

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

A Novelization by
CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

Adapted from the public domain film
Night of the Living Dead
by
JOHN RUSSO and GEORGE ROMERO

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Night of the Living Dead

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With absolute respect for the film's creators,
John Russo and *George Romero*.

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BARBRA

“They’re coming to get you, Barbra ...”

Barbra jerked, her head snapping upright with painful rigidity. Her neck burned in protest, and she bit down on a gasp the barest instant before it escaped her lips. If Johnny realized that she had fallen asleep while he had to drive ...

But a glance from the corner of her eye showed that her brother had not noticed. He was grumbling under his breath again, too wrapped up in his own bad mood to pay attention to her, for now.

Barbra breathed a sigh of relief, her heart slowing to a more normal pace — not that she would be able to release all of her tension until they got this over with. She glanced out the open passenger-side window, using her blonde hair as a curtain as she looked out at the pretty yet mundane scenery.

What was it that had startled her? A dream that was just beginning to unfold ...

No, not a dream. Not really. A *memory*. A memory of the place they were going, a place she dreaded so much, of her brother chasing her around like a cruel idiot, terrifying his baby sister with his hackneyed Boris Karloff impression. Under other circumstances, she might have mentioned it, using a feint of shared humor to ease her nerves, to try and force her adulthood to scoff her inner child into submission.

But no, it would not be a good idea to remind Johnny of his juvenile games. Lord knew Johnny could be a handful at the best of times, and today's annual errand had already put him into a foul mood.

Johnny had been difficult all day. But then, Johnny was *always* difficult.

Life had not been especially kind to either of them. Their father had died when they were both very young. In spite of their mother's shaky health, she had been forced to take a job as a seamstress, leaving them to spend their days with a grandfather who was not known for his warmth. He had been a church-going man — “church-going” as in the Hellfire & Brimstone variety. His long lectures and sermons had influenced Barbra to attend church to this day (though she preferred a *quieter* church to the one her grandfather had insisted they attend as children), but they had driven Johnny to grow up boisterous and irreverent. This attitude led to frequent conflicts with their grandfather, their mother, and even Barbra on any number of occasions.

Such as today.

Barbra was doing everything she could to keep things civil. She knew that Johnny hated these long trips out to their father's grave, but Johnny owned a car and she didn't, so she had been trying to keep the peace. When the car radio had stopped working about an hour ago, leading to a litany of curse words from Johnny, Barbra had bitten her tongue to avoid voicing her disapproval, which would have only created more tension. He was also chain-smoking cigarette after cigarette, something he *knew* she hated ... but she said nothing.

At long last, they turned onto the winding dirt and gravel road that slithered its lazy way up to the cemetery.

Their ritual for the sad anniversary of their father's death was halfway over.

Johnny had ceased his quiet grumbling, and when he pulled the car into their usual spot near the top of the hill, Barbra offered a light comment. "They ought to make the day the time changes the first day of summer."

Johnny was in the middle of crushing out his cigarette. "What?"

"Well," she explained, "it's eight o'clock and it's still light."

"A lot of good the extra daylight does us," Johnny grouched as he futzed with his silly leather driving gloves. "Now we've still got a three-hour drive back. We're not going to be home until after midnight."

"Well if it *really* bugged you, Johnny," she observed, "you wouldn't do it."

She realized as soon as the words left her mouth that it was a mistake, but fortunately, Johnny did not rise to the bait with his usual vehemence. He just snorted and said, "You think I *wanna* blow Sunday on a scene like *this*? You know, I figure we're either gonna have to move Mother out here or move the grave into Pittsburgh."

Barbra rankled and reminded him, "She can't make a trip like this."

"Ohhh," Johnny scoffed as he twisted around to reach into the backseat. "It's not that she can't ... Is there any of that candy left?"

Barbra leaned forward to look. "No."

Johnny pulled the small wreath onto his lap. "Look at this thing," he grumbled. " 'We still remember.' *I* don't. You know, I don't even remember what the man *looks* like."

The sad thing was, she couldn't tell if he really meant

it or was just trying to provoke a reaction from her. “Johnny,” she sighed, “it takes you five minutes ...”

“Yeah, ‘five minutes’ to put the wreath on the grave, and *six hours* to drive back and forth. Mother wants to remember, so *we* trot two hundred miles into the country and *she* stays at home.”

Weary and wanting to close the subject, Barbra rolled up her window and returned to her placating voice. “Well, we’re here, John, all right?”

Johnny mumbled some retort, but he, too, began rolling up his window. Barbra got out of the car and crossed around behind it, her heels crunching on the gravel and making her feel a bit unbalanced. Very faintly, she heard the radio start to whistle through Johnny’s rising window.

Now it decides to work! she thought.

As she waited for Johnny to catch up, she was only vaguely aware of the voice on the radio saying something about technical problems. She was too busy looking around the graveyard in the dimming light, and struggling to keep her jittery nerves from getting the best of her.

They’re coming to get you, Barbra ...

Barbra shuddered. She had never liked graveyards. Pulling her coat tighter around her throat, she stepped off the road and onto the cemetery lawn just as Johnny joined her.

“There was nothing wrong with the radio,” he said as he came alongside her. “Must have been the station.”

