Dedication

Coal Ridge is based on Ohio's Finest Village. It was a great place to grow up and continues to be a remarkable community to which I enjoy returning to see friends and family. For those who live there, take a moment, look around, and be wary of the shadows.
Preface

A series of intertwined short stories that will make you wonder where the darkness ends and the light begins. All small towns keep secrets, but in Coal Ridge when the secret gets out, it begins to feed…again.

Set in a small, somewhat geographically secluded town in the Midwest, the blue-collar people of Coal Ridge are friendly and laid back, enjoying block parties, gossip, and the simple joys that come with being a close-knit community. Because everyone knows everyone else, secrets are hard to keep, but some are so well hidden that they've been forgotten.

These short stories explore a supernatural awakening that will test the bonds of family and community.
Kick the Can

Coal Ridge July 1981

“48, 49, 50...ready or not, here I come!”

For Jesse Martin, the world consisted of things he had to do, like going to school and doing chores, and things he got to do, like hanging out with friends and playing baseball. At thirteen years of age, he'd not yet moved into the sullen place where peer pressure dictated everything from how he dressed to with whom he could be friends. He was literally between worlds, but that wasn't likely to last into the school year.

For most kids in Coal Ridge the 9:15 whistle meant that it was time to come in for the night, but this was summertime. As twilight fell towards full night, Jesse stepped away from the empty tomato sauce can and scanned the space between the houses on the right side of Pecan Avenue looking for anyone who might be hiding poorly. A veteran of Kick the Can, he knew that no one was coming out until he got far enough away that they might have a legitimate shot to kick it before he could put his foot atop and call out their name. Sure, speed and reaction time were important, but you didn't need to be super quick to win, it was all about having a keen eye, keeping a cautious distance, and making some lucky guesses.

Stepping over to the can, he put his foot on it and shouted, “Jackie by Newsome's hedge.” The blonde pre-teen stepped out, absently wiping at her designer jeans. She didn't really care if she was caught, for her the game was more social than competitive. And because Jesse knew which of the twins had a crush on her, he guessed, “Kenny by Newsome's trash can.”

“There is literally no way you saw me there,” the platinum haired boy called out as he stood. Any further argument he might have offered fell silent when Jackie grabbed his arm and pulled him over to the driveway where they would remain until someone kicked the can or everyone else was caught.
Pivoting around, Jesse caught movement between two houses, but had no idea who it was. “Sammy at the corner of Stein’s house?” It was a total guess, so when the little blonde boy—easily the fastest kid in the neighborhood—stepped out, the corners of Jesse’s mouth turned up in a wide grin.

“Lucky guess, punk,” Sammy grumbled as he jogged past to the driveway.

“Pure skill,” Jesse countered, moving parallel to him as he scanned the two driveways that had cars in them. Most everyone in the neighborhood parked in their garages, but Amelia Newsome had recently started at Silver Spring University, adding a third car to the family, and Bob McConnel used their garage as a workshop when there wasn’t snow on the ground, leaving their car and his work truck in the driveway most of the year. Anyone who was going to try to sneak up on him would likely use the cars to get as close as possible to the can. Unfortunately, the cars were on opposite sides of the street making it impossible for him to keep an eye on both at once.

When the small group in the driveway began to laugh, briefly drowning out the hammering from Mr. McConnel’s garage, Jesse turned towards them and immediately ran back to the can. “Carl behind the telephone pole.”

The other twin stepped out from his hiding spot, and shouted, “You are sloppy lucky.” Paternal twins, Carl had darker hair and a slightly more rugged appearance, better resembling their father.

“I got eyes like an eagle,” Jesse replied with a laugh. Carl playfully flipped him off and jogged over to the driveway where the others were waiting. Doing a slow circle to make sure no one was sneaking up on him, he turned his attention back to the cars, moving away from the can to see if anyone was on the far side of them. The sound of shoes slapping on the pavement drew his attention and he turned in time to see a figure bolting down the McConnel’s driveway towards the can. Rushing back, he put his foot on it and yelled, “Kevin running right at m—”

The can was kicked out from under his foot from behind. Jason ran past him laughing, shouting “Olly olly oxen free!” His dark curls bounced with each step. Circling back, he stepped up next to Jesse, his cheeks dotted with acne. “Didn't see that, did you eagle eyes?”

“Where the hell were you?”

He pointed past Jesse at the driveway. “Standing over with them waiting for you to get distracted.”

