

One Night

by

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There are a few rules you got to follow if you want to survive One Night.

Walls up by afternoon.

Gates closed by twilight.

Doors locked by dusk.

You have to be at least fourteen years old to walk the wall.

That last one is the one that's really got me pissed off today. I am thirteen, nine-months and seventeen days, almost a man. My best friend, Slater, is not even six months older than I am and yet he gets to walk the wall. I got a good two inches on him, and everyone knows I am stronger and faster. Ok, maybe not smarter, but on the wall guts counts twice as much as brains. You got to be able to keep your stomach to do what needs to be done on the wall.

It happens one night a year. September 13th. Every year. Without fail. Why this night? Who knows? People speculate but truth is no one really knows. You'd think it would happen on a different day. Maybe Halloween. Or a Friday the 13th. But, no. Every November 13th, Friday or not, it happens. They say it has always been this way. Jonesburgh was founded in 1692. For over three hundred years. Every night. One night a year. They come.

Most of the town is afraid of it. We board up the whole town, throw up walls of pine and cower in tiny homes of tarpaper, chicken wire, and cinderblock under water-stained corrugated tin roofs.

Slater, my best friend in the world, helped a good bit by the fact that he's the only other boy in town near my age, me and him, we find it exciting. It's like the edge of the world has come creepin' up on the outskirts of town. Like if you just stroll out just a bit, just down White Marsh toward Desert road, you might suddenly come up on a gaping abyss where the world just spills on over into darkness.

So, I am just standing on Main, the hot sun is beatin' down on my neck, just standing and waiting for someone to come tell me what to do. Everyone has got something to do on One Night, even if it is just hiding in the basement, cowering with the babies and girls. I wonder what job Slater will get if he'll be a patcher or a pusher. The bastard. It's not like I am bitter or anything. Really.

Me? I'd want to be a pusher. That's really where the action is and is definitely the more exciting job. Anyone can patch. Hell, it's not much different than tarring a roof or hanging dry wall. Slater wants to be a patcher, the pansy. He even said so when we was talking about it the other day. Figures. He ain't got the stomach for it. It's why the rules ain't fair. It's why I should be on the wall and Slater ought to be here waiting on Carol to come give him some stupid assignment. His skinny arms, he can barely hold a hammer. It's freakin' ridiculous.

But those are the Rules, as Mayor Thomas says. We learn from the get-go, from the time you're a kid, right along with the Bible stories and the Ten Commandments and the Pledge of Allegiance. We learn the Rules.

So, because of the stupid Rules, I am standing there, waiting in the dust, squinting into the afternoon sun, trying to spy the wall that's slowly going up on the northwest end

of town, trying to see if I can pick out thin, pale Slater on the wall to see if he's got a tar brush and hammer or a spade or a pitchfork.

That's when I hear the scream.

It comes from the road. From outside.

I glance up at the sun to left, just to make sure its still there, that I hadn't misjudged or lost track of time or something. It ain't dark yet. The screaming's not supposed to start 'til dark.

Up the street, up near where Main hits Marsh, I see the cause of the commotion and I chuckle. Some fancy car with a man in his sunglasses with some pretty young thing in the seat next to him. I wonder how they got off the Interstate.

Not many people come through here. No one new ever moves here. Why would they? Out in the middle of country backwater, perched next to the edge of the Great Dismal Swamp – seriously, that's what it's called, go look it up on a map if you don't believe me. No jobs. Not much to do really, except watch the flies roll in off the marsh or go fishing for walleyes in the deep ponds.

Carolina Road, what the city folk call Route 32, runs out to the West, back beyond the town line, so even passersby don't come this way much, unless they're lost. And then, they don't stay long, usually just long enough to get some directions, by a quick Coke and maybe get a fill up at Arnie's Gas & Go, and take a sidelong look at the town. That's about all the time it takes them to get the measure of the town, to see the small old houses with the dingy windows or the dirty kids playing kick the can on the rutted street. Five minutes, tops, and they got us all figured out – or so they think. Then they split, racing off in their Mercedes and BMW's or what not and good riddance to

them. We don't much care for city folk anyway. They don't know what it's like – what it's really like – to live. What it's like to be down in the swamp, to feel the mud squelch between your toes, to smell the thick mossy breath of swamp. To really feel alive.