All of them? she started to remark, but decided against it — implying that his car wasn’t as cherry as it once was would be unwise. Instead, she ignored his comment and asked, “Which row is it in ...?”

Together, the siblings meandered into the somewhat

disorganized graveyard. They cast about for their father's grave while Johnny carried the wreath and Barbra made sure not to lose her footing — her heels had not been designed for soft earth any more than the gravel road.

The glooming sky and lengthening shadows chased a tickle up Barbra's spine. The place was just so empty, so ... well, dead.

"Boy, there's no one around," Johnny observed in a low voice, as though echoing her thoughts.

"Well it's late," Barbra retorted, the surroundings getting the best of her nerves. "If you'd gotten up earlier..."

"Aw, look, I already lost an hour's sleep with the time change—"

"I think you complain just to hear yourself talk." She shoved her hands into her coat pockets just as she spotted their father's headstone. "*There* it is."

Marching over at first, Barbra's steps slowed as they approached the unkempt grave. Her heartbeat was fluttering again, and she feigned a sudden interest in a low-hanging branch as Johnny knelt to set the cross-shaped wreath in place.

"I wonder what happened to the one from last year," Johnny said. "Each year we spend good money on these things, we come out here, and the one from last year's gone."

Barbra shrugged. "Well, the flowers die and ... the caretaker or somebody takes them away."

A low thunder rumbled through the evening sky from dark clouds rolling in over the horizon. Johnny leaned back to inspect his handiwork over the rims of his glasses. "Yeah, a little spit-and-polish, you can clean this up, sell it next year." He climbed to his feet. "I wonder how

many times we've bought the same one."

Ignoring him again, Barbra stepped forward as Johnny stepped back. She knelt before the grave of their father, clasped her hands, closed her eyes, and began to pray.

She heard Johnny shuffling around behind her — probably uncomfortable with her supplication, if she knew her brother. The thunder rolled again, and Barbra focused to keep her breathing steady.

Sure enough, Johnny only managed to wait a few more seconds before needling, "Hey, come on, Barb, church was this morning, huh?"

Another clap of thunder — the loudest yet — made her jump a little, but it also brought her a reprieve. Her eyes remained closed, but Johnny must have taken a moment to look around, perhaps evaluating the sky for rain; a creaky rustling also told her that he was slipping back into those driving gloves of his.

But eventually, as always, he started again. "Hey, I mean, prayin's for *church*, huh? Come on ..."

Barbra sighed, but kept her eyes shut. "I haven't seen *you* in church lately."

Johnny chuckled. "Yeah, well ... there's not much sense in my goin' to church." He paused, then asked, "Do you remember one time when we were small, we were out here?"

Oh, no ...

Johnny continued, sounding nostalgic of all things! "It was from right over there. I jumped out at you from behind a tree, and Grandpa got all excited and he shook his fist at me and he said, 'Boy, you'll be damned to hell!'"

Barbra stood then, averting her eyes. Why couldn't things ever be easy with Johnny?

Johnny chuckled again, still thankfully oblivious as to how nervous he was making her. “Remember that? Right over there ...”

Barbra walked away, heading in the general direction of the car.

“Boy,” Johnny said, still musing over the tree in question, “you used to really be scared here.”

“Johnny,” she said, turning his name into a chastisement. Big mistake.

Johnny locked onto the tremor in her voice like a cat onto a mouse. “Hey, you’re still afraid!” He sounded all too pleased with himself.

“Stop it now!” she scolded, trying in her own way to sound like their grandfather. “I mean it!”

That was the worst thing she could have done with Johnny — all it did was egg him on. He smiled and started with that annoying, creepy voice of his. “They’re coming to get you, Barbra ...”

“Stop it! You’re ignorant!”

Barbra turned her back on him, but her idiot brother kept at it. He ducked around one of the larger tombstones, then pulled himself over the top like some kind of ghoul. “They’re coming for you, Barbra ...” he moaned in his Karloff-wannabe voice.

Barbra stomped her way back toward the car, and Johnny followed. She hesitated just long enough to tell him, “*Stop it! You’re acting like a child!*”

“They’re coming for you ...” Johnny insisted.

Barbra scoffed with as much false courage as she could muster and continued on her way.

It was sad, really. Here they were, two supposed adults — one teasing the other like a child, and the other *afraid* like a child. Johnny could barely maintain his faux-

frightened mask as the impulse to grin at her rose and fell. He looked over to his right, and Barbra followed his gaze.

An older man was shambling through the cemetery. He swayed from side to side and looked a little bedraggled, and Barbra had to wonder if he was drunk, perhaps even driven to drink by visiting a fallen loved one here in this lonely place.

“Look!” Johnny proclaimed. “There comes one of them now.”

Barbra was aghast. “He’ll hear you!” she admonished with a ferocious whisper.

Johnny ran up to her, taking her by the shoulders in mock fear. “Here he comes now! I’m getting out of here!”

“Johnny!” Barbra gasped as Johnny took off. He ran past the man, and Barbra’s cheeks burned in humiliation. She often thought that their grandfather had been too harsh with them, but at times like this, she wondered if maybe he should’ve tanned Johnny’s hide a little *more* often.

Her hands tucked into her pockets and her eyes low in embarrassment, Barbra continued on her way. She would cross paths with the poor man in a matter of seconds, and she prepared to apologize for her brother’s boorish antics.

