

DWELLERS IN THE SHADOWS

Thomas P. Tiernan

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© 2019 by Thomas P. Tiernan

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Introduction

For many years, I've been writing stories about little creatures that mean us great harm. Whether they come up from the drain, pop up from another dimension or come from a pet supply catalog, it would be best to stay away from the critters in the following pages. You'll live longer that way.

I've always been fond of Monster Movies. The Monsters themselves seem so improbable that we should just laugh at them and not ever visit with them ever again. Yet, what do we do? We're flipping through the channels and up pops "The Crawling Eye." Do we move on? No. We put the remote down and watch as Forrest Tucker takes on the badly animated creatures living in a cloud atop Mount Trolenberg.

For those of you who love stories of creatures from who knows where coming into our homes to eat us, I've put together a collection to please your hunger for something a bit creepy. They may shock you. They may horrify you. But rest assured. They're only stories, and stories can't hurt you. Just don't read them without locking your doors.

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SNOOGS. THE PERFECT PET

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The ad blurb was pretty standard.

"SNOOGS! The first and only invisible pets! Snoogs are the friendliest pets in the universe. Take one home today! Snoogs are the pet for every family. Be the first on your block to own a Snoog.

Take Snoog shopping with you. He will help you make decisions by filling your Mom's cart with only the items you want to buy! How's that for a good friend? He will let you dress his home any way you want to. Snoogs will eat anything and will love it. Best of all, they will eat anything you like to eat and will wait for you to eat so that you can eat with a friend. Just make your dinner like you always do and bring it to the table. Snoog will wait for you to finish eating and then help himself. But don't worry, Snoogs are the cleanest animals in Nature's Book. They never carry any diseases or let dirt get on them, for then they could be seen. So let him eat as much as he wants.

Snoogs are shy, and will only stay near you whenever you go out. They won't ever bite you, your friends, your family, neighbors or your boss. They love everybody! Follow the enclosed simple care and maintenance instructions and your Snoog will grow to become a very healthy and energetic pet. Snoogs come in eight colors- Light Blue, Light Red, Light Green, Light Grey, White, Light Pink, Light Yellow, and Calico. Collect them all! They will make great friends and will take up very little room in your home or office. Just keep them in their little home that comes with every Snoog."

I bought my son, Johnathan, his Snoog last Sunday after he had hounded me for nearly a month.

"Everyone else has one, Dad. C'mon, please?"

That was his argument. I must admit it was very effective. He did deserve a pet after all. His seventh birthday was coming up and I thought I could surprise him this year. My thoughts ran to getting him a kitten.

"Kittens stink," was Johnathan's response to my probing him for his feelings on various pets.

"Johnathan. Don't you talk like that," asserted Katy, my second wife. She could be shrill at times when she wanted her way, but I stopped her before she could say any more and spoil Johnathan's mood. She was only his step-mother and I felt she had no right to impress herself on him like that.

"Katy, please. Let me talk this over with Johnathan. He has his rights, you know."

"Honestly, Bob, I think you care more about him than you do me." She stormed off and I regretted what I had said and that I had ever married her. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I faced away from Johnathan so that he could not see my discomfort.

"Dad. Hey Dad," began Johnathan softly. "You okay? She shouldn't talk like that to you. I know how mad you get."

I smiled and turned back to look at him. His blue eyes looked right into me sometimes and I knew he saw my anguish.

"It's okay, Johnathan. She didn't mean it. Where were we?"

"You were asking me if I wanted a kitten for my birthday."

The kid was smart, I had to admit it. Seven years old and he knew the old tricks. I smiled and roughed up his hair with my right hand. My left hand wrapped around him and I held him tightly. He was right of course. Katy couldn't do that to me. I would have it out with her later.

Johnathan ran into his room after we had eaten supper. He had gotten nothing but dirty looks from Katy the entire dinner. The kid didn't like it much and I felt like hitting her. I couldn't hide the feelings that were inside of me much longer. I did care for Johnathan more than her, but she would not hear that from me. No, she would get the picture from my actions with Johnathan. I loved him a lot more than I did her.

When Johnathan came out of his room an hour later, he was carrying a handful of papers that fluttered behind him as he held them over his head. He ran right toward me, non-stop. I knew this routine and put my book down. I bent lower and scooped him up as he ran right into my right shoulder. His face tear-streaked, he did his best to cover up his sadness.

"What do you have there, little man?" He liked me calling him a man. It made him stiffen up and get serious with me. That way we could have a good balance of foolishness and serious foolishness. I liked that.