It's why I'll never leave. A lot of kids in other small towns – Sunbury, New Lebanon – they light off first chance they get for the big cities – Durham, Virginia Beach. They can't wait to get out of their one street light lives. But not us. There's something magical about this place. Exciting. Out-of-towner's might call it evil. In their sports cars with their Rayban's covering their eyes, their MP3s covering their ears, and their fancy cologne covering up the smell of the road – drowning their senses until they can't see, hear, smell, or feel anything that's real.

The man is out of his car now. He's arguing with Mayor Thomas. The city man is all red-faced and I can see him shaking his head, his hundred dollar hair cut whipping around his suntanned face.

I can see him waving his arms and I see him gesturing, pointing angrily at Arnie's just a few blocks down.

I can see Thomas shaking his head and hear him shout the word “closed” over the sounds of hammering and sawing.

I hear the city man shout back and catch the word “hick.” City man then throws himself into his fancy car and he peels out, burning rubber on the asphalt and kicking up gravel in his wake. The car turns around, going back the way it come, back to the Interstate and the rivers of people and the big city untouched by magic.

Carol comes up to me then, she has her head cocked north and I see a smile play across her face as she watches the dust cloud churned up by the city man's car. "I need you to watch the kids," she says.

I just stare at her. I don't know what to say.

"Vogel? I need you to watch the kids. Ok?" she speaks to me like a child.

"You're kiddin' right?" I finally manage.

"No, I am not kidding."

"Christ, Carol, this ain't fair! Slater's up at the freakin' wall and you want me to baby sit?"

"Look, Vogel, I do not have time for this bullshit. I got to help Sharon with the laundry and layin' in food to the safe houses and we got to go to the grocery and get batteries and candles and what not. And then I have to get over to Mrs. Callum's and help get her over to Sharon's, and then..."

I throw up my hands in defeat and to stop the flow of words comin' out of Carol's mouth. "Please, ok? Alright! I get it. Fine. Bring me the damn kids."

"I ain't bringing the kids to you, Vogel! Come on, they're at school."

"Crap, at the school? Jesus, could this get any worse?"

Carol sighs a heavy sigh. "Vogel – you are incorrigible," she says to me. Now I don't know what the hell that means so I just mutter a name at her under my breath and start huffing my way to the small school. She either doesn't hear me or pretends not to. "Look, you can take them out onto the playground if you want. You can keep an eye out on what's going on from there." I can tell she's tryin' to make it better. What's the word? Placating me. I grudgingly nod. At least school's in the center of town. There's

a small hill that doubles as a baseball mound in the playground – could be a good place to watch the preparations. I smile at her. She smiles back. She’s half-pretty when she smiles like that. She waives me away. “Keep an eye on them Vogel!” she calls over her shoulder at me.

“Yeah, yeah.”

I watch folk hurry about their chores – I don’t see Slater, I think he’s somewhere toward the eastern edge of town, the swamp edge. I wonder if he was going to be a pusher or a patcher. You always hope to be a pusher. A patcher, like Don, just... well, patches. You got your bucket of tar or your hammer and nails, you got your brush or your hammer – and you’re assigned a section of wall. And you just patch. Boring. As they come shuffling around, pawing and pounding at the wall, sometimes they can knock a board loose. Or the really strong ones, the big one’s or the one’s that ain’t been dead too long yet and still have some heft to ‘em, they can sometimes split a plank.

It’s amazing how much damage a two-hundred and thirty pound dead man can do.

And that’s your job. From sundown to sunup – you patch.

Mostly you don’t see ‘em, when you patch. At least, that’s my guess from what I can tell from what the older kids tell me and what I glimpse when I sneak upstairs away from mom to peer out the slits in the boarded up windows at the wall. Our house is on the north end of town, not far from where the wall cuts across White Marsh road, so sometimes I’ve been able to get a good view of the goings-on’s at the wall.