The man attacked her.

Barbra screamed as he grabbed at her, only the collar of her coat preventing his fingernails from tearing into the flesh of her throat. Her shrieks grew strangled as he clutched at her, pulling her toward his snarling mouth — he snapped his teeth as though trying to bite her face! Despite the wildness of his expression, he made very little noise. His body smelled horrible, and from what little sound he did make, his rancid breath made her sick.

Johnny stopped and looked back just in time to see the

man assault his sister. For a moment, he could not respond — the sight was otherworldly to him. He had just been *teasing* Barbra that the man was coming to get her; for the stranger to actually be *doing* so was ... well, it was ridiculous. Outrageous. Couldn't be happening.

Barbra wailed, pulling away from the maniac with all her strength. She pounded at him, his chest and his face. When her fist came near his mouth, he again tried to bite her.

Johnny finally broke into action. He dashed back to Barbra, throwing himself against the madman and wedging his arm between them. He pulled and tugged, desperate to get the man away from his sister.

“Johnny!” Barbra cried. “Help me!”

Finally, Barbra managed to slip from the man's grasp. The lunatic grew wild in agitation, twisting around in Johnny's arms. Barbra then ceased to exist, and Johnny became the target of his fury.

Cowering against a gravestone, Barbra watched helplessly as Johnny wrestled with their assailant. The man bit and snapped at Johnny, trying to sink his teeth in wherever he could reach. Johnny cried out as the man's fingers raked down his face, pulling his glasses off and digging into his eyes. The man still made little noise, and what few sounds escaped his throat were no more coherent than those of a rabid dog.

Having his glasses ruined, of all things, inspired Johnny to his own greater violence. He grab the maniac and shoved him down with enough force to finally break his grip. When the man got right back up onto his feet, Johnny was ready for him, meeting this latest attack with one of his own. They grappled with one another, Johnny clutching and punching at the man's mid-section, while

the man sank his teeth into the padding of Johnny's coat shoulder without doing any real harm. They twisted, spun, and toppled over — Johnny squirmed around, aiming to land on top so that he could press his advantage.

It didn't work.

With a sickening crack, Johnny's head and neck collided with the raised grave marker of one Clyde Lewis Myers. He twitched for two or three seconds ... and then lay very, very still.

It all happened so fast. Why, just one minute ago, certainly no more than two, she and Johnny had been bickering over their father's grave. And now—? How was this—? How could this *be*?!

Barbra gasped as the man crawled forward onto Johnny, his mouth open ...

... and it was that very sound escaping her lips which drew the creature's attention back to his original prey.

And that's what he is, a creature, not a man, not a maniac, it's a creature, a ghoul, oh, God, she could see it in its eyes, they were so cold, so lifeless.

But not entirely empty. As lightning streaked across the sky, Barbra could see *craving* in those eyes — a hunger, a wicked desire ... for *her*.

Forgetting Johnny, the man, the *creature*, clambered to his unsteady feet. His mouth moved, but not to speak. He was chewing the air, just as he wanted to chew her flesh.

They're coming to get you, Barbra.

Barbra ran. She did not think of Johnny, lying there helpless. She did not even think to call for help — who was around to hear her cries?

She just ran.

And the creature followed.

Even as she stumbled over the uneven ground, desperate to get back to the car and away from this place, she could hear it, shambling and battering its way through the low-hanging branches of the trees. It was coming, and it wasn't going to stop until it—

One of her heels sank into the soft earth, and she fell. For a moment she could only lie there, certain that the creature would fall upon her at any moment!

But no, it was still in pursuit, just not as close as she had feared. It was awkward and clumsy, and could not hope to catch her *so long as she kept moving*.

Kicking her other heel off with a flick of her foot, Barbra pushed onward, and at last reached the car.

Jerking the door open, she threw herself into the driver's seat. She might not own a car, but she knew enough about driving to get the hell out of ...

The keys were missing.

Of course they were. The keys were in Johnny's pocket.

Johnny ...

Coming back to her senses enough to lock the doors, she moaned as the creature caught up with her. It grab the handle and yanked on it helplessly, appearing confused and frustrated that it would not open. In fact, it was *pushing* on the glass with its other hand, as though it did not quite remember *how* to open the door. Enraged, it slapped at the window with both hands, then tried to open the door again, then slapped the window, then tried the door ... it could *see* her through the glass, but could not understand why it couldn't *reach* her.

Flailing and bumbling, it ran behind the car around to the passenger door and repeated its pulling and slapping, pulling and slapping, its mouth open and chewing the air,

chewing, oh, why wouldn't it stop, why wouldn't it go away?!

Suddenly, the creature's wild motion prompted it to catch sight of something behind it, something on the ground, too small or low for Barbra to see. It pushed away from the car, and for the briefest moment, Barbra thought that maybe, just maybe, it was leaving.

But then her blood ran cold as it stooped, twisted around (nearly stumbling from its lack of coordination), and returned to the car with a rock bigger than its own fist. Showing more cleverness than when it had tugged in futility at the door handle, it smashed the rock against the window once, twice ...

Barbra screamed as the rock crashed through the glass on the third impact. The creature lost its grip, and the stone missed Barbra's thigh by only the narrowest of margins.