"Wow, I couldn't wait for dinner to end so I could show you all this stuff I got from Michael Tayler down the street. He got his 2 days ago. I knew you wouldn't let me have a Snoog without seeing lots of things to read about them. Well, here they are. I want a light blue one." He shoved the papers into my hand and settled down into the small recess I always made for him in my easy chair.

I looked down at the sheets of paper before me. There were five of them. All but one of them were nearly standard legal size. The last one fell into my lap when I picked them up.

"These all have to back to Michael when you're done reading them. They aren't 'sposed to leave his house. 'Specially that one," he said pointing to the small rectangle of stiff paper I now held. It was a bizarre red, shaped like a weird moth. I read the small writing on it.

RECEIVED: ONE LIGHT BLUE SNOOG. PROVINCIAL CONDITIONS PROHIBIT THE RETURN OF THIS ITEM ONCE IT HAS LEFT THE STORE. THE WELLES MANUFACTURING CORP.
SIGNED: John C. Tayler. That was all the card said. You had to sign a release for a pet that could be picked up in a department store?

It wasn't even a real pet, just the equivalent of an invisible teddy bear. I had serious doubts about this deal. It wasn't like John to show that much affection for his kid. His wife blamed their lousy marriage on little Michael and it caused a lot of fights.

I gave my head a little shrug and looked at the next piece of paper. It was the standard blurb about the Snoogs. I expected very little different than what I had ever read about new stuffed animal pets. I looked at Johnathan. He smiled up at me. I turned my head and gazed down at the paper in my lap.

The next piece of paper was simply an ad torn out of the evening paper. It was an ad for Harmon's Department Store downtown. It read simply, "SALE ON SNOOGS! GET THEM AT THIS ONCE IN A LIFETIME PRICE! FOR THREE DAYS ONLY! JUNE 7, 8, & 9. ONLY \$12.95! HURRY!"

The last paper was a small copy of a magazine article from California, where the Snoogs had first come into this country four months ago. No one knew where they came from. They were suddenly everywhere in Europe. They weren't talking about them except to say they were the easiest pets to care for. It was strictly hype, with all the celebrities available giving them away on their first sale day. The usual garbage.

I had to admit that I was intrigued by these Snoogs. My smile betrayed my interest to Johnathan.

"When are we going to get my Snoog, Dad?"

I knew I wouldn't be able to rest until he had one, so I decided to take him the Sunday before his birthday. That was this Sunday.

On Sunday, Johnathan and I got into my Saab and we wheeled down the road to Keever Plaza. Keever Plaza is the largest shopping mall in Central New Jersey, home of Harmon's Department Store. They had the largest toy department in the state.

The mall was crowded, as usual. We had never had a large variety of stores like this in our part of the state. Everyone here has gone crazy, shopping whenever they had the chance. This made the mall crowded every minute the mall was open.

We made our way through the milling crowds to the toy department of Harmon's. It was the most crowded section of the entire mall. I tried to get into the spirit of the fun of it all but it was excruciatingly difficult.

I looked around above the sea of small people all around me. An occasional adult blocked my vision of the entire department. Two minutes later I spotted the Snoog Zone. This was a separate area of the toy section built exclusively for the pets and their merchandise. It was located at the extreme end of the department, 100 yards or more from the exits. We headed that way, as did everyone else it seems.

The Snoog Zone was roped off and guarded by a large man dressed like a rabbit. This aroused a smile on my lips, one which the giant rabbit himself spotted out of the corner of his eye. He looked at me, his eyes promising retribution. I stopped smiling, looking for a way to explain my actions. We stepped into a long line to wait for our chance to enter the Zone.

I noticed many people being turned away from entering the area. Most of these were children. I wondered if they were getting turned away if they made fun of the man in the bunny suit. If that were the case, I stood no chance to get in with Johnathan.

The line drew near us as I prepared to explain why we were turned away. I saw many children raise their voices as they were forced to go back into the world of ordinary toys behind us.

To my surprise, we were allowed to enter the Snoog Zone. Children were only allowed in with one of their parents. I saw some sense in this, as it was the biggest craze in the country. The bunny man did not look me in the eyes. He got a look on his face that said "Boy are you a sucker." We stepped into the Zone.

The Zone was as flashy and overplayed as I had expected. There were only eight colors to the entire place, the colors Snoogs came in. The accessories to be bought were along all the walls. The pets themselves were found at the center of the room. We went there first, standing in another line.

