

Shut Down

by

Jeff DePew

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Callie

A gust of wind swept through the darkened neighborhood, sending a flurry of leaves spinning in its wake. Some of the leaves spilled up against garbage cans left beside driveways; others piled against car tires and windshields. And more leaves, brown and yellow and orange, buffeted against the desiccated corpses that lay in the street, on the sidewalk, or on front lawns of empty houses.

A young girl walked down the middle of the street, pushing a jogging stroller. Her long, brown hair was tied up in a braid beneath her Seattle Mariners baseball cap. She wore a denim jacket and an oversized backpack. Around her right wrist was a leather dog leash she had found. The leash trailed several feet behind her, where it was clipped to the belt of a slightly older boy who followed her, occasionally slowing, only to be jerked forward with a gentle tug.

Her name was Callie, she was twelve years old, and she was walking through Oregon to find her grandmother in California.

The only sounds were their footsteps and an occasional murmur from the baby. She still hadn't named him. She had been thinking of Sam, or maybe Ryan. That was—*had been*—her father's name. The thought of her father pressed down on her like a weight. Another cinder block thrown into her backpack. Remembering was like that. Thinking about her mom, her dad, their

house. Their life together. Life in general. Life before. Cinder blocks. Cinder blocks that weighed her down. Kept her from moving on. But you couldn't forget. You couldn't just pretend like nothing had existed before IT. That was no solution. A loud squawk from the stroller broke her out of her thoughts.

She stopped and reached down and pulled back the blanket so she could look at the baby. He was holding a jar of baby food (sweet potato and peas, it looked like) with two chubby hands and trying to bite the lid, his baby logic telling him this was the best way to get the contents of the jar into his mouth. His eyes widened and he smiled wetly up at her when he saw her.

“Hungry?” she smiled back at him. Callie turned to her brother, Jake, who was slowly shuffling forward, his eyes vacant and staring. “How about you?” she asked, expecting (and getting) no response. “You ready for some dinner?”

She took a swig of water from a metal bottle fastened to her backpack. She yawned and stretched, twisting from side to side, glanced around at the houses. The nights were getting chillier, and she wanted to find shelter for the night. She preferred the houses with no cars in the driveways. That generally meant no one had been home when IT happened, so there were no bodies on the houses. Not always, but usually.

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She decided on a one-story house, blue, with white trim. There was no car in the driveway, and the front door was undamaged. It was very rare that she found a house where there had been obvious damage and/or looting. So rare in fact that she rarely even thought about it anymore. There had to be people to loot, and since there were hardly any people...

Some part of her wished there were more signs of other people. A busted-in front door, or

a campfire burning at night in the distance. But nothing. She hadn't seen anyone other than Jake and the baby—his name is Ryan—for over a week.

Anyone alive, she thought glumly.

She wheeled the stroller up the driveway and around the side of the house to a wooden gate taller than her by a good two feet. She tried the metal latch. It opened, and she carefully pushed the gate open and led her brother inside and pulled the stroller behind her. She turned and latched the gate, bent down and picked up a twig, and stuck it in the hole where the padlock would go. It wouldn't keep out a determined trespasser, but Jake wouldn't be able to get out, even if he wanted to. And it would keep dogs out.

She slipped the leash off her wrist and reached over and unsnapped the metal clip from his belt. "Okay, buddy. You're free." She stood and watched him. No reaction. No smile, no walking forward, no nothing. She sighed and checked on the baby. He was fussing a little, but he'd be okay for a few more minutes.

Callie tried a side door and it opened easily. She glanced once more at Jake and the baby. They weren't going anywhere. She pulled out a flashlight from a pocket in her backpack and slipped inside. She scanned the room. A kitchen. Neat and orderly. Tile floors and counters now covered with a fine film of dust. She sniffed deeply. The sickly-sweet smell of rotting fruit, and beneath that a fouler smell emanating from the refrigerator. No way she was opening that. She'd learned the hard way not to open refrigerators. The smell was ungodly.

She knelt, and using her flashlight, carefully scanned the counter and corners for rat droppings. She hated rats, and since... IT... they seemed to be almost everywhere. But this looked okay. No little, black, telltale signs.

She crossed to a doorway and checked out the rest of the house.

A small family/living area with a couch and a TV mounted to the wall, two bedrooms, one with a king-size bed and an attached bathroom, and the other smaller, with posters on the wall. Another room with a desk and a computer, and a bathroom.

No running water, but the toilet tank was still full. She could fill up her bottle. A hall closet supplied some blankets that she spread on the floor of the living room. She went to a door that led to the backyard and unlocked it.

She levered the stroller up over the threshold and wheeled it into the living room, then lifted the baby out and laid him in the middle of the blanket. He squinted up at her, his mouth pulled down in a grimace. He was getting fussy. "Don't worry, buddy," Callie whispered. "Give me five minutes."

She went outside to get her brother. Then she would clean and feed them both before putting them to bed.

She stepped around the corner of the house to get Jake, and her heart stopped.

He was gone. She went to the gate, but it was still closed. She turned and saw him. He was *behind* the house, standing in knee-high weeds. He was... staring down at his feet.

Is he looking at something?

"Jake?" Callie approached him warily. He didn't acknowledge her. He had walked off one time before. Just a few feet. Like now. But it was always disconcerting. And yet, it was also a good thing. If he could walk off on his own, without being led or pushed, it meant he was thinking, didn't it?

Callie walked up and put a hand on his shoulder. She thought he trembled a bit, but it was

hard to tell. “What’s up, buddy?” she asked, glancing down to see what he might be looking at. At his feet sat a faded, half-deflated soccer ball. Her heart began to race. Jake loved soccer. As far back as she could remember, he had been playing soccer. He was hoping for a scholarship, a full ride to UC Santa Barbara.