The creature paused for a moment, requiring a second to absorb that it had, in fact, achieved its goal. Then it reawakened, dribble running from its lips as it threw itself into the open window, reaching for Barbra, reaching, dirty fingernails clawing toward her face ...

Lightheaded and desperate, Barbra looked around. If she fled the car, the creature would just clamber back out of the window and come after her on foot. It was slow and clumsy, but all it would take was another fall on her part to bring the thing down upon her like death itself.

What could she do? If only she had the keys!

Her hands were acting almost before her mind understood what she intended to do. Johnny had parked near the top of the hill, far enough over the summit that the car was angled forward. Barbra released the parking brake and pulled the gear into **Neutral**, then seized the

steering wheel as the car began to roll.

The creature, whose long legs were still outside the vehicle, was caught off-guard. As the car rolled and picked up speed, it was dragged back out of the window. Barbra glanced over to see that it was *trying* to hold on, but it again seemed confused by the entire situation. It could not understand how or why its prey was getting away, and a last-ditch leap through the open window or climbing on top of the car were apparently beyond its comprehension.

Soon enough, the car was rolling faster than the creature could stumble to keep up, and it lost its grip. It did not give up, but continued to shamble along after her.

Barbra guided the car along the gentle curves of the cemetery road, and the creature fell further and further behind. Perhaps she would be all right after all, get away from the thing, so that she could get help and come back for Johnny.

For Johnny ...

With her immediate danger past, thoughts of her brother brought Barbra to tears.

No! She had to keep control of herself! She had to! Only she could save Johnny!

She turned to look back through the rear window, but this time she was hoping that the creature *was* still in sight, because if it gave up too soon it might remember that Johnny was still back there, unconscious and helpless. She had to make sure she lured it as far away from Johnny as possible—!

With her eyes off the road, Barbra did not see the next curve ahead. In those few seconds, the car lurched off the dirt road and ground its driver's side up against a large tree, coming to a rough halt.

If the motor had been running, it would not have mattered — the damage to the car was superficial. But since she had been coasting, the car had lost all momentum.

She was stranded, and the creature was getting closer every second.

The driver's side was pinned, so Barbra crawled across the front seat to exit out the passenger door — some of the loose, broken glass cut into her knees, but she didn't even notice. Stockinged feet crunching on gravel and dead leaves, she bolted away from the creature.

Cutting across the cemetery in the general direction of the main road, Barbra crashed through branches and twigs and underbrush, and soon her feet were just as torn up as her knees. She hoped to lose the creature this way, but she wasn't sure how much longer her exposed hands, feet, and legs could take the punishment.

Finally, after a short time that stretched an eternity for Barbra, she broke through onto the smooth dirt she had sought. Risking one glance over her shoulder, she really put on the speed now, intending to race down the road until she was safe.

Thunder rolled across the land once again, and as if on cue, the creature appeared. As feeble-minded as it seemed, it had managed to cut straight across a less-wooded area, reducing the ground it had to cover by almost half. Barbra whimpered and again angled away from the road to avoid it.

In the fading light of dusk, she spotted a rundown, white farmhouse standing across an empty and overgrown field. Should she seek shelter and help there, or continue on to the main town? How far away had it been? Johnny had been driving (and bickering about the broken radio),

so she hadn't been paying close attention. They'd been through here many times before, but she was so rattled!

With a glance back at the approaching creature, Barbra hurried toward the farmhouse.

She was gasping by the time she stumbled against an old gas pump near the barn. On closer inspection, she felt less hopeful that the farmhouse would be occupied — it had a feeling of *desertion* to it. Still, what choice did she have? Slow as the creature was, it never seemed to tire — she needed to get out of sight, and quickly.

Circling wide around to the front of the house (perhaps the creature would think she had run straight past it without stopping?), she climbed the stairs onto the porch before collapsing against a post in exhaustion. She wanted to call out for help, but she couldn't risk the creature overhearing her.

After giving her burning legs an all-too-brief respite, she tried the front door — *Locked!*

Nearing tears once more, she leaped from the porch to swing around toward the back of the house. The lawn was at an incline here, and she slid and fell, but was again on her feet and running in a heartbeat.

An instant before she reached the edge of the house, she caught herself — depending upon where the creature was, she might be exposing herself if she continued on! Forcing herself to move with extreme caution, she inched her way forward and peered around the corner.

No, oh no, no!

The creature was still in pursuit. It moved with less zeal now, but it was halfway across the open field, still shambling straight for her.

In renewed terror, she abandoned stealth and continued to circle the house. If the back door was also

locked, she would have no choice but to press on, and she did not know how much longer her legs could ...

There! Oh, thank you, God!

A small back porch with a narrow doorway — and the door was standing open! Within the shadows, she could see a counter top, a kitchen table, and on the table, a plateful of fruit ... all so safe and reassuring in their blessed *normalcy!*

Mewling as much with relief as with fear, Barbra rushed toward the open door ...

BEN

Ben stepped off the bus and stretched the kinks out of his back. According to the schedule, he would have to wait two hours for the transfer bus to come through — at *least* two hours, as he could not count on the buses running on time out here in the middle of nowhere. Taking his jacket off, he looked around, but all he found was an old gas station, which was closed, and an eatery called Beekman's Diner. He realized that it had been a while since he had eaten, so he picked up his modest suitcase and headed into the diner.