When Jesse glanced over, he could see everyone in the driveway laughing. Although at his expense, he’d known these kids long enough to know their laughter was not malicious. Still, he hated to lose and so just grumbled and stifled an urge to punch his friend. Being the biggest and strongest among them, his playful punches were rarely taken as such. “Since no one ran, I take it we're done.”

Jason put his hand up on his friend’s shoulder. “Come on, we're gonna let Kevin take a turn at being it.”
With everyone gathered on the driveway, Kevin set the dented can down at the end of it. He smiled at them and clapped his hands together. “Are you ready to fly my pretties?” Last summer Kevin had the exaggerated distinction of not having the can kicked out from under him. Sure, he was only *it* twice for the whole summer, but that didn't stop him from growing the legend over the school year into something completely obnoxious.

“What's going on?” Darla asked, coming out from behind her house.

Putting her hands in her hips, Jackie asked, “Were you hiding in your living room again?”

“Oh damn, I forgot she was playing,” Carl laughed, stepping up next to his brother who visibly tensed. The two of them were constantly doing things to annoy one another and they fought like cartoon characters—one being the aggressor until the other got angry enough to retaliate, then they'd switch off. Jason claimed that eleven turnabouts was their current record.

“I had to use the bathroom, for your information,” Darla offered, crossing her arms over her chest as she approached. Nearly as tall as Jesse, but rail thin, what she lacked in athleticism and general grace, she more than made up for in appearance.

“Are we going to do this?” Kevin asked, standing near the can, “I want to add to my undefeated record.”

Jackie rolled her eyes.

Jason and Sammy groaned.

Kenny stared at Jackie, and Carl punched him.

Darla scoffed. “What’s undefeated, Jackie kicked the can on you and she always goes out first.”

The shorter girl put her hands on her hips. “At least I don't go home to hide.”

“I had to pee, alright?” Darla retorted. The two girls turned their noses up at one another, and then began laughing.

Jesse shook his head. “You two are almost as bad as them.” Behind them the twins were in the middle of their yard fighting. Kenny had Carl on the ground in a headlock, their angry faces turning red under the streetlights.

“No one is as bad as them,” Darla muttered.

“One of us should probably break them up,” Sammy observed, nudging Jesse.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed, taking a step back.

Jesse shook his head. “No way; I got kicked the last time.”

The two boys stared at Jesse while Carl pushed at his brother's face trying to break the headlock and then Sammy, the smallest of them, shrugged. “I guess if you wimps are too afraid, I'll go do it.”
From the end of the driveway, Kevin shouted. “I'm just going to close my eyes and start counting; if you all are still standing there when I'm done, this will be super easy. 1, 2, 3, 4…”

Striding over to the twins, while Kevin continued his obnoxious counting, Jesse reached down, grabbed Kenny by the arm, and yanked him upright. “Break it up!” As the boy came up to his feet, he was forced to release the headlock on his brother.

While pulling at the bigger teen's grip, Kenny kicked out at wildly at his brother. The glancing blow wasn't enough to knock him back down, but it pissed him off. Carl lunged up as Kenny stepped back into Jesse and all three of them hit the ground, just as the streetlights blink off.

A squeal of fright slipped past Jackie’s lips in the dark. The others looked around, wondering what happened as the lights came back on.

Jason was the first to speak. “Hey, where's Kevin?”

* * *

Standing at the end of the driveway with his eyes pretend closed, Kevin watched the fight between the twins and Jesse play out. When all three of them hit the ground, he'd stuttered in his count trying not to laugh, so he really did close his eyes to avoid being caught. He didn't see the lights blink off and come back on, but everything around him went suddenly quiet.

“48, 49, 50...ready or not, here I come.” He opened his eyes ready to shout out his friends’ names as fast as he could, but the driveway and yard were empty. “Huh,” he muttered, surprised at how quickly they'd hidden. He supposed it made sense after all the bragging he'd done that they’d wanted to make it tough on him.

Roving a few paces from the can, he began looking for figures in the shadows between houses and around the hedges, shrubs, and cars. Everything was quiet, but for the hammering from Mr. McConnel's garage.

Behind him, down at the end of the street, two figures climbed out of an old truck, one of them carrying a green army style pack.

* * *

“Just stop it!” Jackie’s voice cut through the night. Jason and Sammy were pulling the twins apart while Jesse stood with his arms crossed over his chest, looking like he wanted to punch someone. They all turned. Once their attention on her, she glanced left then right and whispered. “Something's wrong.”

Jesse sighed. “What’s wrong?”

“Can't you tell?” she replied gesturing around.