Only nine parents were in front of us, yet it took over an hour for the salesman to get to us. I saw five forms that I would have to fill out. "Mailing Lists", was the answer I was given for all these forms. I laughed to myself at the enormous paperwork involved to pick up one little pet. The release paper was actually a very wordy legal document that meant nothing to me. I signed it.

On our trip home, Johnathan beamed with excitement. His eyes never left the package that contained the Snoog and the things that came with it. By the time we turned onto Crystal Avenue, he was ready to rip the package open right where he was sitting.

I managed to get him indoors before he tore into the packaging. He brought the box and the wrapping over to the dinner table, where he paused to catch his breath. His eyes beaming, he looked up at me. I smiled back at him and told him to go ahead. He had five boxes to open. Dad the sucker had bought the entire outfit for him. He had chosen the Light blue Snoog, the color of his bedroom walls. In his haste, he handed me the instruction booklet. With this, I helped him by going over the procedures for setting up his Snoog cage.

The instructions were really quite simple. Snoogs like to be kept in a well-lit, airy spot. Keep his water dish filled, (or whenever some of it evaporated). I told him that liked to get to know everyone in the family and would feel deprived if he missed somebody.

We placed the cage in a small, well lit area. Johnathan chose the location, the top of his desk. I anchored the cage well and was sure that he wouldn't be able to topple it over where it sat.

I left Johnathan in his room with his new pet. I sat back in the living room and began to pour over the literature that came with the boxes. The instructions were the same. My receipt for the release had been inserted into an envelope. A light blue cover for the cage was provided (at a small charge). The tag stated that it was made by the Grover's millinery. They were located in Gorson, N.J. I never heard of the place.

I shook my head. Why should I wonder about some new scheme that had been cooked up in the Far East somewhere to entice American children to spend untold millions on nothing? I put the paperwork and the boxes safely away in the hall closet as I heard the afternoon paper hit the porch.

The paper was damp as I carried it to my easy chair. I unfolded it and glanced at the headlines. One of them caught my eye. "Toy Manufacturer Held In Murder Of Spouse." I read on. George Welles, the owner of the Welles Manufacturing Corp. and creator of the Snoogs, had been arrested for the suspected murder of his wife, Virginia. No body had been found and the evidence was all circumstantial. The Welles had a big fight the evening before she disappeared. Welles was quoted as shouting "Someday I'll be rid of you." The next day she was gone. Only a small spray of blood had been found in their bedroom. It had been positively identified as that of Mrs. Welles.

I was intrigued. Here was a man who was raking in the Big Dough and he does something petty like this. Surely he could have found some way to pay her off and be rid of her. the paper further added that she blamed the Snoogs for the ruin of their marriage. She had told friends that they had taken over her husband. But there was more. She even accused him of smashing the cage she kept hers in and letting it get away. That part seemed to be true, according to the police. Other than that they had very little to go on.

It was all crazy. I put the headlines away and turned to the sports. The Mets had won again and it looked like they were going places this year. They certainly deserved it.

Katy was glaring at Johnathan.

"What's wrong?", I asked.

She ignored me at first, but then she looked at Johnathan.

"Johnathan, how many times do I have to tell you to put your clothes all the way in the hamper?"

A shiver went through Johnathan's little body as her words found their mark. He sank even lower into my chair.

"Ease up, hon. He'll get it."

"I don't want him to get it later. I want him to come in the bathroom and show me that he can do it."

"Is that so important?"

"To me it is. Now come on, Johnathan." She held her hand out, looking like an executioner. I shook my head.

"Make your point later. He has to go to bed."

"Why are you always on his side?"

"I don't know. Maybe because he's right too often."

Her eyes glazed over. She did not like having her authority usurped. "How are we going to teach him responsibility if he gets away with everything he does wrong all the time?"

"He's not a bad kid. You know that. All kids are forgetful sometimes. It's up to us to act responsibly so that he learns it from us."

"That's old fashioned. It takes so much time."

"That's what we are here for. You can't beat it into him."

"No? You just watch me." She took a step into the room. Johnathan let out a small scream and hid his face in my side.

"Katy, you lay a finger on him and I'll break it. Don't make me swear or get violent in front of Johnathan."

"You wouldn't dare touch me. There are laws concerning assault."

"There are also laws for child abuse. Why don't you go into the bedroom and cool off. That way no one will get hurt. You're upsetting Johnathan's new pet."

"You're too soft sometimes, Bob." She left in a rage. I heard her slam some things around in our bedroom. Then it got quiet. I sighed audibly.

"You all right, Dad?", came a little quivering voice beside me.

