

A Glimmer in the Dark

by Scott Cimarusti

“I think he’s dead...”

“Don’t be an idiot—he is not.”

“But what if he is? What are we gonna do?”

“Shut up—he isn’t dead.”

The arguing voices sounded muffled, as if he were hearing them from under water.

He jerked awake, his eyes wide and wary—scanning his surroundings while his heart thudded dully in his chest.

“Dad!” one of the voices cried. It was his youngest son, Ethan.

The man sat up, gingerly and tentatively, cradling his head in his hands. Eager arms clamped around his neck, almost choking him. He took Ethan in his arms and hugged him as tightly as he could, smiling in spite of himself and the circumstances in which he found himself with his two sons.

Still hugging his youngest son, the man swiveled his head to find his oldest son, Rob, sitting cross-legged nearby, digging a divot in the dirt with a bloodstained stake of wood.

That’s when the man started remembering.

Breaking Ethan’s embrace, the man staggered to his feet into a defensive posture. He could see it now, about three feet away from him: a bluish pale corpse sprawled in a bed of withered leaves beneath a barren maple tree. It had been a young woman, probably beautiful once; though there was little about the thing she had become that anyone would describe as beautiful now.

Its eyes were rolled up to the whites, the remaining visible crescent of its scarlet irises a cloudy pink. Its mouth was snarled in a silent scream, the crimson lips stark against pale flesh.

But it was the teeth that the man’s gaze kept revisiting.

The unnaturally long incisors were a flawless ivory against a bloodstained mouth.

The man’s hand instinctively went to the side of his neck, his fingers probing for puncture wounds.

“It didn’t bite you,” Rob spoke up, his voice flat.

The man whirled his head around toward his oldest son and saw a coldness in Rob’s eyes that gave him the impression he was looking into the eyes of a battle-hardened veteran rather than a thirteen-year old boy.

“I got it just in time,” Rob added grimly, returning his attention to the stake that had presumably been the implement of murder.

Though that wasn’t entirely accurate; for you couldn’t murder something that was technically already dead.

The man’s gaze returned to the corpse, and he noted the scarlet stain on the swell of what was once a young woman’s breast, where its once-beating heart would have been. In the murky light, the bloodstain looked like a puddle of black ink.

It was then that the man realized the real tragedy of their predicament. As if evading these nightmarish beings weren’t enough to endure; he would also have to witness and participate in the premature demise of his sons’ innocence, as well. He couldn’t help but note how Rob had already

adopted his same practice of referring to these things that were once people as “it” instead of their gender-specific pronouns.

It was easier that way.

It was easier to drive the jagged knife-sharpened point of a wooden stake into an “it” rather than into a “him” or a “her”.

At least, that’s what the man kept telling himself.

And he wondered how long it would be before Ethan would start referring to them as “it”, too, like his older brother.

The man’s shoulders slumped as he let his knees buckle beneath him, collapsing onto the matted grass near their makeshift campsite in the park where he used to take his sons when they were little. Where they used to throw a ball around... Fly a kite... Play freeze tag... Back in what seemed like another life.

Ethan sidled up against him, leaning his head on the man’s shoulder. “I miss mom,” he proclaimed, his voice despondent.

The man curled one arm around Ethan. “I know you do, son...”

“Can’t we go look for her?”

Rob snorted derisively from behind them. “Don’t be an idiot—we have no idea where she is.”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed, and the man could feel his nine-year old son tensing like a coiled spring. “We could go to her house and see if she’s there. And if she’s not, we might be able to figure out where she went.”

Rob leaped to his feet, brandishing the stake to illustrate his point. “Yeah, right, let’s go back to where these things are all hiding in houses, just waiting for a dumbass like you—”

The man managed his best warning tone in spite of his weariness. “Rob...”

“Fuck you!” Ethan spat, his eyes narrow slits brimming with glistening tears. “I wish that thing had gone after you instead of dad!”

Rob recoiled as if slapped, then his face twisted into a snarl, and he threw down the stake (thankfully) and lunged for Ethan—the man staggering to his feet to keep his sons apart.

It was like wrestling with two feral animals and they clawed for each other, spewing insults like venom. The man struggled to maintain his composure as long as he could before he hurled them both to the ground a little more roughly than he probably should have.

“Enough!” he hissed through clenched teeth, his eyes smoldering and his breathing ragged. His sons looked up at him with wide eyes.

“If we are going to survive this, this has to stop now.” His voice was just above a low growl, his gaze fixed upon each of them in turn, hoping they were finally understanding the gravity of their situation. “You two are going to have to find a way to get along...” He let his voice trail off instead of adding the next thought that came to mind: *Because I don’t know how much longer I’ll be around.*

He unconsciously looked over his shoulder at the bloodstained corpse. It had been a close call this time. He had surrendered to sleep out of sheer mental, physical and emotional exhaustion—when he was supposed to be keeping watch.

He could feel ice water seep into his gut at the unthinkable:

What if that thing had gone after one of the boys instead, seeking weaker prey?

He choked back a sob at the haunting mental image of Ethan or Rob staring at him with those scarlet irises, their skin pale as alabaster... Reaching for him, their teeth bared...

Something brushed against the man's leg, shaking him out of his torturous reverie.

It was Ethan, his eyes still brimming with tears, his expression forlorn and penitent.

"I'm sorry, daddy..." He was struggling to dam back the tears so he wouldn't cry in front of his older brother. "I didn't mean it... I love you..."