She stepped forward and tapped the soccer ball with her foot. It rolled a foot and stopped. She watched him carefully. Had his eyes widened slightly? He seemed to be focusing on the ball, but it was hard to tell. She kicked the ball a bit farther. He took a step toward it. *On his own!*

Apparently, that was all he had in him. No amount of cajoling or nudging could get him to move toward the ball again. But it was something.

It was hope.

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Later that night, Callie sat in a canvas deck chair on the back porch. The door behind her was open. Empty baby food jars sat on the floor. One for the baby, and three for Jake. She'd clean up later. She'd had a protein bar and some applesauce she had found in the pantry. And a can of Coke.

The baby (*Ryan*, she reminded herself) lay on the floor on top of a folded blanket, a makeshift crib of propped-up throw pillows around him. He had eaten, was clean, and was fast asleep in a pair of light-blue pajamas Callie had taken from a department store.

Callie liked to keep everyone together in one room. She would sleep on the couch. Like the baby, Jake had been fed and cleaned as well. It was more work than the baby, obviously, but she had gotten used to it now. Just something she did, but didn't necessarily like. Like homework, or cleaning the bathroom every Saturday.

Jake was asleep on a mattress she had pulled to the floor and dragged into the family room. He had rolled off a bed on more than one occasion and once had received a nasty bruise on his forehead. She had been really worried, as any bad injury could be a real problem these days. But he had shown no ill effects, and the bruise healed in a couple of days.

He did seem to dream. He moved around a lot in his sleep. Did that mean his brain wasn't completely dead—that there might be hope for him?

She sank back in a chair and gazed up at the stars. So many more than ever before. Without the pollution and the city lights, the stars blazed at night. Before, they would have to get out in the country to really see the stars. Her mom had wanted to drive out of town and watch the meteor shower the night IT happened. The Perseids Meteor Shower. She and Callie's father had been out running errands. They never came back. Was that what had caused... IT... the Shut Down... to happen? The meteors? She tried not to think about that day... three months ago? She had given up trying to keep track of the date. She too many other things to think about.

Callie's eyes blurred. She blinked, and she realized she was crying. She hadn't cried in weeks. It was a luxury she couldn't afford. She leaned forward and put her head in her hands and wept. She cried for Jake, and for the baby, who would never know his mother and father. She cried for her own mother and father. But mostly, she cried for herself.

IT

"We'll be back in a couple hours," Mom said, sunglasses in one hand, looking around the counter for her keys.

"Marie! Let's go!" came her father's voice from the garage.

"I know. I know. I'm looking for my keys," her mother called back, searching in her purse

for the third time.

"Hello! You don't need them! I'm driving!" Callie could hear the laugh in her father's voice.

Mom looked up, shook her head, smiled, blew a kiss to Callie who was watching from over the back of the couch, and headed out to the garage. Callie heard her parents laughing as the door to the garage closed.

That was the last time she ever saw them.

About an hour or so later (she was never sure) she was idly watching a baseball game and texting her best friend, Erica. Just an ordinary Saturday in August. Too hot to be outside unless absolutely necessary. Erica had just finished telling her about some new eyeliner she was planning on getting when there was a sudden, loud metallic screech, and a brilliant white light filled Callie's eyes. She closed her eyes and jerked her head to the side. The terrible, metallic screeching sound (like a gigantic shovel scraping on concrete) continued. It was loud, louder than anything she had ever heard. It went on and on. It was everything, everywhere. She began to feel nauseous. Then it all went dark.

Callie was never clear if she had blacked out or not. Her eyes took a moment to readjust, and her ears were ringing. She gazed around the room, dazed. The TV was still on, but the picture was weird. The camera was just showing the ground. There was part of a shoe in the lower left corner. The camera wasn't moving, and neither was the foot.

Callie picked up the remote and changed the channel. Cartoon, commercial, a sports news program—but the camera shot was off-center and the hosts looked like they were asleep, unconsciousness, or something. They were slumped in their chairs. Not moving. Eyes open, but

unfocused, just staring. A man came in from off camera. He was holding a clipboard and he walked unsteadily to the broadcast desk. He said something too soft to hear. He nudged one of the hosts, a bald man with glasses, who slid off his chair and fell bonelessly to the floor. The man with the clipboard looked at the camera, his face panic-stricken, and stumbled out of the picture.

Callie clicked the remote and checked more channels, but they were all the same. Any live programs just showed the hosts or newscasters lying on the floor or slumped over their desk. Everything else was just movies or commercials or dead air.

She glanced around for her phone and grabbed it off the floor. She texted Erica.

hey did you hear that

No response. She tried again.

Erica call me now its imprtnt

Again, nothing. Callie pushed the CALL button and the phone rang and rang and Erica's voicemail picked up. "Oh, my God, Erica, what happened? Call me, please. I'm really scared and my parents aren't home."

She stood up and went to the front window, pulled the curtain aside, and looked out. There was a car sitting on their lawn. It had crashed into the big Mesquite tree. The engine was still running. There was a driver inside, leaning against the window. Just like the people on the sports show. Slumped over. She leaned closer to the glass and looked up and down the street and saw someone standing on the sidewalk a few houses up. It was Mr. Phillips, a friend of her dad.

She opened the front door and raced down the sidewalk toward Mr. Phillips. But as she got closer, she slowed. He was so still, just... standing there in front of his house. Mr. Phillips was wearing cargo shorts and a Corona beer tank top. A garbage can lay on its side several feet

away. His face was slack, eyes open, but staring blindly at nothing. Callie approached him warily and touched his hand.