I'd much rather be a pusher. They give you a shovel then. Or a rake. A spade – something like that. You get to stand up short platform ringing the wall – it's an unsteady, scary job – waitin' for 'em to come up. Like I said, they can't climb too well up the wooden wall. But sometimes, I don't think they mean to – not like it's a plan or anything – they don't really seem to plan much – but they gather together in one spot and one of 'em will topple down into the murk and the others will step up all over 'em. Then another one falls, and another and pretty soon you have a little mound and the ones at the top can start to reach the top edge of the wall. And then you push. Spade to head and they topple over, back into the swamp. It's sort of like that game kids play – king of the hill. Only with dead things.

Mom says it's natural though. It's a glimpse into the way the world was back in the beginning. Mayor Thomas says it means we're closer to God down here.

Me? I think it's magic. You can feel it, in the quiet places of the world I think. Places like Jonesborough, places where the air ain't filled with radio and cell signals and where the earth ain't paved over to make room for a Starbucks coffee or a factory outlet. In the places where there are still trees older than most men and where rocks haven't been turned over by bulldozers, old magic still lingers in quiet shadows. Most people are too busy or too crazy to notice it. Not us. When you still live close to the land, when you are quiet and pay attention, you can feel it. I feel it when I am out in dad's dingy – out on Lake Drummond. When it's quiet and twilight and you can hear the rock bass nip at the surface of the water, trying to catch mosquitoes. You can feel it in your bones, hear it in

the creak of the black gums, smell it on the heavy, humid air and it may sound crazy but I swear it's magic.

I freakin' love the swamp.

It starts at 3 pm. Though the real fun doesn't start until later. But that's when we start getting ready for One Night.

The sun starts to go down in a wash of red and the long shadows of the tall, rickety marsh trees – gum , juniper, and white cypress – ringing the town start to stretch out menacingly, like they are reaching out to grab at you.

It's then you can see the nerves in the faces of the town's people – even in the faces of the grown men. You see it in their drawn faces, creased by worry lines and you hear it in their too-polite nervous laughs, or the way the young girls start talking all high in this sing-songy voice that's real annoying. Nervous talking mom calls it. They all start to flinch and skitter like wild horses that caught the scent of something dangerous on the wind.

I feel it too, deep in my belly, that gnawing fear. But I like it.

Then the woman folk start to pull out the old boards that they use to nail up over the windows. Old, haggard, splintered things. And the windows are in pretty rough shape, too. Sometimes the nail holes are so worn they have to have the men folk make new holes with the hammer and nail. Some boards are so oft used they have to be discarded altogether, the old corners of the wooden slats too riddled to support their weight on an iron nail.

They work quickly, eyes always on the horizon, on the low sun starting to set and as the day inches lower, their pace quickens.

The lucky ones are busy at the gates, pulling up the wooden fences, splashing tar between the spaces between the boards, trying to fill the gaps in the slats where wiggling, clawing fingers might gain a purchase and manage to pry apart a loose board.

I stand watching, minding kids. It's not fair. I am almost a man. I can fight. I shouldn't have to be the keeper of the kids. They sit around me in the dirt, eager faces wanting to play, too ignorant to be fearful.

Suzanna throws a red ball at me. It hits my left side and bounces and rolls away through a gap in the siding the Slaughter's house, up under their crawl space. Suzanna looks at me in disgust as if how stupid and grown up I must think I am if I can't take the time to do what's really important – play ball. She watches me a moment, waiting for me to react, but my eyes are fixed on Slater – over by the wall. I see his sweaty head in the fading light as he holds an old can of pitch for Loughery, as the old man dips the horsehair brush into the can and sloughs on a thick swab of the dark, sticky liquid. I wish it could be me. I should be on the wall. It's not fair.

