been an overreaction, but I sunk that box in a nearby creek. A flash flood let the creek gush as though God himself wanted me to get rid of that box. Using a cinder block, I sunk the creature with a rope strangling its neck.

I had dreams the next night. Dreams of my creature. I woke up hot and sweating. In a fit of what I can only compare to some form of lust, I ran outside, slamming the door behind me and jumped into the rushing creek.

Sopping wet in my bed, I drifted to sleep with my creature cuddled softly between my arms. When I woke up, I realised what I'd done. I couldn't get rid of it. I tried, over and over and over, to kill it, to somehow block it out of my life.

One website, a hub of other lost souls, told me all the benefits of getting rid of the thing that had begun to fester in my walls. It told me my mind would be cleared and my energy restored.

But when I blinked, I would always see my creature. I couldn't focus on anything else, and I'd find myself sleeping with it again the next night.

At one point, out at the mall, I walked past a mannequin wearing a green wetsuit. Just that shade, the shade of rotten wood, forced me to go see my creature again.

The creature outgrew its original box, so I moved it elsewhere, but it just kept growing and growing. It had eyes now, three of them, with large black crosses instead of pupils. It grew a mouth yet it never ate. It turned from a fleshy abomination into something almost goopy.

Shades of green stained my walls and carpet, but nobody noticed but me. Or maybe they did and just pretended not to.

My room began to feel like an awful place. Just being there made me feel greasy. It was warm and moist with the ever-present feelings of decay and corruption evident in every corner of the room. The rot made its way onto my clothes, staining each of them with their unique kind of green phlegm.

My parents grew worried; of course they would. Although they couldn't see the crawling rot, they noticed the changes in my behaviour. I had been such a good kid. Good grades, witty humour, and a constant smile; the kind of guy you'd see as the lead in whatever production the school was ushering out this year.

Now I was indistinguishable from the filth that surrounded me.

One night, I woke up, and I couldn't move my arms or legs. I opened my eyes and my creature was there in the corner, staring at me with massive white eyes. The three crossed irises dilated at the sight of me.

I realised my wrists and ankles were tied haphazardly to the corners of my bed with blackened tendrils.

As it observed me, it moved. It crawled its way onto the bed, inching closer and closer as if it were desperate to make its way onto me. Its slimy body dragged across mine, leaving a layer of lime mucus I'd rather forget. It put its face directly onto mine, putting its tiny mouth towards my ear. After what felt like hours of this horrible thing trying to manage more than a whimper, it purred three simple words: "I love you."

It curled up on my chest, leaving my restricted self powerless to stop it. It cuddled onto me, its almost human face looking at me with a minute yet caring smile. It was at this point I let the creature eat me. It unhinged its jaw, inching my body through its mouth like it were a snake. I felt every bit of its slimy digestive tract as I passed through it. Acid dripped onto my face and into my eyes as I was squeezed so tightly through the transparent jelly-like flesh of my creature. It took thirty-four minutes until it was whittling the tips of my fingers to mere flesh before I managed to scrape my way out of the gelatinous thing that had consumed me.

I won't go over what happened that night. I will just admit that I submitted to vile feelings and that I seemingly liked it.

It's gotten worse. I do it myself now. It's part of my routine, some kind of gross habit. Every night I wake up and it stares at me. I call it to me, like a grotesque pet. I can't sleep without it. I can't concentrate without it. I will be minding my own business, at work, or school, or just at the shops, and my thoughts will always drift back to it.

I've tried to stay away, but it always comes back to me; I always come back to it. It was just an accident. Why do I have to feel like this? Why can't I just enjoy it? Or not have it at all? Why do I have to feel like this?

I just want to go back to feeling bad about it, but I can't even do that anymore.