"Mr. Phillips? Are you okay? What's happening?" She was struggling not to cry. He didn't respond. She tugged on his hand. "Mr. Phillips! Please!" He stumbled forward and she quickly backed up. He fell straight down, face first, on his lawn. He never even put his hands out to stop himself. She backed away some more, hands to her mouth, and started back to her house.

A baby was crying somewhere nearby. She stopped and looked around. It was hard to tell exactly where it was coming from. Someone was lying in a driveway street several houses up. A woman she vaguely recognized was standing on the sidewalk. She wobbled and collapsed.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and looked up. In the distance, an airplane was angling toward the ground. It disappeared behind a tree.

Callie walked toward her house. Where else could she go? What was happening? It was like a bad dream. Her eyes burned, and Callie began to cry. She just wanted it to stop. She wanted someone to—

She froze. JAKE! She had forgotten all about him.

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Jake was in the bathroom, standing, facing the sink. He was wearing jeans and a Real Madrid jersey. The water was running, and without thinking, she turned it off.

"Jake?"

He just stood there. Shut down. Just like Mr. Phillips. "Jake, are you okay?" She reached up and cupped his chin, forced him to look at her.

"Jake!" Her voice was husky. "Please, Jake. Say something."

He stared impassively ahead. No recognition in his eyes. She tugged on his arm, and he moved forward. For an instant, she was afraid he was going to fall over like Mr. Phillips, but instead he took a step. She tugged again. He took another step.

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She eventually led Jake into the living room, and with a soft nudge, got him to sit down on the couch. She noticed a blinking light on the kitchen phone.

Someone called! Mom! Dad!

The call had come in eight minutes ago, when she had been outside. She hit the “Play Message” button.

“Marie, it’s me!” *Grandma*, thought Callie. “Marie, are you there? Ryan, Jake, Callie, anyone? Please. Something’s happened. Call me as soon as you can.”

Callie selected her grandmother's number and hit CALL. It went straight to voicemail.

“Grandma, it’s Callie. Mom and Dad are gone and there’s something wrong with Jake. Please call me. I’m so scared. I’m all alone. Please call me!”

She walked back to the couch and sat beside Jake.

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Her grandmother never called back. Callie must have tried her number over a dozen times. And her parents, and Erica. No response from any of them. She thought about going out to look for Mom and Dad but had no idea where they had gone, and she’d been told that if she ever got lost that she should stay put. So she did. She took care of Jake as best she could—fed him, cleaned him, which had been *really* awkward at first, and had generally done the best she could.

The baby was living with them by then. She had followed the sound of his crying, walked

through the unlocked front door and found him in his crib, alone. His mother was lying on the kitchen floor, a box of cake mix still in her hand. The mixer was on, the beaters turning and turning in a congealing milk and egg mixture. Callie had turned it off before she left with the baby.

So life had gone on. Existing, surviving, waiting for something (she was never sure what) to happen. And then, two weeks after IT, something did happen.

On a sultry, windy morning, a fire started down the street, and by nightfall, Callie's house was fully engulfed in flames.

She had managed to grab the baby, her dad's backpack, and some clothes before the fire had driven her outside. She recalled that awful night, and how she had frantically looked for Jake, calling his name (like that would help) until she found him in their side yard, where she had forgotten she left him, staring entranced at the flames.

Together they had watched their family home burn to the ground. She didn't even try to put it out. Water had stopped running by then. All she could do was watch. She still felt the knot in her throat, her mood rotating from sad to angry and back again, as she had watched, completely helpless as everything she had ever known was destroyed. No sirens. No neighbors to help. Nothing to do but watch.

There were still some photos of her parents and friends on her phone, and she turned it on and looked at them when she was feeling particularly alone. She also checked her phone for texts or calls. She had a solar-powered charger in her backpack, and would use it whenever she could, balancing the small solar panel on the awning of the stroller. But really, who was she expecting to call? Aside from her the photos, the only thing she had to remind her of her parents was Jake.

The Warning

As she did every morning, Callie opened a pocket on her backpack and took out a beat-up US road atlas. She opened it up to a folded-back page and spread it out on the kitchen table. She had found the atlas behind the counter at a gas station just after she started out. Her GPS was still working then, but it was getting sketchy. She wouldn't have a signal for hours at a time, and then the 4G icon popped up. Maybe the satellites were going? But for the last couple of days, nothing. So she used the atlas.

She had a pretty good idea of where she was heading. Straight down Highway 101 along the coast was the best route. Not on the freeway, but parallel to it. Through neighborhoods where she could find shelter and food... and maybe people. She went into the kitchen and rooted around until she found a bill with an address on it. She was in Silver Beach. She thought she might have heard of it before but had never been there. She found it on her map and circled it with a red felt pen. She looked at the scale guide and estimated how far she had to go. On the map, Carlsbad was only inches. But in reality she was looking at weeks, especially with the baby. *Maybe months.*

Callie sighed and closed the atlas, put it away, and dropped the red pen in the backpack pocket. She snapped the pocket shut. She looked at her two charges. The baby—*Ryan!*—was rolling back and forth, holding onto a stuffed zebra she had found in the child's bedroom. Jake was sitting on the couch, staring straight ahead.

“Give me a couple minutes, guys, and then we'll be ready to go.”

A quick rummage through the kitchen counters and pantries resulted in two cans of fruit cocktail, a plastic bottle of water, and some crackers. Starvation wasn't really an issue because of

cans and bottles. Once in a while she would find a fruit tree, and fresh fruit was always nice. She did miss meat, though. She'd tried some Vienna sausages she'd found, but they were pretty foul. She hadn't finished them. Canned chicken and tuna were okay, but they weren't really *meat*.