Suzanna gives up on me and goes scurrying after her ball. I watch out of the corner of my eye as she scoots between the boards and disappears into the darkness of the Slaughter's crawl space. Meanwhile, I continue to watch the crazy, bustling activity. The sun slinks lower and the world starts to turn. You can feel it here, the change with the twilight, how the world suddenly shifts. It's something you pry don't get in the cities where everything is always lit up in electric day, where neon lights keep the night at bay. It is an ominous, electric feeling that you only get when you know night's coming and

there no place to hide from it, not even in your own home where you only have one sixty watt bulb and maybe a soot encrusted fireplace to keep the dark at bay.

At the northwest corner of town, men are working on the putting up the last of the wall, connecting the corners, making sure the seams are tight and that there are no holes as they plaster tar into the cracks with the sticky pestles.

Carol comes over. Asks me how I am doing.

“Fine,” I reply curtly.

I can tell she doesn't trust me to watch the kids and it pisses me off. What does she think I am? I got it covered – snot-nosed Toby Nielsen is at my one o'clock, playing with a broken truck; Kevin Lightner is at my four, Shannon MacAllister at my six, her torn dress covered with playground dust, Suzanna at my nine. Oh, hell.

I notice my nine o'clock still isn't there. Where the hell's Suzanna? Then I remember she went off chasing her ball and I glance in the direction she was heading and I see Mrs. Callum's house in the distance. It's a big, ramshackle old place, too big for just her and here two-dozen or so mangy cats, built by hand by her father back before WWII. The house sits up on a brick foundation – the ground here is too marshy for basements. Broken brick and splintered wood skirts the foundation of the house, fencing in the crawl space. I can see where the red ball likely went, rolling up under the porch stairs into the murky crawlspace under the old house.

I'll be damned if I am going to go crawling around under Mrs. Callum's house looking for her, but I just about resign myself to having to go look for her.

That's when we hear a long wail from the road. It's an awful, mewling sound, like a ragged cat that's got its tail caught by something sharp and dangerous. It's coming from the road - beyond the wall.

I glance up at the sky and try to gauge the time by the depth of the dark and shadows. It's late, but probably not too late. Not yet.

"It's Sheldon," I say to Carol, not that she asked, not that she cared. She gives me a blank stare. "Danny Sheldon? Out past Cutter's pool? He and Debra and their two daughters live out there. Out next to Gorman's Orchard." I say this slowly, enunciating each word carefully, as if speaking to one of the snot noses or a dullard. "He's always late."

"By the old mill?"

"Across from it, yeah," I answer.

"What are they doing out? Don't they know the Rules?"

"Of course they know the Rules, Carol. Who knows what kept them. He always cuts it close. It's like a game to him."

"I don't get that. I don't get playing games on One Night. I just don't."

"I do," I reply. And I do. I really do.

"She looks at me like I just offered to swallow a bug, not even for money, just for kicks.

We watch as Mayor Thomas and the rest of the town guard, we don't really call them that, at least most of the town doesn't. Just me and Slater call them the 'guard' 'cause we like the sound of it - unlatch the gate and slowly pull it open letting Sheldon and his family in.

I love it. I love it all. I love the wooden gate – we can't use chain link – according to mom, they tried it once, back in the 70s, but they were able to squeeze their rotten hands and feet into the tiny diamonds and shamble their way up the fence. Since then, we use wood. That's why we tar the seams and fill in the cracks with straw and pitch. So there's nothing for cracked, broken nails or stiff, swollen hands to find purchase.

"I have to go check on Mrs. Callum," Carol says, shuddering slightly and hugging her arms around herself like she just caught a chill.

"No one's stoppin' you."

She gives me a hurt look and slouches off. And for a second I feel bad. I don't know why I'm so mean sometimes. I wonder for a second if it's because I like her. The thought makes me shudder and I roll my shoulders, trying to shrug the thought off.

I hesitate, remembering Suzanna. For a second I weigh whether or not I want to admit I've lost track of one of the little snot goblins or whether I want to go scooting on my belly through Mrs. Callum's cat turd-filled crawl space. I figure I'd rather take another one of Carol's withering looks than get my new sneaks covered in Callum's cat shit. "Hey," I shout out after her. "Hey, can you poke your head under the stoop and see if Suzanna's there."

"Vogel?! What the hell?"