"Sure. It'll pass. It has before."

The incident did pass, but not without a rather loud screaming match the next day when Johnathan had been picked up for school. I could have sworn I saw steam coming out of Katy's nostrils as she spoke. I told her I felt that Johnathan was in danger from her. She said that he deserved a good number of spankings and had them coming to him. My response was telling her that our marriage was a mistake. That sent her packing to her Mother. Peace returned to Crystal Ave.

Several weeks went by before she called. She said she was sorry and asked to come back. I told her she could as long as she gave Johnathan a break. She was not to fly off the handle at him if he did anything wrong. She was to ask him if he knew what he had done wrong and to simply tell him it was wrong. I would deal with him when I got home in any case. She agreed and said she would be home the next morning.

In the evening Johnathan and I heard a loud fight break out at the home of Michael Tayler. It spilled out onto the lawn. Everyone on the whole block was looking out their windows at it, including me. They were belting themselves around like a prizefight. After two or three heated minutes of combat they released they were attracting a voyeuristic crowd and they broke off. They returned to the house, where the fight continued accompanied by the sounds of broken furniture. I smiled and shook my head. Their fights were getting bigger all of the time. It was a wonder Michael never tried to stop them. Maybe he didn't have the resources.

The next morning, two police cars pulled in front of the Taylers house. Several policemen got out and walked to the front door. They knocked for several minutes before Michael opened the door and let them in. Michael wasn't dressed for nursery school. It was too late for him to go anyway. Two other policemen got out and walked around to the back of the house.

I had been waiting by the door for Katy to come home when the cars pulled up. I saw everything that happened at the Taylers. One man came out about ten minutes later. Michael was with them. He was smiling as the door was opened for him and he climbed in. Two more cars pulled up. One was an

ambulance. The other was a coroner wagon. Their drivers went inside. They came out empty handed. A man with a camera case got out of the coroner wagon and rushed inside.

The house was closed up by the police with long strips of tape that read "Official Police Business Only." My thoughts ran wild as they pulled away. Could the Taylers have killed each other in their fight? Why didn't anyone come out with any bodies? Was Michael arrested? Just as I got totally lost in my imagination Katy pulled up.

We had a good long talk before Johnathan got home. When he stepped in the door, Katy went over to him to give him a hug. He ran to my side and clung to my leg. Katy looked hurt. I knelt down and asked Johnathan if he could give Katy a good hug to show her that he was glad she was home. He did it reluctantly.

The next few weeks went by smoothly. There were no incidents with Katy about Johnathan. She seemed to be adjusting to the new way things were going to be done around here. Johnathan and I still had our foolishness meetings in the living room while I watched the news with one eye. The Taylers case was closed from lack of evidence. They had simply disappeared without a trace. Michael had been placed in the home of his uncle Donald. He was happy when he came to visit Johnathan.

A disturbing trend had begun to develop in the newspapers. By sheer chance I had become intrigued by the series of murders that were occurring across the country. They all seemed unrelated to the papers, yet I felt a slender thread running through most of them. All of them involved couples with a young child. There had been fights between the two parents resulting in the disappearance of one of them. One fact alone were enough to make me doubt my sanity. Each fight and subsequent disappearance came about after the family had purchased something for the young child. A Snoog.

I laughed too. I was too scared to do anything else when it hit me. I knew it was crazy to think that these pets had anything to do with these murders. Yet I wondered to myself. Why did the papers mention the Snoogs? The television people never mentioned them. They don't go into any depth on television. A bizarre, sick thought came to me.

Snoogs were responsible for all of these deaths. As strange as that sounds, it all fit together. Yes, now I knew the answer. Snoogs were real creatures. Invisible, yes. But they were really there despite the absurdity of the thought. Somehow they can be made to kill someone chosen by some sort of need. I thought back to the Taylers. They had been quarreling for years over everything. Money. Food. Sex. And Michael. Maybe that was the clue. Michael always ran and hid whenever his parents fought. He screamed at them to stop until he must have wished them dead. He must have hated them both too equal for the Snoog to have chosen between them. It took them both.

The Sunday newspaper came while I was putting this together. I tore into it until I found what I needed. Another murder/disappearance had happened in New Mexico. This time a father had been taken.

What could have happened to them? They had to be somewhere. All that was found in New Mexico was a tiny pool of blood. I chose to believe that they were eaten. Maybe I'm crazy. Johnathan stood at the doorway.

"Dad, she did it again." Tears streamed down his cheeks. I held my hand out to him. He ran into my arms. I made him comfortable and dried his tears.