A cheeseburger, though. She smiled at the thought. *A double cheeseburger. French fries. And a vanilla shake.*

Now none of those things exist.

Callie backed the stroller out to the driveway, carefully led Jake down the steps, went back inside, and shouldered her pack. She took a last look around.

"Thank you," she whispered (as she always did) before closing the door. She pulled the twig out of the lock on the gate, and then had a thought. She closed the gate, ran back to the backyard, and picked up the soccer ball. She held it up before Jake.

"Remember this, buddy? I think we should keep it."

Did his eyes focus? It was so hard to tell. She put the soccer ball in Jake's backpack, opened the gate, and they were off.

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They made good time today, which was good, because it looked like rain, and Callie was in a relatively good mood. Until she saw the dolls.

She spotted the first doll, and not sure what it was, moved onto the sidewalk to take a closer look. She made a face. *Ugh!*

Someone had nailed a baby doll to a tree. A big nail, right through the center of its cloth torso.

She moved on, and saw another one. This one was nailed upside down to a wooden

mailbox post. Then another. And another. Some were not nailed, but hanging, twine tied to an arm or leg. There were dozens of them, and they hung from the trees like malformed, exotic fruit. It was unsettling, and she stopped.

Who would do this? she asked herself. And perhaps more importantly, *Why?*

They stood at the center of an intersection in a small-town neighborhood. A two-car collision in the middle of the intersection. A silver SUV had smashed into the left side of a smaller car. She couldn't see the driver of the second car. Or of the SUV, for that matter. Had they survived and escaped?

She approached the SUV and peered through the open back door. An empty infant seat. She glanced down at Ryan. He had been so lucky she had heard him crying. How many other babies had wasted away in empty houses, their parents lying beside them, dying themselves?

She noticed something on the hood of the small car. She walked over. *Oh gross.* The skin of a cat, spread out, legs and tail pointing in five different directions.

She shook her head and stepped away. *Okay. This is getting weird.* The dolls. The cat skin. Was it a warning? Maybe someone wanted this street to himself?

The neighborhood looked safe enough. The houses were smaller and older, and there was one that was boarded up, but not too bad. No smoke, no broken windows or smashed-in doors. A dried-up corpse lay on a driveway, but she was well used to that by now.

Callie dropped Jake's leash and knelt down. She took off her backpack. She pulled out her cell phone and turned it on. As it was booting up, she scanned the area again. She really didn't want to have to detour. She knew the freeway was only a mile or so to her left, and she wanted to stay close. But something felt *off* about this neighborhood.

The sky was dark and foreboding, the clouds heavy with rain. She wanted to get inside soon. A nice, safe house. *She* could walk through the rain, but it was really too hard with the baby and Jake.

Her phone was up and she quickly opened her GPS app. The map showed her location, and she zoomed in. Her forehead scrunched in concentration. She didn't want to backtrack, and going left would take her to what looked like a business park or a parking lot. She would feel too exposed. If she went about half a block ahead, she could make a right, and that would lead her to another street that ran parallel to the freeway. She looked up and could see the green street sign about a quarter-mile up the road. That's where they'd turn right. Then just skirt this area. *No problem*, she thought as she turned off her phone. *Easy peasy*.

Ten minutes tops.

A raindrop fell on her arm.

She looked at the baby again, and then at Jake. The darkened windows of the houses seemed even darker. The rain began to patter on the roofs and the sidewalk. She turned Jake around and pulled a poncho out of his backpack and pulled it over him.

"What do you think, guys? You ready for a little jog?" She shouldered her backpack and tightened the straps. She even fastened the waist strap, just in case. *Just in case what?* she asked herself.

"Nothing," she muttered. "It's fine. Everything is going to be fine." Callie picked up Jake's leash and put her hand through the loop. She swallowed. "Let's do this."

She started at a fast walk. Another doll nailed to a garage door. The rain wasn't too bad. They'd soon be past this neighborhood, and if the rain stayed like this, they'd make another hour

or so before it got too dark.

Her footsteps echoed hollowly on the pavement. *Am I always so loud?* There were old, towering trees in front of most of the houses, which both sheltered her from the rain and increased the darkness. The hanging dolls slowly turned in the breeze.

The corpse of a teenage girl beside a soccer ball lay in the gutter. One of her legs was missing. Callie moved away and went around a red VW Bug in the middle of the road. There was a definite cattish shape on the windshield. She kept her eyes on the street, occasionally glancing up to check her bearings. The intersection where she would turn right was getting closer.

A screen door slammed open and bounced off the house nearest her. Callie's stomach sank. *Don't look, don't look.*

She turned to look and horror took her so tightly that she stumbled and fell to her knees. The stroller rolled away from her.

A clown stood on the front porch of the house directly to her right. His face was painted white, his mouth a red gash. His eyes were circled in black. They looked empty. An orange halo of wiry hair fringed his bald head. He wore light-blue coveralls, stained and dirty. They were halfway open in the front, revealing a filthy white undershirt—*wifebeaters* Jake had called them.

The clown staggered down the steps to his front walk and stared at her. He was tall. And broad. And horrifying. She watched in paralyzed fascination.

The rain continued to fall.

Callie came to her senses and scrambled to her feet. She suddenly realized she wasn't holding Jake's leash. She whirled around and nearly screamed in frustration and terror. He was

about twenty feet behind, beside the soccer ball that lay next to the dead girl.

"Jake!" Of course he didn't react. She glanced over at the clown. He was striding toward her, and it was then she realized he was holding a hammer.