"I don't know. She went after her ball or something. She's just right there."

"You know, you are supposed to be watching them. You know - watching them," she says this to me like I am some sort of idiot, pointing to fingers at her eyes then back at me.

“I was watching her, right up until she disappeared under the stairs. What was I supposed to do, leave the rest of ‘em?” I reply, gesturing at my other snot-nosed wards.

Carol huffs and shakes her head, but I can tell she’s happy to have the excuse to feel superior to me. Whatever, at least I am not the one who’s going to be scraping cat feces out my fingernails.

Around me, my one, four and six o’clocks play, making vrooming sounds with trucks or talking in pretend-grown up to dollies, and slowly twilight falls. The men, and women, at the wall, light torches and you can sense more than see the tenseness, though you can see it, too, in the grim set of jaws and the white-knuckled grip on spades and shovels.

I lose track of time, watching the nervous preparations. Before I know it, twilight’s deepened to dusk and I hear a soft voice that shocks me out of my reverie.

“Why is One Night different from other nights?”

I look up at the sky and see stars glimmer through hazy purple sky.

I stare at Shannon in her dusty dress with purple and pink lilies, I feel my mouth gaping open as I struggle to answer her question and I hear myself stuttering, but I can’t seem to stop it. How to explain it to a child?”

“It just is,” I say.

“But why?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because it’s just the way it is, that’s all. You’ll understand when you grow up.”

It’s a cop out, I know. Shannon doesn’t seem satisfied with my answer, but she seems to sense my irritation and she’s at least smart enough to pick up on the fact that she probably ain’t getting any more of an explanation from me.

It’s a hard thing to explain, what happens here. Once, years ago, the mayor back then went to Camden to try to get help. First, he tried telling the truth and they laughed the poor sucker right out of the police station. Then he tried making up a story to get the county sheriff to come out on One Night. It’s not real clear what happened after that – but the county police ain’t been back since.

It’s just as well – something like this got out, I mean really got out, it would be all over the news and the National Enquirer and then reporters would come sniffing around and there’d be all sorts of out-of-towners and either one or two things would come of it. They either wouldn’t believe us, and call us all a bunch of drunk, hick in-breds or they would believe us and that would be almost worse, because then the lab coats would come and they’d set up some sort of research facility or quarantine zone or something. Before long, there’d be a ton of suits here and they’d do something horrible like drain the swamp or mow down a bunch of the old trees to make way for their white tents and black SUVs and they’d suck the magic right out of this place with their gleaming science. Bet you it wouldn’t be two weeks before whatever it is that is special about this place was killed off with their hand sanitizer and their lattes. And then we’d just be another poor back water town with no jobs, no prospects, and not much special. At least with One Night, we got magic.

I look back up into the darkening sky.

Where the hell is Carol? It shouldn't take this long to find one goofy little kid. Besides, we're supposed to be indoors by nightfall. Especially the kids. It's another one of the rules. Doors locked by dusk. It doesn't bother me, all the hollering and commotion, but would probably traumatize the rug rats to see their auntie or meme or whatever come crawling out of the swamp, all covered in marsh mud and black squirming slugs. Course I was seven when I snuck out on One Night. I saw my great uncle Curtis come skittering over the wall, only to get a spade in the head and knocked back down, tumbling all ragged doll like into the grass and clover field on the east side of town, just past Al's Garage and look at me – I turned out alright.

At first I am just annoyed, but as more stars start to come out, I start to get kind of afraid. It's not that I am scared to be out mind you, it's just I don't want to be responsible for all the kids come full on dark so I am relieved when Mrs. Dantin comes over with her deer caught in the headlights look and wringing hands.

“Andrew, what are you doing? It's after dark? Get those kids home!”

“I, uh, where are they supposed to go?”

“What do you mean? Where's Carol?”

“I, uhm, she's over checking on Mrs. Callum.” Mrs. Dantin's giving me an iron stare like she's about to try to bend me over her knee even though she's a tiny little thing and I probably weigh twice as much as she does. But the woman raised four boys and she's got an iron will, so I only half-doubt she'd be able to paddle the blazes out of me, so I am not about to admit to her I had sent Carol off chasing one of my kids that got away from me.