“No. What are you—”

“What the holy hell?” Jason exclaimed as he pulled Kenny towards the street, while Sammy and Carl ran towards the driveway. A shadow rose up off the front yard, its body appearing...
spiderlike, but with a wolf’s head and two long tentacles coming off its back. It was easily the size of Mr. McConnel’s work truck and had Jesse pinned between it and the twin's house.

“Jesse, run!” Jackie shouted, backing towards the two that ran past her on the driveway, while Kenny and Jason jogged over to them.

“Dude, are you seeing this?” Sammy asked, his mouth hanging open.

“Yeah,” Carl muttered, “seeing...but not believing.”

Moving behind them, Jackie asked. “Do you see Jesse?”

“He ran through the shrubs and disappeared around the house,” Kenny explained as they jogged up.

“That dude can move when he wants to,” Jason added, and then turned towards the creature. “What's it doing now?” As they watched, the creature shifted its bulk back and forth, while the details of its head slowly seemed to lose detail. The tentacles wavered slightly in the air.

“It looks confused,” Jesse offered from behind, causing several of them to jump.

“Punk ass,” Sammy muttered, shoving the bigger teen.

The creature shuffled forward a couple of steps, but when the group didn't react, it stopped.

“What the crap?” Jason exclaimed. “This makes no sense. Where are Kevin and Darla?”

Jackie glanced around. “She was right next to me?”

From across the road, Darla stepped out of her house and shouted. “Did my parents come out—” When her gaze fell on the creature, she screamed.

In a blink, the head became bear-like with spikes running down its neck. Unleashing a silent roar, it moved quickly across the road. Seeing it coming, Darla ran inside and slammed the door shut.

The teens all took a step back as it skittered past.

“What the crap?” Jason repeated.

“Maybe it heard her?” Jesse guessed.

“Should we do something?” Jackie asked.

“What do you want to do, yell at it?” Jesse retorted, “Besides, I'm sure she's locked the doors and that thing is too big to get into the house.”

Shaking their heads to clear them, the twins glanced at one another. “I feel like my ears just popped.” Carl said.

“No. It's more like being released from one of Jesse’s stupid bear hugs,” Sammy countered.
Kenny shook his head and took a deep breath. “I think you’re both right. It’s possible our senses might have been dulled within the specific proximity of that thing.” When they all stared at him, he let out a sigh, again realizing that he would have to dumb it down for them. “Like an area of effect.”

“Dude, are you talking about a Charm spell from D&D?” Sammy asked.

Kenny nodded. “Essentially, but maybe more of a glam or confusion spell.”

“Maybe more of a glam,” Carl mocked. “Do you always have to correct everyone on everything?”

“I was just trying to be precise.”

“You were just being a jerk.”

A scream erupted from within Darla’s house. When they turned to look, the creature was clinging to the second story, reaching both of its tentacles in through the windows. Jackie turned an angry look on Jesse.

“How the hell was I supposed to know it could do that?”

Jackie started towards Darla’s house, glancing back at the boys. “Well don’t just stand there, we have to help her!”

None of them moved; Jesse shrugged. “How?”

The screams stopped and everything went eerily silent. The quiet was broken by the sound of someone blowing their nose; the group turned to see Jason bending down to wipe his hand in the grass. He stopped in mid-motion, looking up at them. “What?”

Jackie scrunched up her face and uttered, “Gross.”

“I can't smell anything,” Jason stated, wiping his hand in the grass, and then on his shorts.

While the rest of the boys began sniffing the air, Jackie sighed, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, that's one of the things that's wrong. I also don't hear any insects or hammering from Mr. McConnel's garage.” The boys looked at one another, confusion growing into alarm.

“What the hell, man?” Sammy muttered, taking a step back.

Jason pointed across the street. “I think we need to go check on Darla. What if it got her?”

“Yes,” Jackie agreed.

“Hold up a second.” They all turned to Jesse. “If we all try to go there it’s going to come after us. Maybe some of us can lure it away.”

Jackie nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

“It’s a good idea until you have to be bait,” Sammy offered, his brow creased in a deep scowl.
Putting his arm around the smaller boy’s shoulders, Jason grinned. “Just don’t let it catch you, Sammy Speedball.”

Hanging is head, the little blonde boy sighed. He tried to pretend otherwise, but he liked that nickname and often did things to encourage people to call him by it. “I knew it was going to be me.”

“Nah, we’ll take turns,” Jason replied, and then took a step back, “But you can go first cause whatever that creature is, it’s coming back, and it looks pissed.”

They all turned to see the creature stalking down the front yard, its body taking on more of a feline appearance, with the head of an ant, its giant mandibles clacking silently as it approached.