She turned toward the stroller, which was about five feet in front of her, out of reach, and then back at Jake.

The clown was getting closer. His nose had been painted red. She could hear his heavy breathing.

"Please," she whimpered. "Please don't do this." The clown glanced over at Jake and moved in that direction. He raised the hammer.

Callie looked again at the stroller. One of Ryan's hands had grasped the blanket she used to cover him and was tugging at it. Those little fingers...

She darted toward Jake and grabbed the leash and wrapped it several times around her wrist. She tugged and he followed. She ran with her brother stumbling behind her, his poncho flapping madly. She ran and left the baby—*Ryan*—behind.

Tears coursed down her cheeks, mixing with the rain. Callie sobbed, her throat raw with pain and guilt.

She ran and staggered and slipped and stumbled and got up and ran until her legs began to throb and her chest heaved. She slammed into the rear bumper of a car and spun and tumbled into the street. Tugging on the leash, getting to her feet, she sprinted up the nearest driveway past a blue minivan and ran behind the house.

Callie was soaked to the bone, her clothes plastered to her back and shoulders. She took her backpack off and tucked it beneath the wooden porch.

Tugging Jake closer, taking up the slack in the leash, she leaned against the back of the house gasping, sobbing, hating herself. She tried to vomit but nothing came out, just thick strands of saliva. She spat and wiped her mouth.

Jake stood passively beside her, his chest rising and falling. *Jake*. This was his fault. Her eyes narrowed as she stood up.

“Why did you have to walk away!” Callie sobbed, pushing Jake back a foot or so. She shoved him again, and he stumbled, teetered, and fell on his butt. He didn’t try to break his fall.

Callie looked down at him, sitting on the cold, wet concrete. Her older brother, who had taught her how to do a layup and helped her with her pre-algebra homework. He had even introduced her to *Star Wars*.

He was just sitting, not even trying to stand up or shield himself from the rain. She thought of a lyric from an old song her dad had played on Christmas last year.

“...and Tommy doesn’t know what day it is,

He doesn’t know who Jesus was

Or what praying is how can he be saved,

From his eternal grave?”

An eternal grave. That’s what this was for him. And all those others. Only Jake was still alive. Because of her.

Callie’s heart cracked.

She knelt and wrapped her arms around Jake.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into his sodden hair. “It’s not your fault.” She reached around him and half-hugged, half-lifted him.

Jake allowed himself to be pulled up to standing. He didn't really help, but he didn't resist, either. He was just... compliant. Was that the word?

She led him to a relatively dry spot against the back of the house. They were sheltered by a tattered awning.

"Now, you stay here," she said unnecessarily and headed back along the rear of the house, peering into windows, but it was too dark to make out anything of substance.

She tried the back door, but it was locked. She shoved the door with her shoulder; it rattled in its frame, but wouldn't open. Rubbing her shoulder, she glanced around and spied a cinder block supporting a drain spout coming down the corner of the house. She looked at the window.

In all the weeks she had been traveling, she had managed to avoid breaking into any houses. Open doors, unlocked windows. That was the way to go. Something didn't feel right about breaking into a house. It didn't make sense; it wasn't like there were laws anymore... no one cared if she broke window or two, but she could always find an unlocked house.

This is different. He could be after us.

She looked over at the minivan. There was someone in there. Behind the wheel. Which meant they probably had the keys. She swallowed. She didn't want to do this, but she didn't want to do a lot of things these days. She approached the driver's door. Between the clouds and the rain, it was extremely dark and hard to see, although there was clearly an adult-sized shape behind the wheel.

Callie went around to the passenger side and pulled the handle. The door was locked.

Resolutely, she went around to the driver's side and opened the door. The interior light

popped on and she jerked back in surprise. Electric light. It had been a while since she had seen it. Then the smell hit her. A hot, foul, rotting-fruit stench forced her away from the door. She gagged, coughed, breathed deeply and was able to compose herself. Breathing through her mouth to lessen the stench (a trick she had learned the hard way after entering one too many corpse-filled houses), she leaned into the car.

The rotting, jellied corpse of a woman wearing a burgundy warmup suit sat in the seat, her hands on her lap. In the seat opposite sat a gym bag and a cell phone.

Callie leaned further in, aware of how close she was to the dead woman's shriveled, breathless mouth, her teeth lengthened by drawn-back gums. Her eyes were sunken, glistening holes. Callie reached around the wheel for the keys, but wasn't able to quite reach them. She couldn't see over the steering console, so she had to operate solely by touch. Her face was inches from the foul face of the corpse.

Callie had a mad thought that the mouth would open and from her dark, dead throat, the voice screaming above the sound of the pounding rain.

"Get out of my car! What are you doing? Get out! Get out!"

Callie felt blindly for the keys. Her fingers touched something leather, which could only be a key chain of some sort. She followed it up and found the ignition key. And twisted and pulled. The lights on the dashboard lit up.

Callie cried out in frustration. She took a step away from the car, took a deep breath, leaned in and twisted the key the other way. It clicked off and she tugged it out of the ignition.

She jerked out of the car as quickly as possible and slammed the door.

It took her a few minutes to figure out the right key in the dark and rain, and she had to

hold her flashlight in her armpit, but finally one that slid in smoothly and the door opened.

Callie moved along slowly through the dark, unfamiliar house, the shadows thrown by her flashlight constantly moving and changing shape.

She opened the back door and grabbed Jake and pulled him in.

Then she fetched her backpack from under the porch. She looked around, thinking she had forgotten something, that *something* was off... and remembered. Ryan.