“Here, I’ll take the kinds over to Martha and Ben Ortiz’s – you go get Carol, then get home. Wait, where’s Suzanna?”

“Uhm, she, uhm, went with Carol,” I lie.

“Well, go get them both, Andrew. And hurry.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I shuffle off, relieved to be free of the kids, anxious to grab Carol and Suzanna and get the heck home. Mom must be wondering what’s happened to me. It’s just me, her, and dad, and dad’s off at the wall, probably at the south end of town, probably patchin’.

As I head off toward Mrs. Callum’s, I hear Mrs. Dantin call after me. “And Andrew, hurry now! And be careful!”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter into the darkness.

I approach Mrs. Callum’s house and wonder how the old ramshackle place even still stands upright. It’s one of the biggest houses in town, most of which aren’t bigger than a pillbox as my meme says. It canters at a slight angle, so when you look at it, you feel slightly off, like you must be dizzy or standing on a slope, even through your feet are flat, and it makes you want to cock your head a little, just to get a good look at it. It’s not built regular-like, like a normal house – it’s all funny angles with odd-shaped windows that are in the wrong places where your eye doesn’t expect them to be. The wood siding is sun-bleached gray, warped, and cracked in places. It’s a creepy place, even during daylight, even when it’s not One Night. The strangest thing about Mrs. Callum’s old house though is that it’s pitch black, no steady, pale electric light, not even warm,

guttering candlelight comes from darkened windows. That's what bothers me most – it ain't exactly a rule, but you've got to be pretty near crazy not to have a bazillion lights on One Night, most houses in town are lit up like a Walmart Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving.

I take a deep breath and think about ditching this whole sorry enterprise. The house is dark, obviously no one's home. Carol probably got old Mrs. Callum and Suzanna and packed them off to her parent's place, figuring it wasn't worth coming back to bother me to mind Suzanna. Yeah, they're probably all over at Carol's folks place, in the light, behind locked doors, just like I oughtta be.

I turn around to beat it home and even make it a few steps and a tension that had set in even slowly starts to uncoil from around my stomach and shoulders.

Then I hear it – a kind of mewling sound, coming from the dark space between the broken slats under the porch stoop.

I turn back around and squint into blackness to see if I can see what's making the noise. I can't see a damn thing.

Then I hear it again. It's a kind of pitiful, strangled cry that gives me gooseflesh and sets my teeth on edge. I feel like someone just splashed ice water all over me, and my stomach feels like a got a hunk of ice sitting heavy in it. I don't know what made that sound, but I know one thing for sure – it ain't no cat.

I think about turning tail and just running, leavin' that dank, dark stoop and whatever is caterwauling under the porch way the hell alone. Now, I am a lot of things – mom calls me ornery, my dad calls me mule-headed, Slater calls me an idiot (and worse),

Carol calls me ‘callous and indifferent’, whatever that means. But no one’s ever called me chicken.

At the wall, I can hear noises now – the soft shuffle of anxious feet, the wooden clacking of rake and spade shafts knocking together as the men and women at the wall make ready. And beyond, you can just hear it, and for a second you think maybe it’s just a low wind groaning through trees or just the creaking of an old, rotted cypress branch. But the groans grow louder and then, here and there, you hear the shouts of shock, surprise, and revulsion.

One Night’s begun.

I turn away from the wall and look back at the dark space. It has an awful smell coming from it, dank and humid.

There’s nothing for it though, so I take a deep breath of September air and take the plunge, getting down on all fours and scooting through the narrow gap in the slats at the base of the stairs.

The air here is close and clammy against my skin. It smells foul, too, like sodden things left to moulder, rat urine, and damp earth.

I push through, cobwebs brushing across my face, wrapping around my mouth and eyelids, I blink furiously and try to spit webs out my mouth; pawing an arm across my face to get the rest of the sticky residue off of me.

I stare into the darkness, hoping my eyes will start to adjust so I can see something, but there is too little light – there’s nothing, just a wall of black.