Jesse’s eyes went wide. “Scatter!”

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“Man, I still don't get how you knew it was going to show up here,” Bruce Richards, asked, pouring salt in a circle on the grass. He and Hank McDonald had climbed over the five-foot metal fence in the backyard of the corner house and were hunkered down between a shed and small garden behind an above the ground swimming pool.

The older man sighed. “I told you, it migrates around town in the same general pattern. It was observation and a little luck, but we need to hurry. I've never seen it pull in that many at once.”

“If we need to hurry, why in the hell did we sneak all the way over here?” Bruce stood up straight and stretched his back. The kids disappeared four houses up?”

“Be quiet damn you,” Hank hushed him, pausing as he drew the scripting in the salt, “there's still a kid down there, if he or anyone else comes over here and breaks this circle while we're inside, we'll be trapped.”

“I can watch it while you go in, like normal.”

“You saw how many kids disappeared, we're both going in to collect them.”

Bruce shuddered in the silence while Hank finished working the symbols into the circle of salt. He hated going in there. Aside from the creature of which he was completely terrified, he found the silence and lack of smell to be extremely disturbing. It was like walking around in a dream, waiting for the guy with razors on his fingers to show up.

After completing the last symbol, Hank moved back as the area directly above the circle dulled, looking like an iced over window. Taking the athame out of its sheath, which looked suspiciously like a double-edged decorative knife that could be found in any small-town flea market, the older man turned to his companion, his tone hushed. “You ready?”

Bruce shook his head, wishing desperately for a drink, a toke, or a snort—anything that would stop his inside from shaking.

“Stop being a sissy,” Hank whispered with a grin, stepping up to the portal and driving the
athame into the dulled column. Bruce wondered if any knife could cut the barrier, but only ever thought about it when they were doing it, and so never asked. “We have to rescue those kids,” the older man continued. When he pulled the blade out, the barrier shuddered and then shattered inward, leaving the edges near the circle ragged and flapping silently.

Sheathing the athame and grabbing the green pack, Hank stepped inside and disappeared.

“Oh man, I don't wanna do this,” Bruce muttered. He paused, sighed, and uttered “Fuck,” before stepping through. Once inside, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath of nothing, feeling the despair of the place creeping into his mind. Next to him, Hank was on one knee digging things out of his pack, when a boy’s voice broke the silence.

“Over here! Come and get me.” The kid was goading it.

The two men glanced at one another, confusion stitching their brows. Bruce was the first to speak. “What the hell, man?”

Shrugging, the older man handed him two purple felt bags full of salt and pulled the pack over his shoulders. “Let's go find out.”

“I hate this place.”

Hank didn't respond, hopping over the fence and moving quickly in the direction of the voice. Much as he had when they made their way over it the first time, Bruce struggled, rattling a large section of the fence as he thumped to the ground on the other side. Pushing himself up, he wondered how much alcohol it would take for him forget all about Hank and this place. He'd just started making his way up the road, when he saw a dark-haired boy sprint across the street ahead of him, running towards a yellow house. “Hey kid!”

The boy practically skidded to a stop. “Dude run!” he shouted, pointing back across the road. “It's coming.”

Bruce backed towards the kid when the creature emerged from the shadows between the houses. It looked like a giant cat with two long tentacles coming off its shoulders, and an insect-like head. Muttering, “Man, I hate that thing,” he pulled the bow free and launched one of the purple felt bags. It was difficult to miss something the size of a van, but Bruce did his best, scoring only a glancing hit, but it was effective enough. When the salt inside exploded outward on impact, the creature shrank back the way it had come.

“What was that?”

“Salt. Come on kid, we gotta get you outta here.” He turned back towards the fenced in yard on the corner.

“Wait—”

“No time to wait kid, we gotta round up a gaggle of you all.” He started walking; the kid stood there. “What the hell are you doing, man, let's go!”

“We have to warn my friends, they're not gonna know it's coming back.”
Bruce sighed. “Man. Shit. Okay, where are they?”

* * *

“We need to find a way out,” Jesse whispered.

“What are you talking about, punk? You said we can go out the back door if it comes to the front and the other way around if it comes to the back,” Sammy replied.

“Not out of the garage, out of this place. Wherever it is.” When they didn’t find anyone in any of the nearby houses, Kenny had explained that they likely stepped into a parallel dimension, citing science that made no sense. Since he was by far the smartest kid in school, they all acknowledged his explanation. Accepting it was something else altogether.

“Dude, we don't even know how we got into it.”