Business was slow in Beekman's. Aside from himself, only four other people had gotten off the bus, and two of them had started walking up the road. There were a pair of old men sitting at the counter, sipping at cups of coffee and bickering over the best way to prepare catfish, and an overweight janitor sat slumped in the farthest booth with a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes.

"Wherever you want," said a tired-looking waitress, indicating the open booths. The two other travelers walked ahead of him and sat together at a booth near the middle of the small, narrow diner. Ben took the nearest booth, tossing his suitcase and jacket in beside him. It was a lot cooler in here, so he kept his sweater on as he sat down.

The waitress came to him first. "Passin' through?" she asked the obvious with no real interest in her voice.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Just coffee, or should I bring you a menu?”

“I’d like some water, and please bring me a menu.”

The waitress exhaled and nodded, *almost* concealing her annoyance at the extra effort required on her part.

It did not faze Ben in the least. As a high school teacher, he had been subjected to every variety of passive-aggression under the sun — from simple eye-rolls to soul-deep sighs, Ben had seen and heard it all.

The woman brought him his menu a minute later, then perked up a bit when he ordered a very simple burger and fries. When he asked for her opinion on the best pie for dessert, she returned his warm smile with one of her own. By the time she brought his food, she was exchanging small pleasantries, albeit one sentence at a time.

Just like with so many of his students, Ben had won her over.

It didn’t always work out this way, of course. Some people wore shells too tough to crack with entreaty. Ben had learned long ago that there were times for charm, and there were times to put his foot down, hard. He was glad that charm had worked here.

Ben had finished his entree and was waiting for his slice of peach cobbler when he saw the woman standing in the road.

Even after he set eyes upon her, it took him a moment to absorb the oddity of it. By now, the sun was low in the sky and the shadows were long, and the diner’s tinted windows didn’t help. Ben almost looked away before it struck him how ... well, how she was just standing smack in the middle of the road. She was dressed in what *appeared* to be a nurse’s uniform, but even in the poor light, he could see that it was very dirty — a particularly

nasty stain ran from the left side of her neck down onto her breast. Her hair was a mess, too, hanging wild and hiding much of her face.

And there she was, just standing in the middle of the road.

“Here you go,” the waitress said as she set his cobbler onto the table.

“Mmm ...? Oh, thank you, ma’am ...”

“You all right?” she asked, but then answered her own question when she followed his gaze. “Oh, my Lord!”

One of the old men turned on his stool. “What’s that, Clara?”

“Look there!” the waitress exclaimed. What Ben had considered merely strange had struck a stronger chord with his server, and her voice trembled as much as her pointing finger.

Now both old men were looking out the big front windows, as were Ben’s fellow bus travelers. Only the janitor remained oblivious, still snoozing away in the back booth.

“Is that Liza Connelly?” one of the men asked as he rose from his stool for a closer look.

“I, I think so, yeah,” the waitress answered. To Ben, she explained, “She’s my neighbor.” Her fingertips were touching her quivering lower lips now. “She works as a nurse over at the county hospital. That’s a ways from here.”

The woman in the road, Liza, was moving now. A very slow pace, and with an awkward gait, but she was moving. Straight for the diner.

Ben did not know why this disturbed him — if anything, Ms. Connelly looked as though she might need help — but it did.

Perhaps this was why he was hesitant to stand, slow to move. He found himself reluctant to take action, which was very out of character for him. As such, it was one of the older patrons who announced, "I'll go see if she's okay." And it was the two old men together who hurried to the front door.

And so Ben watched it all happen:

The two old-timers hustled until they were about ten feet away from Liza, then they slowed down. Ben could see one of them talking to her, probably asking if she were all right.

Liza turned in their direction, but she did not look up right away; her hair was still hanging in her face.

The speaker reached out to Liza now, taking her by the arm, guiding her toward the diner.

Liza leaned toward his hand, stooped her neck ... and *bit* at him. Ben blinked in amazement, but the waitress' gasp told him that he had not imagined it — Liza had tried to *bite* the old man.

The speaker jerked back, turning into profile as he addressed his partner from the counter. Ben saw his mouth form the words, *Did you see that?* His expression was both mystified and offended.

Whatever the men might have tried next was irrelevant. Liza threw herself at the speaker, her temperament suddenly that of a wild animal.

The speaker, now the *victim*, tried to push her away, but as he shuffled backward he lost his footing. He stumbled and fell.

Liza landed atop him and bit him, bit him right on the face. Her teeth sank into his cheek and ripped the flesh away in horrifying strings of gore, exposing his gums and molars to the air.

Ben could hear the victim's screams through the glass.

The man's partner stared down at his friend, who was by now crying out for help as the crazed nurse continued her assault. The partner took a single step backward ... and then he turned and ran as fast as his old legs would carry him — up the road, away from the diner.

Ben slowly became aware that the waitress was screaming as well. Her hands were pawing at her face as though she wanted to cover her eyes, yet could not. She hopped up and down in place, but seemed unable to look away from the carnage.

One of Ben's fellow travelers whimpered and hid her eyes; her male companion hunched deeper into the booth, vomiting onto the seat.

