

CLICK!

by Natalie Novella

The leaves crunched under my exhausted feet as I trekked through the never-ending woods. This was not where I planned to end up during my trip to Russia, but it's exactly what I needed to take my mind off of my hectic life. In a bout of clumsiness, I had slipped and tumbled off the hiking trail I was on and stood up to find myself in this surreal, calm, woodland. There's something so tranquil about the woods around me. I have no idea how I'm going to find my way out of here, and I don't even think I want to. There is something so peaceful about the swaying trees and the running creek. The serene silence was relaxing. But one question arose in the back of my mind: *Where are all the animals?*

Eh, this is Russia, everything is weird here.

I kept on exploring. Soon I found myself at the edge of a vast golden plain filled with tall grass. It would have been a stunning view had there not been an eerie, charred, metal structure haunting the middle of the meadow. I found it bizarre: why would this burnt edifice be laying here in the middle of a field?

Walking back, I found a creek and stopped to sip up some water. I should get back to the trail before dark, because as peaceful as these woods seem, who knows what comes out at dark. As I was lounging by the creek bed, I plucked a few blueberries from the bush next to me and plopped them in my mouth. Right as I was getting up, I noticed a couple of deer grazing in some tall grass across the creek. I could only see the tops of their backs, but it was still a serene moment to capture in a picture. Quietly, as not to startle them, I pulled out my camera and focused the lens. *CLICK!* The rambunctious noise of the camera echoed through the pastoral woods. Suddenly, all of their heads snapped up and stared straight at me. My stomach dropped and my skin crawled with absolute horror. These weren't deer, they couldn't be. The thing closest to me had a neck that split and stretched in an absolutely grotesque way to accommodate both of its heads. The one next to it limped out from behind a bush; I could make out six legs sprouting from its otherwise normal looking body. *What is this place?* Without a second thought, I turned and sprinted. I need to get out of here, wherever this is. God, I hate Russia.

I dashed across the woods in no particular direction, I just need to get away. In the last rays of sunlight I saw a fence through the trees. I ran closer until I was standing right beneath it. The fence stood sturdily at about nine feet tall with generous amounts of barbed wire lining the top. I turned my head from left to right but the fence went on forever with no end in sight. On the other side a tall wooden post stood abandoned with a rusted sign that read: DANGER! STAY CLEAR OF CONTAMINATION ZONE!

It all made sense now. The burnt structure in the middle of the field must have been that nuclear power plant that had exploded and infected everyone and everything within 100 kilometers. My mind flashed back to the horrid pictures that were plastered in every newspaper for years. Nuclear chemicals can, in high doses kill a person instantly, but the longer affects are scarier.

People have gotten terminal cancer, and their offspring genes are mutated or in some cases, sterilized. I fell to the floor in a sobbing mess and screamed until my lungs just about collapsed, but no one heard me.