But she hadn't *forgotten* him; she had left him behind. And no matter how she twisted it, rationalized it, it all came out the same. She had abandoned him to be—what? Killed? Eaten? Raped? *Did people do that to babies?*

Why else would he want us?

Callie Makes a Decision

Callie had changed out of her wet clothes and was wearing a bathrobe she found in a closet. She sat on the bedroom carpet, cross-legged, staring at the light of the camping lantern. No way she could sleep. Ryan's face swam through her mind. And his little hand, those perfect tiny fingers, the last true memory she had of him. She didn't even have any pictures of him.

Somewhere outside a dog barked.

Callie crawled over to Jake stretched out on a mattress. He was out. Fast asleep. The sleeping pill she'd ground up and put in his cold beef stew would make sure he stayed out.

Callie stood up, stretched, and took off the bathrobe. She got dressed quickly, efficiently. She had found a black, nylon windbreaker in a hall closet and pulled that on over her sweatshirt. She debated tying a line around Jake's leg and attaching the other end to the bed frame, but decided not to. If she didn't come back, she wanted him to have a chance at survival, slim as it

might be.

She knelt beside him, kissed his cheek. He was getting stubbly. She'd have to shave him again. She put her lips close to his ear. "I'll be back in a little while."

She left the door open and made her way to the kitchen. There was a butcher block on the counter, and she pulled out the biggest carving knife. She carefully wrapped it in a T-shirt and put it in her jacket pocket.

Then she went to get her baby back.

*

The rain had let up; it was now a steady drizzle, but much easier to see in than the earlier downpour. She could make out dim shapes: the shape of a tree here, a car there.

Piles of clothing and half-eaten corpses she would see at the last moment and step over. She held her flashlight low, covering the lens with her hand, just allowing herself enough light to see a couple of feet in front of her.

She remembered running—and *leaving Ryan behind*—from the Clown Man's house. She remembered she had made one left turn, so at the first intersection, she made a right. She found the sidewalk, and carefully made her way, house by house. Traveling slowly, step by step, eyes on the light just ahead of her feet. No sense looking up ahead. She wouldn't be able to see anything anyway.

Is this it? kept running through her mind. She'd stop and look, try to recall what the house had looked like. A front door, a porch, okay, that was a start.

Then she stopped. Her—no, *Ryan's* jogging stroller lay on its side on a front lawn. She ducked behind a tree, shut her light off and scoped out the house.

No lights, but that doesn't mean anything.

She glanced at the baby stroller. Why would he just leave it there? Maybe he didn't need the stroller.

Just what was in it.

Then another, darker thought.

Could it be bait?

He had seen both Callie and Jake. Did he want them too? Her thoughts flashed back to Jake, alone, helpless. *This is stupid. I should just go back. Jake needs me.* But another look at the stroller silenced those ideas. Ryan had needed her too.

Might still need her.

She stayed low and made her way around the side of the house. There was no fence, so she was able to keep close to the house, moving beneath the dark windows. She rounded the corner and found herself in a small backyard. The plants were overgrown, and she had to push away some sopping branches as she made her way closer.

A small concrete patio, three steps up to the back door. The house was small, maybe two bedrooms. She would have to be so quiet.

In the Dragon's Den

The rain had stopped completely now, and some stars peeked through a hole in the clouds. It was getting lighter.

Several boxes sat on the ground beside the steps. The contents glinted in the cast of her light. Bottles. Lots and lots of empty bottles.

As she reached a shaky hand for the handle—*What are you doing?*—a slight hesitation,

but she had to be sure. For Ryan. *For Ryan.* The door was unlocked and the knob turned easily. She pushed the door open an inch and waited. Another inch. Still nothing. She pushed it open a bit more and slid in, still staying low. She gently closed the door behind her, but not all the way.

Might have to make a quick exit.

The smell was foul. The smell of spoiled meat. Of sweat. Of stale cigarette smoke. Of madness. But after what she'd smelled earlier tonight, it wasn't so bad.

She took a chance and turned her flashlight on, again masking the glow with her fingers.

Something twisted beneath her foot and she heard a faint jingle. She shone the light at the floor. A small collar. Pink, with a bell on it. And another one, beside it, this one bigger, with a metal name tag shaped like a bone. A green collar, larger. And a red one, the tags gleaming in the light.

What is all this? She asked herself. But she knew.

She peered over the top of the counter and choked on a scream. The counter was littered with bones. Tiny bones from cats, birds, larger leg bones and ribs from dogs and who knew what else.

You know what it is.

Three skulls placed in a row on a plate, their empty eye sockets regarding her solemnly. On the other counter, a key chain. His hammer. The skin of a dog hung from the back of a chair. And on the kitchen table—*oh no*—tiny clothes. A little pair of shorts. A onesie. A boy's T-shirt. And the shoes. So many, it seemed.

Callie had never wanted anything so badly than to leave that house right then and there, and in many ways, it would have been better if she had. But she couldn't. She had to find Ryan.

Or what's left of him. Keeping low, she looked over the clothing again. Nothing looked familiar.

She took notice of her surroundings. Sheets covering the windows. A couch. Boxes of liquor bottles—these full, unopened—stacked along the wall behind the couch. Dead rats, many crushed, littered the floor. A pile of clothes beside the couch. Empty cans of food, soda, beer, piles of cigarette cartons. And what were those? She moved the beam.

Magazines, DVDs. So many. Stacks of them. She moved closer.

Oh my God.

Sex movies. Porno magazines. She hadn't seen much in the brief glare of her light, but it was enough.

I shouldn't be here.