Jesse paused, scanning the shadows over by Darla's house. “I still don’t see Kenny or Jackie.” He paused and turned back to Sammy. “You said it's not letting us off the block, maybe we just need to get out of the area. Over to the stadium or something.”

“Jason should be back by now,” Carl called from the backdoor.

Sammy turned to him. “Shit. I told you guys, it’s faster than you think and does that creepy teleport thing when you get to Palm or Douglas. It won’t let us onto those streets. Do you think it got him?”

Jesse shushed his friend. “Nah, Jason’s smart, but I think there's someone coming around the house.”

“Maybe it's that thing.”

“Nah.”

“How would you know?”

“It doesn't make any sound and I hear footsteps.”

“Oh.” Sammy paused. “But we haven't seen anyone else.”

Putting a finger over his lips, Jesse waved his friend back as the footsteps got louder. The two of them hunkered down next to the blue station wagon in the garage.

The quiet was broken by Carl’s voice as he moved to the front of the garage. “Jason's late, he should have been here by now.”

Jesse stood, motioning him back as a figure loomed at the corner of the garage. “Hey fellas,” a man's voice said, “I'm Hank, let's get you all out of here.”

Carl yipped when the man stepped forward and, fell back on the lawnmower parked against the back wall, barely catching himself on his father's workbench. The crashing noises seemed to be amplified by the silence around them.
Jesse jumped at all the noise. “Jesus Christ! What's wrong with you?” He turned. “Wait, Hank McDonald?” The old man offered him a half smile.

“Shit,” Sammy uttered, grabbing the larger teens arm, “my ma says to stay away from him.”

“Well my dad told me that if I ever saw Mr. McDonald, I should do whatever he says, and he'll make sure I get home.”

“My mom was pretty insistent.”

“Your mom goes to a psychic for Bingo advice.”

“Uh, guys…” Carl called from the back of the garage.

“No, she doesn't,” the boy started, his brow knit, and then looked away, “she goes for lottery advice.”

“Yeah. So, I think we'll go with what my dad said.”

“It's coming!” Carl announced as he retreated towards the back door.

While the two boys moved deeper into the garage, towards the front of the station wagon, Hank pulled the bow on the pouch in his hand and launched it directly into the insect-like head. The salt exploded out of the bag and the creature backed away, practically pouring into the driveway next door. When he turned back to the teens, he said, “I saw a backdoor, let's go. I need to get you guys outta here.”

“We definitely listen to him,” Sammy agreed, clambering over the hood of the station wagon.

* * *

“Crap.” Kevin stood by the can, he hadn't seen any of his friends since the game started and had gone so far as to check behind several of the houses, leaving the can completely unguarded, purposely giving them plenty of time to kick it.

He felt like he was all alone and didn't like that feeling one bit.

It was time to give them what they wanted, if only so that he wouldn't be alone any longer.

“Alright guys.” He paused, breathing through the grimace on his face. “I give up. Olly olly oxen free!”

When there was no response, he got angry. “Come on you guys! I said that I give up! You win, just come out!”

More time passed, and Kevin sat down on the curb, muttering to himself. “Come on you guys, where are you?”

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“Hank’s got them man,” Bruce insisted, as he and Jason watched the creature move towards
the garage and then retreat away in a cloud of salt. “See. Let's get out of here.” Again, he turned back towards the fenced in yard on the corner.

“What about Kenny and Jackie?”

“Who?”

“They went to Darla's house to check on her.”

“Fuck man, why didn't you all stick together?”

The teen shrugged. “Things got crazy, and it's not like we wanted be here...man.”

“Fuck.” Bruce mulled his options, there weren't many. “Alright, what house are they in?”

“The blue and white one next to the McCon—err, five houses up on that side.”

“What! Are they far enough away?” Bruce ran his hands through his greasy black hair. “Fuck.”

“I get it, that thing is out there, but it tried to get to Darla in her house. They're trying to get to her so we're keeping it busy. Or we were until you showed up. If it loses track of us, it might go back over there. We need to get them all out of there first.”

“Fuck, you guys are making this complicated.” Bruce looked at the creature hunkered down in the driveway. It was already starting to reform. He couldn't leave them in that house without leaving this one too. He shook his head; *Hank is going to have to spring for something a lot stronger than beer when we get out.* “Come-on, let's go get ‘em.”

When Bruce started up the road, the teen grabbed his arm. “Not that way, we can't let it see us or it might follow us. We have to get behind the houses.” He took a couple of steps across the street and turned back. “It's like the world's deadliest game of Kick the Can.” For the third time that evening, no one laughed at that joke.

