

RITUAL

written by

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EXT. WOODED AREA - NIGHT

A dense landscape. Hills and trees browned by the autumn air. Fog rolls in.

EXT. WOODED AREA, CLEARING - NIGHT

A RING OF TORCHES arranged in a circle. In the center, a CRUDE SYMBOL. Not Satanic. Not pagan. Not religious at all. More like a child's doodle.

In the distance, SOFT HUMMING. A gentle lullaby.

THEN --

SOMEONE STEPS INTO VIEW.

A WOMAN IN A DARK CLOAK, hood up, tufts of blonde hair peaking out. She moves slowly, but with purpose.

She reaches the circle. Walks into the center. Lays down on the ground, face-up, arms splayed out like a starfish.

And then she waits.

A heartbeat later, A TALL MAN approaches, wearing an identical cloak. In his right hand he holds a GNARLY STAFF -- crooked wood topped with A HUMAN HEAD. EYES MISSING. TONGUE STICKING OUT. HAIR SHAVED.

The Tall Man stabs the staff into the ground. The exposed tongue wobbles a bit.

TALL MAN

Do you know what is required of
you, child?

BLONDE WOMAN

Yes.

TALL MAN

Are you prepared to make the
ultimate sacrifice? To complete
the ritual?

BLONDE WOMAN

Yes.

TALL MAN

Then let us begin!

He turns toward the woods.

A GROUP OF SIX CLOAKED FIGURES WAIT IN THE TREE LINE.

The Tall Man motions for them to join him.

They do so without hesitation.

Soon the circle of torches is surrounded by men and women of all in their 20s, wearing identical cloaks. Each of them hum the same tune.

It would be beautiful, if not for the context.

The Blonde Woman looks around the circle at the group, smiling as if this is the greatest day of her life.

The Tall Man raises the staff --

-- STABS IT DOWN INTO THE MUD --

-- WHERE IT BREAKS.

The head goes TUMBLING off the staff, skittering along the ground. The tongue flies out.

Instantly, the Tall Man's facade breaks. Now he's just some guy -- a guy named JACOB.

JACOB

Goddammit! Kylie, I thought you said we had a bigger budget this time!

The group of robes college kids break character as well. The Blonde Woman groans. Moves to a sitting position, disappointed.

BLONDE WOMAN

It's freezing down here, guys.

REVEAL:

A FILM CREW -- a small one, but still -- standing behind a rather CHEAP CAMERA sitting on a tripod.

KYLIE, 21, the director, sighs. Storms forward into the circle. Goes to fetch the prop head.

KYLIE

The girl on Etsy said it was handmade from the finest materials.

JACOB

I think you got scammed. Make sure you leave her a one star review.

Kylie squats down. Picks up the head. Gives it a good shake to see if anything else is going to fall off.

The Blonde Woman -- real name SARAH -- pulls back her hood.

SARAH
I'm not trying to be a diva --

JACOB
But you're going to anyway.

SARAH
Fuck off, Jacob!
(to Kylie)
I can't keep working like this.
This shit is unprofessional.

Kylie straightens, wedging the prop head under her arm. She stares down the rest of the group, trying to stay calm.

She's not doing so well.

KYLIE
I'm doing the best I can, people.
If that's not good enough for you,
then you're all welcome to leave.

EXT. WOODED AREA - NIGHT

Jacob and the crew load their gear into the back of a creepy-adjacent WHITE VAN.

Kylie follows Jacob back and forth as he loads the equipment.

KYLIE
Come on, I said I was sorry.

JACOB
Sometimes it's not enough to say
you're sorry, Kylie. You have to
mean it.

KYLIE
I do mean it!

Jacob stops, turns. Gives Kylie a once-over.

JACOB
Yeah... I don't believe you. No
offense.

KYLIE
I'll pay you double.

JACOB
You're not paying me anything.
Zero times two is still zero.

Kylie stops to watch the others loading gear. She glances back at the spot where the "ritual" was taking place. Returns her gaze to Jacob.

KYLIE
I know I can be a bitch
sometimes...

JACOB
What, no...

KYLIE
I'm trying to apologize, asshole.
I'm sorry.