"Okay, sport. What did she do now?"

"She broke the cage of my Snoog. It got away."

A smile crossed my face while Johnathan buried his face into my shirt. It had begun here. This is how it must have happened everywhere else across the country. Virginia Welles accused her husband of smashing the cage of her own Snoog. I had to play it safe.

"Johnathan, look at me."

He picked up his head and looked up at me. My smile was gone and I looked at him seriously. He sniffled and rubbed his eyes with his hands.

"Tell me what you think of your new Mom."

"I hate her."

"You can't mean that." I tried to look sincere.

"I wish she were dead." That tore it open. I took a deep breath.

"How would you like to go get some ice cream when Mom gets home from seeing Grandma?"

"Yeah!" His face lit up. The plan was set. All we had to do was wait.

Katy came home her usual time. Her mother was ill and she took care of her. Johnathan went to his room when he saw her coming up the walk.

"Doesn't he even care to see me?"

"Hello to you to," I replied. She turned and looked at me strangely.

"What's eating you?"

"Nothing. How is your mother?"

"Since when do you care about her? The last time you mentioned her was last Christmas when you kicked her package across the room."

I shrugged. "It can't hurt to be nice." Her attitude was just what we needed. "I'm taking Johnathan to get some ice cream. We'll be back soon."

"It'll be time for dinner in a few hours. Can't it wait?"

I pretended I did not hear her as I stepped into Johnathan's room. He stood at the window. He held the Snoog cage in his little hands. I walked over to him and knelt down. He turned and showed the cage to me. It was smashed all right, but not the way it would have looked if someone had stepped on it, for example. No, this looked like a breakout.

"C'mon, let's get that ice cream."

"Yeah." That said it all. We walked hand-in-hand out of the room and straight for the door.

Katy was not about to let us pass without some words.

"Aren't I invited?"

"Maybe next time. We have a father and son talk long overdue. By the way. Johnathan says his bed sheets are a little soiled with mud. Maybe you can wash them while we are gone." This brought her to a royal boil.

"Well, I never heard of anything..." Her voice faded as we went down the porch and over to my car. It sat where it always did, next to the house. We piled in and I started the car. I let it idle a bit while I waited for

Katy to enter the bedroom. Sure enough I heard her enter and begin to swear like a pro about doing wash every day. She sounded like she could use a rest.

Seconds passed with the speed of water freezing before I heard a muffled outcry, like someone stubbing their toe. It came from our bedroom. Satisfied, I backed the car out of the driveway and headed into downtown Keever. There we would buy the biggest sundaes we could find. Children should always face bad news on a full stomach.

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IN THE TEETH OF THE NIGHT

A Cautionary Tale

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1740 Words

“Tell me, Pappa. Tell me about the Night Ones,” said Alice, safely tucked up in her bed.

“Are you sure you're old enough, kitten?” Pappa looked around the room. His eyes were now well adjusted to moving around in the dark. All of the drapes had been drawn and secured to the windows. Only the faintest boundary from the light of the moon could be seen outlining the windows.

“I'm nearly ten years old, Pappa. Karyn and Joel learned the history at that age,” she said with a hopeful look in her eyes.

“They were nearly twelve, my little historian. And they were ready.” Alice made a small pouty face, her lips protruding. “But you are a very grown up ten.” It was better she knew now, in case their time to tell her when she was twelve ran out.

She smiled. “Ooh, does that mean you'll tell me?”

Pappa looked down at her, pressing his back into the chair. He was uncomfortable. “Are you sure you wouldn't want me to tell you the history at breakfast? It might be easier to hear in the light.”

“Oh, no, Pappa. Night time is perfect. I can go outside at breakfast. It wouldn't be the same as right now, when we have to stay inside.”

Pappa smiled. “Fair enough. Get comfortable. I will tell the history just this once. If you fall asleep, you'll miss some of it.”

“I won't fall asleep, Pappa,” she said, sitting up.

“All right. Now let me think back to the beginning.” He paused and looked at the window. “More than twenty years before you were born, the oceans had risen so much that the big cities on the ocean's edge were abandoned. The people moved inland and began to build new big cities.”

“Like New Philadelphia?”

“Exactly. Many people didn't like moving away from their neighborhoods, but they had been warned many years before that such a thing could happen if all the ice melted. No one listened.”

"Was there really ice at the top of the world, like Joel says?"

"Oh, yes, and at the bottom of the world too."

"The bottom? Don't people fall off?"