In all the chaos, only two people maintained even a semblance of calm: Ben and the janitor, who was just now waking up, looking confused and irritated.

"Help him!" the waitress demanded, addressing either Ben or the janitor, someone, anyone. "*Help him!*"

Yes. Help him.

Ben finally moved. He slid out of the booth and looked around before finally deciding that his jacket might be the most useful tool at hand (he later cursed himself for not thinking to grab his suitcase). He seized the jacket from the seat and rushed out the front door.

The nurse, Liza, was still tearing into her victim, but the old man was barely fighting her now — his arms wrapped around her in a mockery of intimacy as her teeth sank into the side of his neck. Blood sprayed outward in a sickening arc, but the old man was past expressing his pain.

Swallowing his gorge, Ben edged around her, avoiding her line of sight and treading with a gentle step as he

circled around a parked Chevy pickup truck. He could see that it was far too late to save the old man who'd had the misfortune to try and speak with a raving lunatic, but if Ben pulled this off, he could prevent her from harming anyone else.

When he was behind her hunched back, he loosened his grip on his jacket to let the torso fall free, then coiled the ends of the sleeves around his hands. With sweat dampening his forehead, Ben crept forward ... slowly ... slowly ...

At the last moment, Liza reacted as though she heard him. She cocked her head, then straightened and twisted to the side, but her movements were stiff and clumsy, which bought Ben the critical extra second he needed.

God, please don't let me miss!

Lunging forward, Ben threw his jacket over her head and wrapped it around her face. He twisted his forearms, coiling the sleeves even tighter around his wrists, and with a final cinch, closed his impromptu trap. Perfect! The crazy bitch was now blinded, half-deaf, and most important, could not bite him.

That didn't mean she wasn't still dangerous, though. She flailed about in apparent confusion at first, but as soon as she touched his hands and arms, she went wild. She bucked and thrashed, tugging at the sleeve of his sweater, trying to get free and latch onto him at the same time.

Fortunately, Ben outweighed her by forty, maybe fifty pounds. He pulled her halfway to her feet, then shoved forward with his knee in her lower back. She collapsed back to the ground, lying nearly prone this time, allowing Ben to slip a shaky arm around her throat ...

It's okay, she can't bite you through the jacket, do it!
... after which he applied considerable force into

choking her.

It was over. In another few seconds, Ms. Liza Connelly would black out, which would allow Ben to hogtie her with his ruined jacket. They could call the local police for her, and an ambulance for the old-timer (for what good it would do), and then maybe someone could tell him just what in the hell was ...

The woman was not blacking out.

It made no sense. Not only was the jacket smothering her face, but Ben was putting so much pressure on her windpipe, he feared he might crush something if he didn't let up soon. She *couldn't* be able to breathe through all this; despite her exertions, she wasn't making so much as a peep.

That's when Ben realized that she had made very little noise through the whole affair. Some wheezing, a little moaning ... but otherwise she had made none of the racket one would expect from someone who was so *clearly* out of her mind.

He squeezed her throat harder than ever, as hard as he could, and now he *did* feel something crumpling in there ... and yet she *still* continued to struggle.

I don't understand—

“She still goin’?”

Startled, Ben looked up to see the janitor emerging from Beekman's. The man had unscrewed a broom or mop handle and brandished it now before him. He approached the mauled old man, who by now had stopped moving altogether.

“Yeah,” Ben answered after a moment. “I'm trying to knock her out.”

The janitor squatted next to the old man. He started to touch his throat, then jerked his hand away from the

bloody mess; he settled for touching his wrist instead. After a moment, he announced, “Joe here’s dead.”

Liza, rather than getting weaker from Ben’s efforts, suddenly surged in her twisting and turning. She started thrashing about in the direction of the janitor’s voice, evidently riled by the proximity of new prey.

“I can’t knock her out,” Ben said, hoping that, somehow, the janitor might offer an explanation. “She can’t be breathing, I’m cutting off the blood supply to her—”

“Knock her in the head,” the janitor said, releasing the old man’s wrist and standing. His voice shook with anger.

“I don’t want t—”

“I said knock her in the fuckin’ head!”

The janitor caught Ben off guard as he rushed forward and kicked Liza, hard, right where her face would be. His boot struck closer to Ben’s choking arm than he cared for, but it more than got the job done — he heard, and felt, a loud *crunch* as the nurse bucked once, then collapsed.

Ben dropped her, then stood and backed away. His right arm was aching and trembling from the exertion. “I think you just killed her, man.”

“Like I give a fuck,” the janitor seethed before spitting on her unmoving body. “She fuckin’ killed *Joe*! Fuckin’ bit his face and throat and killed him!”

“Okay, okay!” Ben said, holding up his hands and gesturing for the man to calm down. “I’m not passing judgement here, I’m just ... saying ...”

From around the corner of Beekman’s appeared another woman. She was wearing a hospital gown, and even in the dying daylight, Ben could see that she, too, was a dirty mess.

First a nurse, now a patient, Ben thought. How

fitting.

The janitor's jaw dropped a little when he set eyes on the new woman, but the instant she started walking in their direction, the anger returned. "Another one."

"Wait, now, we don't know ..." The patient's face contorted when she saw them, and she reached out with fingers hooked into claws. "Okay, it's another one."