Shaking his head, Bruce grimaced at the teen. “Come on, man, let's go get these fuckers and get the hell outta here.”

* * *

Leading the three kids back to the fenced in yard on the corner, Hank whispered, “Go over quietly, we don't want to draw any attention over here.”

“What about my brother?” the dark haired one asked again.

“I told you, my friend's getting him and the others.” Hank sounded a lot more confident about that than he felt. He needed to get these three out so he could go look for Bruce and the other kids. The problem was that the creature wasn't going to just be feeding any longer, after getting hit with the salt it would be raging. Anyone it caught would be crushed or torn to pieces almost immediately.

“What's that?” The big boy asked, pointing at the ragged tear above the circle.
“That is an exit strategy. You always have to have one,” he said, clapping the teen on the shoulder as the boys moved over to the circle. Gathering them into a huddle, he continued keeping his voice low, “Go through one at a time and be damn careful to step inside the circle. If you step on it and break it, the rest of us are gonna to be trapped in here with that thing and I'm gonna to be pissed.”

The boys all nodded, and the dark haired one asked again, “What about my brother?”

“They're gonna get him out,” the short blonde-haired boy said. “Stop being a punk.”

Hank grinned. “I couldn't have said it better myself. When you go through, sit quietly and wait, don't draw any attention until everyone comes through,” he looked pointedly at the dark-haired kid, “including your brother.”

* * *

“Do you think you could've taken us further up the block?” Bruce asked between labored breaths as they jogged down through the backyards towards the blue and white house.

“No, if we go any farther it will just show up, like teleport or something.”

“Don't get sarcasm, do you kid?”

The teen glanced back. “Uh, yeah.”

Frowning to himself, Bruce followed as they moved in silence to the back of the house. Once there, Jason went to the sliding glass door and slowly pushed it open. “Wait here, I'll go get them.”

“What? No.” Bruce began to push his way inside.

Standing firm, the kid put up his hands. “Dude, I don't know you, I ain't letting you into Darla's house.”

“Are you fucking kidding me here?”

“The more you argue, the longer this is going to take.”

“Fuck.” Bruce looked around. “Fine. Go get them.” If he wanted to leave them, this was going to be his chance. Moving to the edge of the house, he peeked around the corner. The creature was moving across the road towards the house, its form had become lobster-like, with a bear’s head. The two tentacles were now forward on the body and they slammed silently into the ground as it moved. “Fuck, its raging.”

He turned back towards sliding glass doors in time to see a girl emerge. A short blonde—and man was this girl stacked—hips, breasts, and butt all perfectly proportioned. He was suddenly very happy that he hadn't left them and wondered how grateful she might be for the rescue.

Seeing his leer, the girl took a step back and wiped tears from her eyes.
“Dude, stop staring,” Jason said, crossing in front of him as he exited the house. “It’s creepy!”

He hadn't even noticed him or the other teen boy, presumably Kenny, come out of the house. “Right,” Bruce said, clapping his hands once as he glanced over at the girl, “Wait, ain’t there supposed to be two girls?”

Jason shook his head. “It got her.”

The girl leaned on the platinum haired boy and began to sob.

“Uh. Sorry.” The platinum haired boy looked pissed. Bruce wasn’t sure if the kid was pissed at him or someone else and didn’t much care. “We all need to get out of here and the way we’re gonna do that is by heading straight back towards those houses up there and then quickly, but quietly, back towards the end of the street. Any questions.”

“Whoa!” Jason jumped back, grabbing the girl and pulling her to the ground.

She looked up and screamed, pushing herself away along the ground in an awkward crab-walk.

Turning, Bruce saw the creature atop of the house. The platinum haired boy was wrapped in one of its tentacles. Something popped and the boy let out a stifled scream. “Fuck.” He glanced down at the remaining bag of salt in his hand—he'd planned to use it to cover their escape, using it now meant that once the creature recovered it would be a race and he'd be willing to bet that all the kids were faster than him, even the girl. Another pop sounded over the screams. Sighing, he mumbled, “Fuck.”

Pulling the bow, Bruce launched the purple felt bag, striking the silently rotating bear head right in the mouth. It dropped Kenny and skittered back off the roof. Pointing at the girl he turned to Mike. “Pick her up and shut her up,” he commanded, heading over to the injured teen. “Forget the yards, get to the street.” Jason and the girl stared at him. “NOW!” The shout got them moving while he helped the injured teen up by his shoulders.

“I can't...breathe,” the boy uttered.