JACOB
I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry that
this all fell apart. But people
have class tomorrow. We're all
tired and cold and hungry.
(beat)
Maybe this weekend.

KYLIE
There might be people camping here
on the weekend!

JACOB
Then we can find somewhere else.
They're woods. You just need
trees. If we can find trees, we're
good.

EXT. WOODED AREA - MOMENTS LATER

The van now fully loaded, Jacob slides the door closed. Most of the other cars have left, only a couple stragglers left behind collecting odds and ends.

Jacob starts for the driver side door of the van, fishing the keys from his pocket.

Kylie meanders toward the passenger side, arms folded, still clearly pissed.

JACOB
You coming or not?

KYLIE
Yeah, I'm coming. Will you --?

THEN --

A MONSTROUS GROWL.

COMING FROM DEEP WITHIN THE WOODS.

Kylie freezes. Turns toward the direction of the noise.

KYLIE

Did you hear that?

Jacob is already rushing toward her, glancing into the darkness.

JACOB

What the hell was that?

KYLIE

I don't know.

SARAH and GREG, 22 and 20, respectively, RUN over to join Jacob and Kylie.

GREG

This isn't funny, guys.

KYLIE

It's not a joke. I don't know what that was.

She looks at Jacob.

JACOB

I don't know what it is! Maybe it's a mountain lion or something.

KYLIE

I've never heard a mountain lion that sounded like that.

SARAH

Me neither.

JACOB

If you guys wanna go check it out, go for it. I'm getting the fuck out of here.

He turns and starts toward the van.

JACOB

If you have any intelligence at all, come with me.

But the others don't move. Calling Jacob's bluff.

Jacob makes it about ten steps before he realizes no one is coming with him. He stops. Turns back to the group.

JACOB

People, come on! Do you wanna get ripped apart by some weird ass animal? This is how stupid people get killed! Don't you guys listen to podcasts?

But none of them are looking at him. Their gaze is held firmly on the tree line.

Realizing they're not listening, Jacob follows their eye line.

AND THAT'S WHEN HE SEES IT --

A LARGE, SKELETAL CREATURE. BITS OF DARK FUR COVERING ITS BODY. A BARE SKULL MAKES UP ITS HEAD, A PAIR OF CROOKED ANTLERS GROWING HAPHAZARDLY FROM THE SIDES. DARK, HOLLOW EYES.

The creature from Algonquian folklore.

"The evil spirit that devours mankind."

THE WENDIGO.

JACOB

(high pitched)

What the fuck is that...?

KYLIE

I don't know.

GREG

I don't think it's friendly.

SARAH

I think we need to get out of here...

JACOB

Are you stupid?! Turning your back to a predator is the worst thing you can do. It triggers its chase down response.

KYLIE

How do you know that thing's a predator?

Jacob gives her a *seriously?* look.

JACOB
Okay, everything about that thing
screams predator.

SARAH
Is it Bigfoot?

GREG
I don't think it's big enough to
be a Bigfoot.

KYLIE
I don't care what it is, everyone
back up slowly. Greg, Sarah, you
guys go first.

JACOB
Why do they get to go first?

KYLIE
Because I feel bad.

JACOB
What about us?

KYLIE
We'll be --

The Wendigo GROWLS, drawing their attention. But most
frightening -- IT STARTS MOVING TOWARD THEM.

Slowly, patiently.

JACOB
Holy shit!

GREG
Run!

JACOB
Don't!

TOO LATE.

Greg turns around. SPRINTS toward his car, trying to get his
carabiner off his belt loop. It's STUCK.

GREG
Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!

Sarah RUSHES after him, SCREAMING --

SARAH
GET THE KEYS! GET THE KEYS!

GREG
I'M FUCKING TRYING!

The Wendigo GALLOPS FORWARD ON LONG LIMBS, its gait somewhere between a horse trot and a gorilla stampede. Its MASSIVE CLAWS tear up tufts of grass and mud, flinging the debris in all directions.

JACOB
Jesus Christ!

With the whole *not running* thing out the window, Jacob and Kylie BOOK IT TO THE VAN.

BEHIND THEM --

The Wendigo LEAPS. Its massive frame LANDS ON TOP OF GREG, CLAWS DIGGING INTO FLESH. Ripping away bits and pieces.