"What the fuck is goin' on here?"

"I don't have a clue."

The patient shared some of the nurse's unsure footing, but she was moving a bit faster. She would be on them in seconds if they remained where they were.

With a gentle but firm hand, Ben touched the janitor's shoulder and pushed him back toward Beekman's door. "Let's get inside."

"To hell with that." The janitor shook free, moved forward to meet the patient halfway, then hauled back with his broomstick like a batter at the plate before swinging it around with all his might.

In his hurry and vehemence, his aim faltered. Rather than slamming the broomstick across the side of her head, it skipped off the knuckles of one of her outstretched hands. He still struck her in the face hard enough to break the broomstick in half — and to send a number of broken teeth flying through the air — but it didn't even knock her unconscious, let alone kill her.

The patient stumbled back, her jaw askew. But she made no sound, never took her eyes off the janitor. Ben was also surprised by how little blood flowed from her ruined mouth.

When a raspy moan did float through the air, it did not come from the patient. Another person — a man this time — had appeared from around the same corner. He was

dressed as neither a nurse nor a patient, just plain street clothes, and he was not dirty. But it took all of two seconds for his gait, expression, and the dark circles under his eyes to reveal that he was just like the others.

“Come on,” Ben urged again, “we need to get inside.”

The janitor threw down his broken weapon. His failure with the patient had rattled him, and when he repeated, “To hell with that,” he said it with less bluster and more dread. He backed away from the two while fishing into the pockets of his overalls. “I’m gettin’ out of here.” He produced a set of keys and turned toward the Chevy pickup truck parked in front of the diner.

“Wait,” Ben said. “I’ll get everyone else. We’ll leave together.”

“Fuck off. I’m goin’ now.”

“Just wait a second, they can climb into the back of—”

“I said fuck off! I’m not wait—*Ah!*”

The janitor had almost reached his truck, was stepping over the old man, Joe, in his rush to the driver’s door. He cried out because old Joe had grab his ankle.

“Jesus Christ, Joe! I thought you were *dead!* You scared the ...”

Joe sat up, looked around ... then down at the ankle he was holding, and the leg attached to it.

“Joe?”

The old man leaned forward, just as casual as you please, and sank his teeth into the janitor’s calf. Blood soaked through the pants and gushed into his mouth, some of it squirting out through the gaping hole in his cheek.

Ben’s chest tightened, and he tried to reject everything that was happening, reject the whole mess. None of this made sense, so none of this could be happening — none of

it!

The janitor was screaming and trying to pull away, but old Joe had his teeth sunk in deep. The janitor punched at the old man, but he did not let go.

The terrible yet engrossing scene vied for Ben's full attention, but he became conscious of a thumping to his right. He glanced over to see Clara the waitress and the male bus traveler through the front window of Beekman's, each of them pounding on the glass with one hand while pointing with the other. His wits were intact enough for him to follow the direction they indicated, but by then it was too late.

The patient with the ruined mouth and the normal-looking man both seized the janitor from behind. The patient could do little more than gnaw her ragged lips against him — she lacked her front teeth, and her jaw was no longer in alignment — but the man bit the janitor's right ear off.

All four of them — one of them struggling; three of them feeding, *feeding!* — tumbled to the ground and rolled into an atrocious jumble. The afflicted three focused all of their attention on their latest quarry.

Ben, for the moment, was forgotten.

He crept away, back toward the diner. He hated to leave the janitor to such a fate, but the actions of old Joe told him one indisputable fact.

Whatever was happening, it was *contagious*.

Ben was mere steps from the front door when he spotted the janitor's dropped keys. All in an instant, he knew what he had to do.

The woman who had traveled on the bus with him opened the door to greet him, to let him back inside as quickly and quietly as possible, but he shook his head.

“No,” he whispered.

“What?” she gasped, then covered her own mouth with a frightened look at the three feeders. For now, they remained focused on the janitor.

“Get the waitress or the cook to lock this door, then shut off all the lights. Try to keep quiet.”

“What about *you*?”

Ben swallowed. “I’m going for help.”

The woman opened her mouth to say something, then hesitated. She stole one more peek at the three lunatics, then nodded. “Good luck,” she said, and closed the door without trying to change his mind. A second later, without any help from the staff, she locked it.

He was committed now. Turning around, Ben took just a moment to build his nerve.

Would it be better do this slow or quick?

He opted for quick. Rushing straight through the hellish chaos, he stooped long enough to snatch the janitor’s keys, then jumped away before his arm or leg could be seized.

He needn’t have worried. They remained focused on ... on what was left of the janitor. My God, they were actually *eating* him!

don’t think about that, don’t stop, just keep moving, keep moving before they notice you, damn it

In seconds, Ben was behind the steering wheel, the door re-locked behind him. Adrenaline demanded that he get the hell out of there *now*, but he wasn’t entirely sure where to go. In his rush, he had forgotten to ask for directions — which would have required entering the diner to talk to the waitress, anyway.

Think, damn it!

Okay ... okay ... he knew that the two other people

who has disembarked with him had started walking up the road to his right, north, away from the old gas station. When Joe's cowardly friend had taken off running, he, too, had gone in that direction. If he had to bet money on it, he would go with the direction the three locals had taken.

All right. That's it then.