"No, but that's a story for another time. It wasn't so bad, moving into the countryside. At least until the seas found its way into the old caves and the mines, especially in West Virginia."

"Can you show me in my book?" she said. She reached over to her night stand. Her hands brought back a well worn atlas. Pappa took it and turned the pages to the Central United States. The two pages filled his lap. She had carefully colored in the new coast of the East with her blue markers.

"Right here is where the first reports of the Night Ones happened," Pappa said, pointing to what was central West Virginia. The area was now underwater, fifteen miles from the new coastline.

"What happened?" she said.

"At first there was only a trickle of water going into the mines and caves. They tried to block it at first, but it soon was no use to even try. People began to die in and around these places, but that was not reported. Scientists are now pretty sure that the seawater either awakened something or caused something to hatch deep underground.

Farmers began to complain that their chickens and goats were disappearing. No one listened, even after cows and horses were slaughtered in the pens."

"Why didn't anyone believe them?"

"There was a lot of confusion back in those days. Many people had to find new homes, new cities. The police thought it was bad people from the big cities who had moved through the area."

"Or hungry people." she said.

"I'm sure that someone thought of that as well. Over two months went by, and more animals went missing. Then people began to vanish. Right in front of their homes." He was growing tired. It had been a long day of checking the fences and adding several feet to the brick wall that now wound half way around their property.

"Wow."

"It was the hunters at first, and people who went into the parks and forests. When people began to disappear from the edge of towns, the government began to get serious about what was happening. It was noticed that no one was harmed if they were indoors. They also found that the attacks only happened at night. Laws were passed by various towns to keep people from going outside at night."

"Like a curfew?"

"Yes, exactly. A curfew."

"Did it work?"

"Not at first," said Pappa. "People in towns and the ones moving west thought they would be safer in towns. They were wrong. At first, only the outskirts of towns were hit by the Night Ones. But soon no one was safe anywhere out doors."

“Ryan calls them Nightmares. Who named the Night Ones?”

“No one knows. It may have been someone on a podcast or a reporter on television. I don't care. The name stuck and spread quick. The name didn't matter. They'll most likely kill all of us before too long, no matter what their name is.”

“All of us, Pappa?” Her eyes grew wide. He wouldn't keep the truth from her, not now.

“I'm afraid so, kitten. It's just a matter of time. Hopefully, a very long time.”

“But aren't we safe indoors? That's what Mom says.”

“She's probably right. I'm just tired of all the hiding. Who's to say what the truth is?”

“The Night Ones don't come indoors. That means that they're afraid of coming inside of buildings. That's a good thing, right?”

“It is. That's just a best guess. We don't know why they don't come indoors. Outside information like television and newspapers stopped coming years ago.”

“So we're on our own? Maybe things are better than we can see from here.”

“Anything is possible. It's been quiet for weeks. With the curfew, the Night Ones only have what they can find outdoors at night. That could be enough pickings for them.”

“What will happen when they run out of animals and the people who go outside at night?”

“That's when we will see if they're afraid of coming indoors or not.”

“What'll we do, Pappa?”

“Nothing we can do. There's nothing we've been able to do to stop them. All the armies of the world lasted a few weeks against them. They'll get us all, unless we stay inside. We're safer here, though, with the fences.”

Alice's eyes went wide. “Oh, no, Pappa. I should have let you tell me the history at breakfast.”

Pappa smiled. “Cheer up, kitten. We're safer here than anywhere else for a hundred miles. This house we live in used to be a prison.”

“Really? I thought it was an old castle.”

“It only looks like a castle from the outside. Most houses don't have the fences and security system that we have.”

“So the criminals had to find a new home when this one got too small for them.”

“Something like that. This place became too small for the criminals in it and they were moved to a much bigger place. I worked here and bought it at an auction.”

“Did you not move with the others into the bigger place?”

“Yes, I did. I left when things got bad. My work hours kept me there until dark, and I couldn't stay there anymore.”

“So all of this keeps us safer?”

"Much safer than where we used to live. We'll be all right here for a long time. The fences will keep them out."

Alice nodded. She looked at the window. "Are the Night Ones snakes?"

"Something like that. Reports were never clear about them. Why?"

"I saw one."

Pappa came to attention right away. "Where?"

"Out on the big lawn in front."

"Inside the fence?"

"I think so."

"When?"

"Just after dark today. I peeked out the curtain of my room."

Pappa got to his feet. There was a wild look in his eyes she had never seen before. He went to the wall intercom. "Mary, can you come to Alice's room?"