The sound of RIPPING CLOTHING and SHREDDING FLESH mingles with the screams from Sarah, nearly drowning her out.

LIMBS FLY INTO THE AIR. BLOOD SPURTS LIKE MINIATURE FOUNTAINS.

With one final scream, Greg goes limp. Dead.

The Wendigo rounds on Sarah, baring its wide, fang-filled mouth.

IT POUNCES.

In the BACKGROUND, Jacob's van SPEWS DIRT AS IT SPEEDS AWAY.

EXT. NARROW ROAD, WOODED AREA - NIGHT

Jacob's van drives along, following the curvy road. Headlights providing little visibility in the fog.

INT. JACOB'S VAN - NIGHT

Jacob drives in silence. Eyes out the windshield. Both hands white-knuckling the steering wheel.

Kylie stares out her window, tears streaming down her face.

KYLIE
Are we assholes for leaving?

She puts her face in her hands.

KYLIE
We're fucking assholes, aren't we?
We left them to die!

JACOB

We're not assholes! What else could we do? We'll call the cops as soon as we get cell service. They can come out and deal with... whatever the hell that thing is.

KYLIE

We should've stopped it.

JACOB

How? How, exactly, were we going to stop it?

KYLIE

I don't know, but we could've tried something. Maybe we could've thrown some rocks at it or something to make it run away. I don't fucking know...

(beat)

I just wanted to get the last shots for Ritual tonight.

Jacob glances sideways at her. He can't believe it.

JACOB

Are you serious right now? Your short film? That's what you're worried about?

KYLIE

No! I'm just saying I never wanted anyone to get hurt.

JACOB

Well, we failed.

KYLIE

I'm just sorry we ever came out here. I wish I'd never --

Jacob SLAMS ON THE BREAKS, jerking the car -- and them -- to a VIOLENT STOP.

Kylie takes a moment to feel around on her neck, making sure nothing's broken.

KYLIE

What the hell?

She looks at Jacob -- but he's too busy looking out the windshield.

Kylie looks out at --

The Wendigo, standing in the center of the road, blood covering its mouth and a good deal of the fur below its neck.

KYLIE

Back up!

Jacob doesn't have to be told twice. He throws the van into reverse, stomps the gas pedal.

The van SQUEALS BACKWARD.

Trying to maintain his composure -- and failing miserably -- Jacob looks over his shoulder, trying to navigate the tricky road without running off.

Kylie keeps her eyes on the Wendigo.

It takes a few seconds to stare at them, tilting its head side-to-side like a curious dog.

AND THEN IT STARTS CHASING THEM.

KYLIE

It's coming after us!

JACOB

I'm trying!

EXT. NARROW ROAD, WOODED AREA - NIGHT

The van fishtails, nearly running over the side: a large drop leading to a RUSHING RIVER.

The Wendigo SPRINTS forward in GIANT STRIDES, several feet at a time, closing the gap in seconds.

After getting up a good running start it JUMPS, SOARING toward Jacob's van.

INT. JACOB'S VAN - NIGHT

The windshield SHATTERS, glass spraying the front seat, over Kylie and Jacob's bodies. They SCREAM.

Jacob grabs the wheel, turning it in all directions to try and gain control.

It's too late.

EXT. NARROW ROAD, WOODED AREA - NIGHT

The van CRASHES into the hillside, the Wendigo still attached.

A gentle puff of smoke billows from the hood, bathing the Wendigo in an ominous aura it doesn't really need.

INT. JACOB'S VAN - NIGHT

Kylie and Jacob are FROZEN IN TERROR, eyes on the Wendigo, no glass separating them now.

The Wendigo LICKS ITS MOUTH.

It OPENS WIDE --

THEN LUNGES FORWARD!

EXT. NARROW ROAD, WOODED AREA - NIGHT

The van ROCKS VIOLENTLY as the Wendigo does its thing. SCREAMS and an unsettling SQUELCHING sound fill the otherwise calm night air.

The sound of INCOMPREHENSIBLE SUFFERING.

And then everything goes silent.

As the LOW GROWL of the Wendigo drifts from the van --

SMASH TO BLACK.