But now that he was sitting inside a locked vehicle and the three sick people, or whatever they were, remained oblivious to him, he felt secure in slowing down, if just for a moment.

The biggest problem was that he had no idea what was happening. He needed *information*.

Pushing the key into the ignition, he turned it only halfway, just enough to engage the truck's battery. Ready to turn down the volume at a moment's notice, he switched on the radio.

For the first several seconds, he heard nothing but static ...

Great, just great!

... but then the instant before he twisted the knob back to Off, a male voice broke through.

"... *back on ...?*" it asked. The signal continued to whistle and scratch, but then the man continued, "*Oh ... uh, ladies and gentlemen ... we're coming back on the air after an interruption due to technical problems—*"

Thump!

Ben jerked in surprise, switching off the radio on reflex as he turned to the driver's side window.

The patient, her wretched mouth a ghastly sight up close, had left the janitor ...

Maybe because she can't eat him very well with broken teeth and jaw?

... and was now outside the door, staring in at him with milky, dead-looking eyes. She drew back her fist and pounded on the glass again.

Okay, enough was enough. Ben started the truck and threw it into **Reverse**. The truck swayed a bit as the front tires rolled back over the woman's feet, but she gave no reaction of any kind — she just staggered after him.

Ben shifted into **Drive**, turning around to his left. He would have to swing around into a U-turn if he wanted to head north ...

Coming from the cross-street, a large gasoline truck rounded the bend, heading straight for him. Well, not *straight* for him — the driver was weaving all over the road! Drunk, asleep, or in some kind of distress, the gas truck screamed right across the road without heeding the stop sign.

Ben slammed on his breaks to keep from hitting it broadside.

As the gasoline truck continued forward, tearing through the guardrail, Ben finally understood *why* the poor driver was behaving so. Ten, maybe fifteen people — men, women, even one child — were trailing after him, some of them dragging behind the truck, but most of them chasing after it in the awkward gait which Ben now recognized all too well.

The truck barreled toward the gas station, smashing through a low billboard, shattering the wooden sign into a million pieces and throwing the hanger-ons through the air. Seconds later, the truck ripped over one of the gas pumps.

Sparks flew and flames erupted, turning the gas truck into a rolling bonfire.

It didn't stop moving until it slammed headlong into

the side of the gas station's front wall.

Instincts which had failed him earlier (and thereby saved him from the nurse) kicked into high gear, and Ben was out of the truck before he could contemplate the risk, the danger of such action. All he could think about was helping the driver.

He could hear an agonized scream coming from the gas truck. He did not know if it was the fire or those *things* which had gotten the man, but either way, it chilled Ben to the bone.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't know whether or not the truck was going to explode. He didn't know if he could save the man even if it *didn't* explode.

He did not know what to do.

The things which had been following after the truck had stopped now. They backed away, staring into the flames as though they were hypnotized, some of them holding up their arms as if to protect themselves even though the flames were a safe distance away.

They're afraid of fire, Ben realized.

Maybe he could use this to his advantage, to rescue the driver while they were held at bay. If the man from the bus could help him—

Ben turned back toward the diner, and his thoughts of seeking help stopped dead. Both the patient and the other sick man had emerged from behind the diner. He had not considered what that meant, but now he knew.

From his new vantage point further away from the building, he could see that the field behind the diner was *full* of those things, the majority wearing hospital gowns like the first patient. They had surrounded the place, and because the customers or staff had never gotten around to his suggestion of turning off the lights, he could also see

that the things had somehow gotten inside — even with the tinted glass, he could see the shapes moving around through the windows.

If anyone were still alive, they wouldn't be for long.

Ben turned back to the burning truck, but there were no more screams.

He was alone.

The fire had spread to the gasoline station itself, and the flames licked high into the evening sky.

He was all alone.

He looked around. There were fifty or sixty of the things in plain view now. They just stood in place, staring at the flames ...

... until, slowly, one by one, they shifted their gaze to stare at *him*.

It was a petrifying, impious sensation. Ben might have frozen, rooted helpless to that spot, if he had not seen one thing.

The janitor was getting up. With his neck ravaged, with his ear and most of the fingers of one hand bitten off, with one leg mauled to the bone ... *the janitor was getting up*.

Ben was back in his borrowed pickup, was circling around and driving toward the parking lot before he realized what he intended to do.

The things did not move as Ben plowed the truck right through them. The janitor showed no sign of recognition or fear as Ben made a special point of crushing him.

They just stood there, staring at him. They scattered through the air like bugs, but there were no wails of fear, no cries of pain.

Ben sailed over the curb and raced into the coming night.

It was only a precious few minutes before he noticed the gas tank needle. He had not thought to check and see how much fuel the damned truck had, but he now saw that it was very near empty.

What could he do? There was no town center in sight as yet, and he sure as hell didn't want to be left stranded on the side of the road on *this* night.

In what little light of dusk remained, Ben was barely able to make out the white farmhouse standing in the middle of the field down a long, dirt driveway. A small barn stood on the other end of the property and what *appeared* to be a modest, single gas pump, most likely for refueling tractors and other equipment.

He could also make out movement in the yard, but would it prove to be *people* ... or more of those *things*?

Do I have any choice?

No, he didn't.

Turning off the main road, Ben drove toward the farmhouse ...