"Yes. I'll be right there."

"What is it, Pappa?"

"It's nothing, kitten. I just need to check on something."

Mary came into the room, and Pappa moved to meet her. They stepped out into the hall. "They've gotten past the fence," he said.

The color drained from her face. She began to shake. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"What do we do, Jason?"

"They may be hearing the goats in the prison yard. I'll have to let them go."

"But why?"

"If we don't, the Night Ones will find a way to get at them."

"And us," she said quietly.

"I won't let that happen. I'll go now to let the goats out."

"Be careful."

"I will be." He went back to Alice. "Good night, kitten. See you in the morning."

"G'Night, Pappa."

Mary watched her husband walk down the long cinder block hallway until he turned the corner and his flashlight couldn't be seen. She went into Alice's room and sat down.

"What were you and Pappa talking about?" Mary brushed back the daughter's hair from her face.

“He told me about the Night Ones.”

Mary's blood ran cold. She was mad at her husband. “We were going to wait another year or so to tell you.”

“I know, but I wanted to know.”

Mary smiled. “What do you think?”

“They're really scary. Are you sure they're real, Mom?”

“Very real. We have to be very careful not to ever let them know that anyone lives here. That's why we're very quiet all night.”

“And no lights?”

“That's right.” Far down the hall behind her, she heard one of the large heavy outer doors swing open with a bump. That sound always scared her.

“What was that, Mom?” Alice stared at the door to her room, shaking.

Mary stood and went to the door. Deep within the bowels of the prison, she heard an unfamiliar grating noise. At first, she thought it was the generator restarting. The noise continued, and grew a bit louder.

“I think Pappa's turning on the heat,” she said. A goat bleated for a short second. It was cut off. The rasping grew louder in the hall. Mary closed the door and locked it.

“When will Pappa be coming back?”

“Soon, dear. Mom's getting cold. Can I get in and cuddle with you?”

Mary slipped into the covers and pulled them up to their chins. She tried not to make any noise as the clatter of clawed feet made their way up the hall toward them.

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AND NOT A DROP TO DRINK

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You know what I really want right now? A nice big glass of ice water. I wouldn't even drink it all at once. No. I'd watch the ice cubes swirl around, condensation building and running down the glass. Fat chance that I'll get one the way it looks now with this damn water shortage.

Why do we always have a shortage of water in the early summer? We've had millions of gallons of snow dumped on us during the winter, right? I guess it's one of those stupid things that no one can explain, like why people go crazy on nights of the full moon.

Something was happening here in Kever. Something strange that I can't quite pin down. I have a feeling is all. News of the water shortage has been missing in the news, as if it wasn't important. New Jersey is in

the middle of a water shortage. Everywhere else in the state people could to use their faucets on a limited basis. We in Keever are not allowed to use our taps.

My wife Jean was down at Greenman's supermarket. She'll stand in line for forty minutes to buy two or three gallons of bottled water. Greenman's was nice enough to stock up on bottled water for us. We need it now that the taps have shut off. Beer and wine were the first things to disappear off shelves when we found out about the shortage. Then, very quick, by all brands of soda are gone. Now you couldn't find a bottle of beer even if you drove all the way to Cape May Courthouse. It's crazy.

Here we are only 300 yards from the Atlantic Ocean and they say we don't have enough water to drink. Atlantic City is three miles down the road and here I sit, Pete Reindl. I'm vice president of the company that picks up the trash for half of those casinos down the street. Guess what? I can't get into any of them.

I never did believe all that crap that I have some conflict of interest. I bet the people throwing their money away at the casinos down the street have plenty of water to drink. I'll bet they get it for free, and all they want. It's enough to make me want to take out my suit and go strolling into Harrah's for some water. You know, maybe if I flashed my Master's degree in English at them it would be enough to get us in.

When the shortage was first announced there were all kinds of protests. Mayor Vernon visited the area and things calmed down. He said the water would off for a few days until the reservoir is clean. Some kind of chemical spill, they say. It's been a week so far and he keeps making excuses for why we can't use any water from the tap. He has a way about him that tells you he's lying. That's why I didn't vote for him two years ago.

Dave Harrison, my next door neighbor, grew real quiet a few days before the water shortage hit. He used to work for NASA and was a part of the new Marco Polo explorer project. After the Marco Polo project came to an end (too soon, according to Dave), he moved to another project. He said he was doing marine life research but wouldn't say any more.

