

## The Old Well

Nobody in the town liked to talk about it, but the old well in the park scared people stiff. The well was just a little thing, an inconspicuous amalgamation of worn stones. It was covered with boards, and nobody, as far as anyone could remember, had ever fallen into it, but almost no one liked to go near it. It was probably the sound. From the depths of the well, one could hear moaning. According to the more scientifically-minded locals, the water running deep underground flowed in such a way that it created the faint sound. But most people just cared that it gave them goosebumps.

Leroy Muria was known to check the boards over the well every day. The consensus among the townspeople was that he wasn't quite right in the head, and hadn't been since almost ten years ago. He'd always liked to take walks through the park, and on one of them, late at night, some kind of wild animal had attacked him. A huge chunk had been bitten out of his left arm; the doctor said that he was lucky to be alive. No one had been able to figure out what had attacked him though. Leroy Muria had been entirely unwilling to recount what had happened, and didn't actually speak much at all anymore. Animal control concluded that it was some type of bear, but the more superstitious locals had other ideas. They thought that, whatever it was, it had to do with that well.

Ever since then, Leroy would take a folding chair out every day, sit down, and watch the well. He'd stay like that for hours upon hours, his eyes glued to the well, alert for any sign of a disturbance. Every once in a while he'd stand up and test the boards once more, hammering any nails that had come even slightly loose deep into the stones. Then he'd sit back down and keep watching and listening. Sometimes he'd bring a flashlight or spend all night there. One time he'd

even stayed out in a blizzard and been half covered by snow. But still he sat there, keeping watch.

Late one autumn afternoon, Leroy seemed far more jumpy than normal. He was muttering to himself as he stared at the well, and every minute or two he'd get up, check it again, and hammer the nails furiously into place despite having done so the last time. Then he'd put his ear to the boards to listen carefully. Ms. Lars, a middle-aged woman whose house bordered the park, stopped to watch him.

"Listening for something, Leroy?" Ms. Lars had never been particularly superstitious, but she had lived in the town her whole life, and the well had always given her the creeps.

Leroy nodded and beckoned for her to approach. She did so cautiously, not sure if she was scared of the well or the man. Leroy gestured for her to put her ear to the boards and she did so after a moment's hesitation.

"What am I listening for?" She could hear the familiar, faint moaning through the wood, but nothing out of the ordinary. "Is that... sound a bit louder than usual?" Indeed, the moaning wasn't usually so audible, but Leroy shook his head.

"Listen," he whispered, his voice shaking. Ms. Lars glanced up at Leroy, surprised. Leroy never spoke much - in fact, Ms. Lars couldn't remember the last time that she'd heard him speak. He was shaking slightly, his white knuckles clenching the hammer. His breath came in and out in rapid gasps.

"Are you okay?" She asked. "You don't seem well, Leroy."

He glared at her. "Listen!"

Ms. Lars strained to hear anything beyond the moaning, but couldn't. She was just about to give up listening when she heard something else. A soft scraping, like something sharp sliding

across stones. It came at intermittent intervals, only for a few seconds at a time, and was barely audible. Ms. Lars was amazed that Leroy had noticed it. But then again, he had spent countless days listening to the well. Even the tiniest variance in the sound couldn't go long without him noticing it. "I hear a scraping sound," Ms. Lars whispered.

Leroy nodded rapidly, almost frenziedly. He lifted his ear from the boards and hefted his hammer, bashing the nails deeper into the worn rocks. If Ms. Lars wasn't so rattled herself, she'd complain about the racket. Instead, it made her feel more than a bit reassured that the well was safely sealed. She paused to collect herself for a minute.

"I'm sure it's nothing," she said, trying to reassure herself as much as him. "Well, I had best be going. Can't be late." She didn't really have anything to be late for, but she didn't want to stay there any longer with the half-mad man and that well.

She walked briskly away, sparing one more glance over her shoulder to see Leroy, who had sat back down in the chair, staring at the well. She gave a little shudder, then hurried home. Best to leave things like that alone.

But that whole evening, she couldn't put it out of her mind. She kept glancing out of her window, and was vaguely reassured to spy Leroy Muria still sitting in vigil, a silent shadow watching the well. Every few minutes she'd glance out again, almost expecting him to have vanished, but he was still there as always. After a few hours it got so dark that she couldn't see him anymore, no matter how much she strained her eyes. Eventually, she grabbed a flashlight and went out to check on him.

She let out a sigh of relief when she spied him sitting where he had been before. "Hello, Leroy!" She called.

Leroy didn't answer, just sat there, still.

“Leroy?” She approached him slowly. “Are you okay?”

His face was ashen, as though he’d seen a ghost. He gestured wildly at the well.

“What is it?” Ms. Lars asked. The well looked fine, and she couldn’t hear anything

“It’s quiet,” he murmured. And indeed it was. For the first time in her life, Ms. Lars couldn’t hear the moaning sound coming from the well. She leaned down and put her ear to the boards, but still couldn’t hear anything. She paused, then shook her head.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “The water’s just at a low ebb, or something.” Still, her heart was racing. “You had better get inside,” she added firmly.

Leroy shook his head. “It’s quiet,” he repeated, as if struck dumb.

“I know,” Ms. Lars said.

“It’s never quiet.” He didn’t make any move to head inside.

“I’m leaving,” said Ms. Lars. She turned to head back to her house. “You really shouldn’t stay out here,” she yelled over her shoulder. “You’ll catch a cold!” Although, if she were honest, it wasn’t the cold that she was worried about.

She had almost reached her house when she heard a crash behind her, like something smashing through wood. She spun around. “Leroy?”

Somebody screamed. The light flashed across the empty seat by the well. Ms. Lars’ footsteps echoed in the now-silent night. The well’s top was smashed, bits of wood lying scattered around it. Leroy’s hammer lay abandoned in the dirt. Drops of crimson glinted in the flashlight’s beam. The well lay open. Broken planks ran around the outside, crooked teeth on a gaping maw. And down, in the darkness, something large and white, something just at the edge of sight, was climbing downwards, its long claws scrabbling on the well’s crumbling stones. As Ms. Lars stared downwards, she saw huge, dark eyes, eyes that had never seen the sun but only a

world of darkness, staring up at her from the well's depths. The creature let out a long, ghastly moan, and for a second, Ms. Lars feared that it would come back for her, but it continued downwards. Then the darkness swallows the beast, and it was gone.

The next day, there was quite a bit of head-scratching among the town officials, who had to explain the broken planks and a man's disappearance. Eventually, they decided that the planks must have been loosely secured, and Leroy Muria had fallen through one night when he was trying to check them. An attempt to recover the body had been cut short when the well proved to be far deeper than expected. A tragic end for Mr. Muria, all agreed, but nothing too abnormal. Of course, that didn't explain the blood, or the fact that the planks had evidently been smashed from the inside, but people have a remarkable propensity to overlook the truth when it doesn't fit their story. There were, of course, superstitious whispers, but there always are.

A few days later, Ms. Lars went outside and stared at the well for a while. She hadn't told anyone what she had seen. She wasn't sure what good it would do, even if they believed her. But she stood there and said a quick prayer, that maybe, somehow, Leroy was okay. Then, she went inside and grabbed a few planks and a hammer, before nailing the wood into place over the hole. She lugged a chair from inside and sat down next to the well. She stared at it, and listened. And just at the edge of her hearing, she could hear the faintest of moans, echoing up from deep inside the earth.