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Friday, July 1st, 2022, 11:02 PM, Picher, Oklahoma ...

A wicked stench—like that of sludge and oil—woke up Arnold Linderman’s nose before his mind did.

Blinking wearily, Arnold wondered what in the world had awakened him at such a late hour before pain flared in his joints, making him gasp involuntarily in bed.

He reached over to wake his wife, but his hand touched only an empty pillow beside him.

Right, Arnold thought, staring at the empty pillow. *She’s been dead for years.*

Shaking his head, Arnold tried to go back to sleep, but he couldn’t. Between the awful stench and his own creaking old bones, Arnold couldn’t get back to sleep as quickly as he used to.

Sighing, Arnold stood up and walked over to the window. It was incredibly hot tonight and he never slept well when it was this hot. He hoped that opening the window and letting in a soft breeze might cool things down a bit, because his old house didn’t have air conditioning and he didn’t want it.

After all, Arnold was the last person still living in Picher. And he wasn’t expecting to live much longer, if his health kept declining the way it did.

Opening the window was when Arnold first smelled it: A strong, nearly overpowering stench, like oil mixed with human feces. The stench nearly made him gag, forcing him to cover his nostrils with his hand.

Normally, Arnold was not bothered by the smells of Picher. Thanks to the massive piles of chat—leftover from the days of Picher as a bustling mining town—everywhere, the entire town always smelled slightly of lead. That included the groundwater, which Arnold did his best to filter, but he still sometimes caught a whiff of lead whenever he showered or drank tap water.

But this smell was different. Stronger and thicker than the stench of lead, it smelled what Arnold often imagined the sewers of New York City and other major cities might smell like. It was almost enough to make him literally ill, clutching the window sill for support, his achy bones demanding he go back to bed right away.

Normally, Arnold would have taken that as a hint to return to bed.

If he hadn’t also heard something sloshing around outside.

Peering out the window, Arnold couldn’t see much. The moon wasn’t out tonight and it was almost midnight. Most of the streetlights in Picher had long since been turned off back when the city had effectively voted itself out of existence. The only light that Arnold had to see by was the light from the ceiling of his bedroom, but that was of little help in revealing what was out there.

Because Arnold *was* sure he’d heard something moving outside.

And not any of the deer or rabbits or other wildlife that had moved into Picher since the town was abandoned thirteen years ago, either.

Arnold left his room, grabbing a bandanna with the Picher Gorillas logo emblazoned on it. Wrapping the bandanna around his nose and mouth, Arnold made his way down the stairs to the pharmacy that he owned. His living quarters were on the second floor while the pharmacy itself was the first floor.

Before leaving the house, however, Arnold grabbed two things:

His flashlight.

And his rifle.

The hinges of the door creaked too loudly for Arnold's tastes as he opened it and peeked his head out. He still did not see anything, but the stench was overwhelming. He fumbled with his flashlight, flicked it on, and shone it around his backdoor.

The light landed on his trashcan ... or rather, where his trashcan *had* been. What remained of his trashcan was a half-eaten lid and a slimy puddle of sludge and oil that made Arnold wish he still had his grandfather's old WWI gas mask.

But it wasn't just a puddle. A long trail of slime, sludge, and oil extended from the trashcan well past the range of Arnold's flashlight.

Katie, Arnold's wife, likely would have told him to go back into the house, lock up, and wait until the morning before investigating what happened to their trashcan.

But Arnold, always too curious for his own good, didn't listen to her then and wasn't going to listen to her now that she was gone. Besides, Arnold, being the last resident of Picher, had come to think of himself as the ghost town's last line of defense.

And anything that could eat an entire trashcan whole was almost certainly a threat.

Closing the door quietly behind him, Arnold followed the trail of slime and sludge, being careful not to touch it. He put on his old miner's hat—the hat that had belonged to his father, who had worked in the Picher mines for his whole life—and clutched the rifle with both hands.

As Arnold followed the trail, he found things far more disturbing than a half-eaten trashcan lid. Green grass charred black as if set on fire, corpses of rabbits, deer, and raccoons covered so thickly in the black slime that Arnold barely recognized them, and similar signs of death everywhere.

A crazy thought occurred to Arnold as he walked: It was almost as if whatever monster he was following could kill things just by touching them.

But Arnold dismissed that thought. Arnold was a practical man. He didn't believe in myths, legends, or anything science couldn't prove.

Even so, Arnold struggled to think of a scientific explanation for what looked like the chat of Picher coming to life and moving on its own.

That was when Arnold heard the sloshing sounds again. He looked up, his headlamp revealing the mountains of white chat around him. He hadn't realized how far out of the town he had walked. Everywhere he looked, he saw the lead-filled chat hills standing silently, a familiar, if unpleasant, sight during the day, but absolutely eerie at night.

But it was the massive, bulky form about ten feet away from him that truly caught Arnold's attention. In all of his 66 years of living in Picher, Arnold had never seen anything like the creature before him. It looked like a living, breathing ball of slime and garbage. The stench was overpowering this close to it, to the point where Arnold's bandanna did nothing to protect his nose from it. His eyes started to water, but he could still see the creature itself.

Although the creature did not seem to notice him yet. As Arnold watched, the creature made chomping sounds like it was eating something, although what, Arnold could not even fathom to guess.

Nor did he want to.

He had seen enough.

It was time to leave.

Arnold took one step back ... right onto a glass bottle he had not seen in the shadows, breaking it in two under his boot.

The sound of glass breaking was too loud in the silence of the night.

The monster stopped eating. It then began to 'rise' higher and higher until it was twice as tall as Arnold before turning around to face him, glowing green eyes peering out of a misshapen face at him.

Arnold gasped. "What in God's green earth is—?"

Arnold did not get to finish his sentence before the monster opened its mouth wide and lunged toward him.

Instinctively, Arnold raised his rifle and fired several times at it. The bullets hit home, causing the monster to stop and moan in pain, although Arnold also thought he heard it say, in a monstrous, low voice, "Ow ..."

But Arnold did not stop to listen. As soon as the creature stopped, Arnold turned and ran. He ran as fast as his achy, old bones would go, faster even, driven by pure adrenaline to leave this creature behind and forget it existed.

Yet deep down in Arnold's heart, he knew that he was no longer the only resident of Picher, Oklahoma anymore.

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