The dark hallway beckoned. She reached into her pocket and grasped the handle of the knife. A quick flash of her light showed three doors. One, on the right, was partially open. One farther down on the left had a padlock on it. At the end of the hall, another closed door.

Her heart pounded so loudly she thought it would give her away. She walked quietly, carefully. Staying close to the wall. Three doors. If Ryan was here, where would he be?

What's that?

A noise. A growl? *Is there a dog in here?* She pulled the carving knife out of her pocket and unwrapped it. She waited. The sound repeated and she relaxed her hold on the knife.

Snoring. Someone snoring. Someone *big* snoring.

Not someone. The Clown Man.

Walking so quietly, so carefully, practically levitating, it felt like, she passed by the doorway without incident. A sidelong glance revealed only darkness and a foul odor. The

snoring at least was a good thing, she told herself.

As long as he's snoring, he's asleep, and I know where he is.

But what if he stopped snoring?

Shut up, shut up. Just keep walking.

She glanced at the door on the left, the one with the padlock, but kept going. She wouldn't be able to get in there. The farthest room first.

What She Found in the Bathroom

A few more steps and she reached the door. It was unlocked. The handle was stiff, and it turned with an audible click that made Callie wince. She gently pushed the wooden door open, and keeping the flashlight low, she swept it across the room. A bathroom. Filthy. Dark stains all over the floor. The toilet seat up. The smell was worse in here, dank and sour. With her knife hand she pulled her shirt up over her mouth and nose and stepped in a little further.

A window over the bathtub, allowing what little light there was to weakly penetrate this foul space. Boxes stacked along one wall. More alcohol. And soda. Once water stopped flowing through pipes, the bathroom became just another storage room.

A sound. A squeak. *Rats?* She swung the light left to right, at the same time bringing her feet closer together, trying to take up as little space as possible.

The bathtub. Something in the bathtub.

The tub was full of... what... blankets, dead animals? No, something alive. Something that squeaked. Not a squeak. A coo. A baby coo.

Not believing, but hoping against hope, Callie knelt beside the tub. The shower curtain was long gone, and the plastic shower curtain rings hung like rib bones picked clean.

The tub was filled with towels and blankets, but in the center a boxy shape covered by a towel. She pulled off a corner, revealing a plastic laundry tub—and stared into the beautiful blue eyes of Ryan, pooled in the beam of the flashlight.

He squinted and turned his head, so she quickly shut the light off and put it in her pocket, stashed the knife in another pocket, and reached down and scooped him up. He was wearing only a diaper, which looked incredibly full and about to fall off. Other than that, he seemed fine.

She resisted the urge to hug him and kiss him over and over. That could wait.

“We’re getting out of here,” she whispered, holding him tightly. The knife was in one pocket, the flashlight in another. No light. No weapon. This was going to be difficult. And to top it off, Ryan began squirming.

“Shh,” she whispered, kissing the top of his head. “It’s okay. Shh.” But he continued to squirm and now began to cry. Callie crouched in the hall and pulled out her flashlight, checked out the floor in front to her. *All clear*. A faint light was beginning to filter in through the living room. She could make shapes of the furniture. She shut the bathroom door behind her.

Ryan cried out and wrenched away from her. She grasped him even more tightly, struggling to keep him from falling. The flashlight fell from her grasp and hit the floor.

A loud groan from the bedroom. “Shut th’ fuck up!” followed by a hollow thud. A bottle hitting the floor. She froze. Ryan squirmed even more and let out a loud squawk.

More noise from the bedroom, clattering of things falling over, thumping of a big man—a *really big man*—getting up on unsteady feet.

Three months ago, Callie would have been too frightened to make a rational decision. But now her choice was clear.

No hiding.

She moved toward the bluish cast of light emanating from the kitchen, toward the door, and escape.

The hallway grew suddenly dark as something immense moved in front of her, blocking the light from the kitchen.

The Clown Man.

He was huge, and gross, and up close, the most frightening thing she had ever seen. He still wore the white makeup, although it was splotchy and smeared. In the dim light, his eyes were black holes. His pendulous, hairy belly hung over his stained, baggy sweatpants. She could smell his stench: sweat, urine, and who knew what else.

“What are you doing?” he roared. “That’s mine!”

Ryan was screaming. Without realizing what she was doing, Callie backed away. Away from escape. Away from Jake.

The Clown Man strode forward. He was carrying a large black flashlight in one hand, and he turned it on, shone it at her face. She turned her head, and a big, meaty hand snatched at Ryan, grabbing him by an arm. He cried out in alarm and—*pain*—and Callie instinctively tugged back.

“Let go, you little bitch!” His spittle spraying her face. The Clown Man twisted Ryan’s arm and the infant yelped, his face contorted with terror and pain. Callie let go of him, holding her hands up in supplication.

“Please, don’t hurt him. Please, just let us go.”

“Shut up!” A massive hand slapped her across the face, rocking her head to the side, bringing her to her knees. “It’s mine now. And so are you.”

He reached down and grabbed her coat.

White spots in Callie's vision. Her ears rang. Her jaw stung. But he had Ryan.

He had *Ryan*.

She was being dragged down the hallway, back toward the bathroom.

Or the room with a padlock on the door.

She struggled to slide herself out of the oversized jacket, but he had her left elbow in a painfully firm grip. She was stuck.

He mumbled to himself as he pulled her. "Goddamn bitch, try to steal my baby. I'll show you, yes I will. Show you. Gonna eat you up. Eat you *all* up."

Her hand slid into her jacket pocket and clutched the handle of the carving knife. She moved in one motion, not allowing time to second-guess herself, twisted her body around, and stuck the knife into his calf.