A hear the low wail again and stop my crawling.

“Hello?” I call.

Nothing.

Christ. This is the last thing you want to be doing on One Night. My heart is pumping and stuttering furiously in my chest, and my palms are sweaty. My legs feel weak and I start to have trouble pushing through the low, close space.

“Hello, dammit!” I call again. “Suzanna, that you? Carol?”

I push forward a bit further and my belly rubs across something foul smelling and squishy. I try not to think about it and push further in.

I figure I must be about a good ten or fifteen feet now beyond the porch, probably under the foyer or maybe the living room of the crooked house, perched and liling on a cracked foundation, just inches above my head, when I smell it.

It’s a worse smell than the crawlspace – worse than mold, worse than rat pee, or old, wet earth that hasn’t seen sunshine in a hundred years.

It’s a smell like none other; it hits me in the gut and takes my breath away.

“What?” I cough.

I hear a soft noise come from back to my left – further into the crawlspace.

I pause and listen and hear it again: “Hsst.”

“Who’s there?” I call softly. Even through the crawlspace, I can hear the ruckus at the wall now – spade and rake mashing into bone and meat. Screams of the living, and wails of the dead.

“Hsst,” I hear again. “Andrew!” It’s Carol’s voice.

I start scooting back and to the left, encouraged now, and relieved. I never thought I’d be so glad to hear her voice. I am glad I am not alone. It’s not that I am

scared mind you. I ain't scared, not of nothing. It's just on the wall, there's people with you. It's good to have people around.

I make it another ten feet, then my hand hits flesh in the dark, and I feel Carol wrap her hand around mine. Her grip is warm and it's comforting, and I am sure she is scared, so I decide not to pry lose. Next to her, I hear Suzanna give a low whimpering cry.

“Carol, what the hell are you doing in here?”

“Sshh!” she whispers, pulling so close I can feel her, hot urgent breath against my ear.

“What?” I ask.

“Shhh,” she whispers again. “She'll here you.”

“Who?”

“Mrs. Callum!”

“What's Mrs. Callum doing down here?” I ask.

Then the awful smell comes again and I hear a moist shuffling sound behind me.

My stomach lurches and roils and I upchuck a thin broth of mostly digested cheerios and milk and chunks of frozen burrito into the dark ground of the crawlspace because I just realized what's down here with us and it's sure not any kind of cat, or spider, or skulking rat. It's Mrs. Callum. Only she's not alive.

In this corner of the crawlspace, there's a break in the siding that lets in a sliver of moonlight. My eyes, adjusted to the low light, starts to pick out details – a rusty lawnmower lays half buried in mud a few feet away, there's a score of rusty tin cans, some broken glass, a garden hose so old the rubber's cracked.

I can make out Suzanna, she's pressed herself as far back into the corner of the crawlspace as she can possibly go, she's got her eyes closed and she's clutching her red ball in front of her, holding it like a shield. Carol's next to her, her right hand on Suzanna's arm, her left clenched tightly around my hand.

Carol's eyes are open and they are staring, wide-eyed and petrified at something behind me.

For a second, I consider not turning around, like maybe if I don't acknowledge whatever is shuffling around back there in the blackness, then maybe it won't really exist; that by turning to look at it, somehow, that act is what will conjure the unimaginable into reality.

I turn and look.

I hear a high-pitched keening scream, a four-year old girl's scream, and for a second I think it must be Suzanna, but then I realize it's me. I am mortified, but I cannot stop the scream welling inside me. My mouth is slack, open wide and I am just letting the scream out like it has a life of its own.

You'd scream to if you saw what I saw.

Out of the dark murk – two eyes, filmed over gray, a slack-jawed, drooling mouth, oozing fluids not just saliva, all pale, jiggling skin, stiff limbs, pushing awkwardly through the damp mud. Then, a sound, a kind of low wail comes from Mrs. Callum's open mouth: "Aaaannnnndrrrrreeeeeeelllllll.

Aaaannnnndrrrrreeeeeeelllllll." And I realize to my horror she is calling my name around a blackening, swollen tongue while she shambles and crawls toward me.