“Probably busted ribs,” Bruce replied, doing his best to get them jog-stumbling towards the road.

The two kids were there waiting for him.

“What the fuck are you doing, man? Run! Get to that fenced in yard on the corner.”

While the girl started running, Jason grabbed one of the injured boy's arms and put it around his shoulder. “You are way too slow to do this alone...man.”

“Fucken smartass.”

Before they got more than a few steps, with the platinum haired kid whimpering in pain between them, the creature stepped up out of the shadows on the street in front of them.
“Well this sucks,” Jason muttered.

Glancing over at the dark-haired boy, Bruce nodded. “Yep.” He paused as it silently roared, feeling it trying to dull his senses. “Fuck!” He let go of Kenny. “I'm gonna to lead it away. Tell Hank I fucking hate him for bringing me into this shit!”

With that, Bruce took off running towards the house across the road.

Behind him the kid shouted, “Who's Hank?”

Ignoring him, Bruce pushed himself as hard as he could, half-hoping the creature would settle for the easy meal instead of the moving one, but just like the old man said, whenever someone runs, it chases.

* * *

“Why are we even talking about this?” Jesse asked, his arms crossed over his chest.

Carl stepped up to the larger teen. “Because my damn brother is still in there!”

“Hank said—”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what Hank said.”

“Listen, if we go back in there all we’re going to do is make it harder for them to get everyone out. We’re safe now so they don’t have to worry about us and can just worry about the others.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“No, it isn’t I—hey, where’s Sammy?”

The two of them turned in circles, looking around and stopped at the ragged tear.

“You don’t think—” Carl’s voice trailed off.

“Nah, he wouldn’t be that stupid.”

“Sammy Speedball might be.”

“Shit.”

* * *

Retracing his steps to the backside of the yellow house, Hank peeked around the front to see the creature crossing the road. It had recovered from the salt and was moving deliberately, aggressively; more like a soldier than a hunter. If it were going after the kids it should be stalking, and it certainly wasn't moving fast enough to be on the chase. He watched as it climbed the blue and white house across the street, curious as to this behavior. There was no doubt that it was pissed and would kill anyone it managed to capture, but for the moment it seemed...unfocused.
As it moved over the house, Hank wished he'd been able to get a look at its head, the form of the head often mirrored its behavior.

Unable to see it any longer, he took the opportunity to retrieve a couple more bags of salt from his pack and picked up the empty one he'd thrown earlier. Throwing it back over his shoulder, he wondered if Bruce might have had gotten the kids out, and then heard the girl's scream.

“Dammit,” he muttered, realizing that the creature had been going for the kids after all. He raced across the street, moving to the back of the neighboring house in time to see the last of the kids disappear around the corner, heading for the road. From his vantage, he could see the creature stumbling across the roof and realized that Bruce likely hit it with one of his pouches of salt. Moving into the backyard to get a better look at the creature, he saw the tentacles wagging frantically. He'd not seen it as angry since the night it killed Chief James and his wife.

* * *

Fueled by outright terror, Bruce ran as hard as he could, ignoring the growing stitch in his side and trying to remember if he should be breathing through his nose or mouth. A glance back at the creature closing the distance between them, with the bear head beginning to sprout spider eyes as it silently roared, nearly made him forget to breathe.

He ran up the driveway of a green house with white trim, tripped through a flower garden, and rounded the gray house next door as a tentacle slammed down on the ground behind him. Somewhere in the terrified scream that followed was Hank's name, if he were still around to hear it. Even with the terror clouding his mind, he was aware enough to note that the green house with

And the angrier it gets, the faster it recovers.

No one catches Sammy Speedball, the boy thought to himself as he ran up through the backyards. Not even stupid shadow monsters.

His Mom said that to him all the time. Now he was going to prove it.

Ahead of him he saw someone running towards him through the backyards, and the creature followed.

* * *

The smallest among you is the greatest.

His Mom said that to him all the time. Now he was going to prove it.

Ahead of him he saw someone running towards him through the backyards, and the creature followed.
white trim had a fenced in backyard—had he been one house further up or gone around to the
tother side, he'd have likely been trapped and dead by now.

It was a sobering thought that did nothing to allay his fear.

“Stupid fucking kids,” he muttered to himself, as he ran beneath a two-story deck that the
creature was forced to navigate around, giving him a few precious seconds of lead time. Big
obstacles helped a little but weaving through trees or around cars just slowed you down enough
for the tentacles to get you. “I should have left the fuckers there,” he huffed, taking some solace
in the sounds of his own voice in the silence that seemed to permeate this place. After the
creature fed on them it could have been a year or two before it started hunting again, plenty of
time for him to convince Hank that he was the wrong guy for this job.