The Clown Man hollered, took a step, and fell to one knee. His flashlight thudded on the carpet, and the shadows danced crazily in the narrow space.

Before he could turn on her, Callie, crying out in fear and anger, yanked the knife from his calf with a wet, sucking sound, and stabbed him in the lower back. The knife went in, caught on something, but she leaned on it and it slid in to the hilt. She tried to pull it out, but it was stuck fast. She moved it back and forth, struggling to loosen it, and he howled. Blood leaked from the wound, covering her hands, making her grip slippery.

Still on his knees, he dropped forward, supporting himself on one hand. He clutched Ryan to his chest with the other. Ryan was no longer screaming. Callie stood up and moved away. The knife was still stuck in his back.

The Clown Man's breath came in quick, short gasps. He coughed once, placed Ryan on the floor, and shakily stood up and faced her. He leaned on his uninjured leg. She was disgusted to see that the front of his sweatpants was stained with blood. He reached behind him, struggling to reach the knife, but he was too bulky. Too much fat. He couldn't get his arms around. He roared like a maddened bull and slammed against the wall as he lurched toward her.

"You... little... fuck!" he wheezed, coming closer. Callie inched away, looking around desperately for another weapon. She saw that Ryan was moving slowly on the floor at the opposite end of the hall.

In the living room, hazy with the morning light, she had more space to maneuver, but was no closer to helping Ryan. She picked up an empty beer bottle and hurled it at the Clown Man. It bounced off his massive chest. He didn't even seem to notice. His face was a mask of hatred and pain, his big red mouth turned down in a grimace. Blood leaked from one corner of his mouth. He put one arm out and leaned against the wall, panting. Then started forward again.

She picked up another bottle, this one larger and squared at the bottom, and flung it at him. It caught him in the forehead, knocking his head back with an audible *thunk*.

He groaned and stepped back, putting a hand up to his head. A bottle smashed into the wall beside him and he ducked. A clear glass bottle caught him in the knee and he grunted in pain.

"Goddamnit!" He straightened, and still wheezing, lurched for her. The back of her legs hit the couch. She had nowhere to go.

He was five steps away. Three.

Callie picked up a wine bottle and held it like a club. She sidestepped, closer to the

kitchen. She knew she could outrun him if she made a move now. But what about Ryan, squirming in the hallway?

I can't leave him... again.

She went to move around him, but he was on her.

“Goddamn... bitch! You... stabbed... me!” He was gasping, weakened, but still dangerous, still a monster. She swung the bottle, hitting him in the chest, the stomach. No effect. He grabbed her wrist, squeezing, bones grinding together. She cried out and dropped the bottle. He clamped a hand around her throat and lifted her up.

No. Not fair. Jake. What about...

Everything went black.

*

She gasped. Her throat burned, and it was difficult to breathe. So much pressure on her chest. Her wrist hurt. It was so dark. And that smell. She struggled to move, but it was hard, like something was pressing down on her. Something spongy... flabby... cold.

It's him. He's lying on top of me.

A wave of claustrophobia swept through her. She squirmed, and pushed and twisted, and slowly wormed her way out from beneath the lifeless body of the Clown Man. She got to her feet and felt her wrist. It really hurt, but she flexed her hand without too much pain. It didn't look swollen. Her legs were wet with blood.

Not mine. His.

She heard faint crying.

Ryan!

She raced down the hallway and knelt beside him. He was alive and moving, still a bit fussy. She lifted him and cradled him to her and let the tears come.

“I’m so sorry, so sorry.” She held him at arm’s length and inspected him. He looked fine. Probably traumatized—*you and me both*, she thought, and heard the cry again. Muffled, nearby.

Her eyes went to the padlocked door.

She approached the door, listened. Definitely crying. A child. She reached up and tugged at the lock. The crying stopped.

“Hey,” she said, leaning in. “I’m going to get you out of there. I’m going to help.”

She went back to the kitchen counter, giving the stinking corpse on the floor a wide berth, and found the key ring. She took a moment and tore down the sheets covering the windows. It made a difference. The room brightened considerably.

We might actually see the sun today.

She used one of the sheets to cover the Clown Man.

She placed Ryan on the floor beside the locked door and tried a key. Then another. Finally she found the right one. She removed the padlock and turned the handle and opened the door. The room was another bedroom, but the bed was bare, just a mattress. On the floor were three large dog crates, the kind for really big dogs. Two were empty, but the third held a little girl.

She squatted on a filthy blanket as far back in the crate as she could get. Her hair was ratty and her face was dirty. With her was an old teddy bear, a plastic water bottle, and an empty bag of pretzels. There was a tiny padlock, the kind Callie’s mom used for her suitcase, keeping the crate locked.

Callie dropped to her knees in front of the crate. The girl came forward a bit.

“I’m Callie. What’s your name?”

“Becca.” Her voice, a whisper. She looked like a third or fourth grader, so that would make her—Callie did the math—eight or nine.

“Okay, Becca.” She nodded at the baby in her arms. “This is Ryan. We’re going to get you out of here, okay?”

Becca nodded.

*

On the way out of that nightmare house, she took one last look at the sheet-covered Clown Man, the knife still sticking out of his back, standing up like an accusing finger.

You killed someone.

*

Later that afternoon, a strange-looking group made its way through the deserted neighborhood. A young girl, her eyes grim and haunted, held onto a leash and led an older boy, who walked behind. Beneath her free arm, she held a battered teddy bear.

Slightly ahead of them, her eyes warily scanning both sides of the street, walked a slightly older girl, maybe thirteen or fourteen, pushing a jogging stroller. Her name was Callie, and she was on her way to see her grandmother in California.