I cry out again. I turn back to Carol. "What do I do?" I scream.

“I don’t know,” Carol sobs. “Hit her!”

“With what?”

Carol looks around, frantically, wide-eyed, she peels her hand from mine and starts patting around in the darkness, looking for something.

I feel cold breath against the back of my neck and the awful smell comes again, a horrible stench that I now recognize as death.

“Oh, God!” I scream again.

I feel damp, rigid hands clap against my calves. I sense the bulk of Mrs. Callum, quivering and eager, just behind me. I want to scream again, but my body’s seized up. I wish I could just crawl out of my own skin somehow, escape the awful feeling of Mrs. Callum’s decaying flesh pressing against mine.

“Here!” shouts Carol as she presses something firm and hard into my hand.

I stare down at it, it’s a handle to something – I don’t know what, maybe a piece of the lawnmower handle.

“What do I do with it?” I cry.

“Stove it’s head in!”

I turn back around and stare into milky eyes. I smell fetid rotteness, like butcher’s meat left out accidentally in a hot car on a summer’s day.

I am paralyzed; it’s like all the strength and life has gone straight out of me. I want to run, to escape, to get away. It’s all I want. But I can’t. I can’t move.

I drop the metal handle and hear it hit damp earth and roll away into the darkness. I start to cry and feel hot tears roll down my cheeks.

I feel hot, terrible pain as long, untrimmed, dirty nails rake along the flesh of my arms and across my chest. I hear the sound of fabric ripping and a wet, awful, chortling that I recognize as Mrs. Callum, or what used to be Mrs. Callum, laughing.

Cold, dead flesh presses on me and I fall back under the awful, awkward weight of it, my back pressing into mud, the horrible sticking weight of Mrs. Callum on top of me.

I close my eyes and try to wish myself to a happy place, in the forest rabbit-hunting with my dad, out on Drummond lake bass fishing, at home, in my bed, my tv perched next to me, watching America's Next Top Model. It doesn't work.

I feel something cool and moist and sticky against my cheek, I feel a presence next to me. I sense more than hear or feel Carol hunched over me in the low crawl space. Then a hear thud, thud, thwack, thwack, crack and feel something cool and sticky spray over my face in fine droplets and there's a terrible smell of copper and decay.

I open my eyes and see Carol over me, her hair all flyway away dusty in the dark and partly plastered against her head in a sweaty pate. She's heaving in great gulps of air and her breathing is ragged and irregular. I can tell she's crying. She looks beautiful, standing there.

She drops the metal bar and holds out her hand to me. It's sticky and covered in fluids. She pulls and slowly the now truly dead weight of Mrs. Callum rolls off of my with a terrible gurgling sound and I get to my feet, stooping to avoid banging my head against the support beams and pipes snaking underneath the floor of Mrs. Callum's kitchen.

We stand there for a second, panting heavily in the darkness, looking at each other. I can feel my pulse pounding in my neck and can hear my heart beating in my ears with a sound like a white water river rushing. The already dim crawlspace seems to grow darker suddenly and the room seems to spin. Everything goes black.

The next thing I remember is sitting outside on the curb at the corner of Juniper and Main across the street from Mrs. Callum's house. The sounds of One Night are fading in the distance – there are fewer shouts and screams now, just the occasional ‘over here’ or ‘I got one!’ or a pounding sound and then a thudding or a splash as something heavy and dead is thrown back into a clover covered field or into the brackish stream winding it's way toward the lake.

Suzanna is sitting next to me, clutching her red ball tightly against her chest. Carol's standing over me, holding out a glass of water with a trembling hand; I take it and gulp down warm water eagerly. I hand back the empty glass and mutter “thanks.”

Carol takes the glass from me and sits down on the curb next to me. She lays an arm around my shoulders and shakes me gently. “No problem,” she says. “You owe me one.”

And I do. I really do.

The sky lightens in the East, the night giving way slowly to day and the swamp ringing the town seems to transform as One Night slips away and magic rolls away with the dawn.