With his breath coming in pants, a painful stitch growing in his side, and his legs beginning
to cramp, Bruce was beginning to slow. He’d almost made it to the yellow house, but it wasn't
going to be enough; as much as he willed himself to keep running, a voice in his mind was
telling him that it was already too late. At this point, all he was going to accomplish was to die
tired.

Just as he was about to give up, a voice called out in the darkness. “Over here, you punk ass
thing!”

Bruce turned, the creature was practically on top of him, but there was another kid in the
back by a large tree. He was hopping from side to side, practically shaking his ass at it. “Kid, no!
Obstacles don’t…”

The tentacles lashed out. The teen dodged one and ran around the tree, but the creature
anticipated the move and the other was there waiting.

It slammed down on the kid, driving him into the ground with a muffled scream.

Turning away at the sound of breaking bones, Bruce saw the open door at the back of the
yellow house. He leapt inside and barely managed to pull it shut as the creature slammed into it,
rattling the frame. “Fuck!” After taking a moment to catch his breath, he made his way through
the storage shed at the back of the garage and moved between a blue station wagon and an old
blue truck towards the open garage door.

The tentacles dropped down onto the driveway first, followed by the creature slowly
lowering itself down, the spider-eyed bear head was staring right at him.

Anger joined the fear in his mind. “Seriously man! You just fucking ate two kids, give me a
break here!”

Silently, the creature moved forward, completely blocking the garage, its tentacles moving
inside.

“Fuck you!” he screamed at it, backing away. He was almost back to the shed when he fell
backwards over the edge of a lawnmower parked against the back wall, hitting the concrete floor
hard. Pulling himself up on a shelf, one of the tentacles wrapped around his leg and lifted him
into the air, for the moment the only thing that kept him from being ripped back into the garage
was his desperate grip on heavy workbench. Pain lanced through his mind as the creature began to crush his lower leg and moved upward to engulf him.

He turned to look for a weapon on the shelf, what he saw instead brought a smirk to his pained features.

* * *

When Hank had returned, two of the three kids he'd already put through were standing by the fence. The third, a blonde kid named Sammy had gone back out to try to help. A string of curses fell out of his mouth as Hank roughly herded them all through, warning them repeatedly not to step on the circle of salt. The last one, a curly-haired boy named Jason, stood there and asked, “What about the other dude?”

“I'll go get him and your other friend, don't worry.”

“I don't think there's gonna be anything to get,” he replied. “That guy wasn't fast enough to outrun that thing.”

“I'll worry about that, you make sure none of them come back through, no matter what.”

The teen nodded and stepped through, popping his head back in, “You sure you want to go it alone?” Hank stared at him until the kid acquiesced with a nod. “It's your funeral, dude.”

When he was alone, Hank took off his pack and started digging through it. Even though the creature got one of the girls, he knew from experience that the kids would tell their story, and no one would listen. A story would circulate about the girl running away and once the mockery started, the kids would stop talking about it. That's the way it always went. Those who let it go would be fine, but the ones who persisted would fall on hard times.

He paused, looking around. Jason was right, chances were good that Bruce was gone, but he'd still have to look, he owed him that.

Shaking his head, he couldn't help but smile. When it came down to it, Bruce had sacrificed himself to save others. From the moment they'd meet at Miller's Pond that night, he'd known Bruce had it in him, even if he didn't know it.

“What are you smiling about, old man?”

Hank turned, what he saw left him speechless. Bruce hobbled up to the fence with a confident grin that was new. “You made it. What happened?”

Bruce held up an empty bag of rock salt. “That fucker hates this shit.”

He glanced over his shoulder as Hank started laughing. “Come-on, man, help me over this so we can get the hell out of here.”

“Wait, we’re still missing one.”

Bruce looked away and shook his head. “There was nothing I could do, man.”
“Dammit, if he’d just stayed put!”

“Not your fault, man. We do what we can, now let’s get the fuck outta here.”

Nodding, the older man started helping him over the fence.

“And Hank?”

“Yeah?”

“All the drinks are on you tonight.”
About the Author

Chuck lives in Maryland with his wife Shannon and their three cats. An avid reader who fell in love with The Lord of the Rings and Chronicles of Narnia in grade school, he began writing in college, getting his first publishing experience in the Star Wars Adventure Journal…and then life got in the way. After a couple of missteps, he has found his way back to the dark places that exist in his imagination and is now sharing the general insanity that has crawled out of his mind with the world.