We played cards every Friday night with the Harrisons. Jean and I always played host to them, because Dave always bought the beer. German beer. Even during the shortage he has been able to get at least a case from his connections downtown. That beer was worth waiting for. In this heat it was ecstasy in a dark bottle. Play always began at 8 pm. sharp, to give us plenty of hours to unwind and get loaded. Jean, my wife, doesn't mind if I get snogged every Friday night. I do it only on Friday and I don't touch booze the rest of the week. She has some idea that I'll become an alcoholic at age 34 if I drink on any other day of the week. I don't give her any argument because deep down she might be right.

Tonight I sensed something would be amiss. Dave and Carol were never late, yet here it was almost nine and they haven't even called. I thought it could have been the strange argument they had before six this evening. I had stepped over to their back porch like I always do after dinner on Friday and stood looking in the screen door. I raised my hand to knock when I heard Carol's voice.

"I don't want them in this house anymore."

Dave answered in his weak but persuasive voice. "I'll keep them here only another few days. It's important that they stay here in the refrigerator for that long. I promise that they'll be gone by then."

They were talking over by the sink and I was out of sight near the gate. Then I heard the glass break in the sink and Dave scream. "Look what you did. Goddammit, I told you not to take the container out."

"Why don't you scoop it back into another jar? I'll do it."

"No, don't. Let me do it before it runs down the sink."

As I slinked away I could here his voice rise to a frenzied pitch. I knew that I would only add to the trouble if I stuck my head in at that point. That was three hours ago.

Now I was at the porch again. I wondered if I should intrude or let them have their fight in peace and skip tonight's pinochle session. I let my thirst for beer get the better of me and I knocked. There was no answer.

"Hello?" I called. My voice fell upon the walls and bounced around, echoing back to me softer. I shrugged and entered.

The kitchen looked in disarray as I neared the sink. I called again for Dave and Carol. Again I received no answer. My eye caught something strange. Hanging from the faucet in this heat was an icicle, frozen solid to the metal. A thin coating of frost covered most of the faucet itself and spread out toward the handles. They had their own well, dug by the crew where Dave worked. It was all hush hush, don't tell anyone on the block or they'll all want some and run the thing dry.

I wondered if something else had been set up to Dave's sink and had backfired to cause this ice. I decided to turn the faucet off if it was on. The faucet handle felt cold in my hand. Ice cold. I grasped it and began to turn it. Water began to pour out in a small trickle, melting the ice and breaking the icicle at the tap. The water ran down the drain. It was then that the strangest sound I have ever heard reached my ears.

I bent over and looked into the tap because that was where the sound came from. It was then I saw it. "Yikes! What the hell is that?", I started aloud, looking behind me to see if anyone had heard. I straightened up in a swift move that almost took my left ear off.

Something was coming out of the faucet. As I stood up I saw that the water had stopped flowing. Something was stuck partway through the nozzle. I bent lower to see what it was. Damned if it wasn't a leaf from some tree somewhere. It was brown with some orange in it. As I watched I realized it was something more, something that even now forced its way out of the tap.

It flopped down into the sink. Little legs wriggled and it sat upright. To me it resembled a rose that had shrunk back onto itself after sundown. It floundered in the water of the sink, which now ran down into the drain. When it got a good foothold, the little legs began to unfold. Seconds later it crawled along the bottom of the sink, looking for a way out.

Several minutes passed as I watched the little bugger walk around the interior of the sink. The sink dried where it crawled and the thing soon found a small pool held by the piece of ice. It waddled to the water and I watched in fascination as the water sucked away into the creature itself. It looked like some sort of insect, disguised as a flower bud. Bright orange in color now, it had no head or face I could discern, only those ten segmented legs. He was cute.

I turned off the tap. He was making no progress escaping the sink confines. The water was disappearing in the sink as the little thing sought out all moisture it could find. I smiled and reached out to let him crawl onto my finger. I pressed my index finger into the rough texture of the sink about three inches from the bug. It had been heading away from my finger until I touched the floor of the sink. Stopping in mid-stride, two small antennae turning in my direction. Their incessant one-two beat never varied as it crawled up to my finger and onto it.

I shook my finger to get it off. The god-damned thing wouldn't let go. It unfolded its legs quick and clamped them tighter around my fingertip. The legs had tiny claws like some sort of Velcro that gripped me in a hundred different spots. It nestled closer to my knuckle and inflated a little.

It bit me. Jesus Christ! I felt the pain shoot through my finger like a dentist drill. I smashed it against the side of the refrigerator. That seemed to do no good. Its main section had a hard shell. That made crushing it difficult.

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