It didn't escape the man's attention that Ethan had reverted to addressing him as "daddy"—which he hadn't used since kindergarten. That was when the man's own emotional dam collapsed under the weight of his own tears, and he squatted down to smother Ethan in a protective hug, letting his son bury his face in his shoulder. "I love you, too, Ethan—you know that. And I'm sorry, too." *You have no idea just how sorry I really am*, the voice in his head added. He was sorry not just for momentarily losing his temper, but also for a boy his age having to wonder where his mother is on top of everything else.

Goddamn it, he was sorry for just so much...

The man raised his eyes to Rob, who was standing stubbornly apart from them—yet still closer than the man would have expected. Father and eldest son stared at each other in silence for several heartbeats before the boy finally relented and let himself be drawn into their embrace, though reluctantly.

The man clung to his boys as if he were drowning.

And in a way... It felt to him like he was.

It was almost cliché, how it had all started—just like a pulp horror novel or a "B" movie.

At first, pets started disappearing; dogs and cats.

Then children. Small children. Always after dusk. Toddlers let out of their parents' sight "only for a minute", the weeping parents insisted in front of the news cameras; snatched from the perceived safety of their backyards.

Then attendance began to drop noticeably at the schools in the area.

Businesses, too, started noting more employees burning through their sick days. Or just not showing up to work at all without any explanation.

At first, there were fears that some new flu mutation was responsible; the more paranoid blamed the government or the terrorists. But no one seemed to know anyone who was sick.

And there were never any corpses found.

The man could remember his first encounter with one of the undead.

His ex-wife had just dropped off the boys after taking them out to dinner, the exchange between him and her customarily terse, as he had come to expect since the divorce. Both boys were at their usual homework spots in his house: Rob at the kitchen table, his books and papers controlled chaos strewn about; Ethan sitting on the floor at the family room coffee table, all his papers neatly stacked beside him. The man had just finished folding another load of laundry from the dryer when he remembered that he hadn't put the trashcans out by the curb for pickup the following morning. So he left the boys to their studies and headed through the kitchen and out into the garage.

With summer drawing to a close, the days were getting shorter and the evening breeze was becoming more insistent and less playful with its bite. It was still the man's favorite time of year,

though; even though it never failed to stir melancholy in him as it reminded him of simpler and more hopeful days that were now just fading memories as he navigated the uncharted waters of being single again, and a single parent on top of that.

The man stepped out of the dim amber rectangle of light thrown from the garage's overhead light and veered around the corner into the stark darkness where he kept the trashcans. He grabbed one by the handle and pivoted it so he could wheel it down their driveway to the curb, the familiar squeal of the wheels clacking over the cracks in the concrete. He maneuvered the can with the handle facing the street, per the directions stamped into the plastic of the lid before he headed back once more for the recycling bin.

The breeze suddenly whipped up, raking through the man's hair and sending leaves scurrying across the driveway. And once again, he passed through that rectangle of artificial and dependable light into the darkness along the side of the house. He had just bent over to pick up Rob's football, which had been carelessly left out where anyone could trip over it, when he heard an odd rustling in the bushes that sounded too deliberate to be merely the night breeze.

He figured it was probably one of the more daring raccoons that sometimes tried to pry open the trashcan lids for the buffet inside. He even thought he spotted its eyes glowing with reflected light from the garage.

Except no raccoon stood at almost eye level with him.

The man took a stumbling step backward, Rob's football slipping from his grip. His heart was suddenly hammering in his chest, his pulse thudding too loudly in his ears. He could feel his eyes widening in fear and time slowing down; every sight, sound and smell seemed overwhelmingly vivid to him.

The thing emerged from the bushes with an odd combination of shambling awkwardness and predatory efficiency. The man couldn't tell for sure, but it looked to him like it had once been a teenage boy about high school age. Even in the darkness outside the perceived safety of light from the garage, the man could see the thing's sharp incisors gleaming in the reflected light.

And its eyes... Their luminescence was not reflected; rather, they smoldered with their own eerie (yet oddly alluring) inner light.

And they were focused on the man with an unmistakable hunger.

Primal instinct took over the man's body as he reverted to survival mode—the primary goal being creating distance between him and the ghastly predator that stalked him. He kept backing up slowly, edging along the side of the garage toward the opening and to the promise of light and safety there.

The thing kept pace with him, though; advancing toward him step for step with lurching deliberate strides.

The man was almost to the garage when the damned football tripped him up.

He hadn't seen or cared where it had bounced after he'd dropped it. But as Murphy's Law dictates, the football had somehow wound up in the perfect place to trip him up. He didn't fall, thankfully, but he did stumble and lose his balance.

Which was all the advantage the creature needed to close the distance between them.

The man saw the thing crouch and then pounce with an almost preternatural grace. And out of sheer panic, the man lost the battle to regain his footing and he tumbled to the garage floor, landing square on his ass.

Instinct had taken over, though, and without thinking, the man rolled to his left, colliding with a collection of gardening and lawn care tools which were leaning against the wall where the boys had left them instead of hanging on their designated hooks.

It wouldn't be until later that the man would express silent gratitude for the boys' negligence.

The man raised his arm to shield his face as a rake, a spade, and other long-handled tools came clattering down on him. He blindly reached out for one of those tools—any of them—to use as a weapon against the thing that had once been a teenager not much older than Rob.

The man's fingers closed around one of the garden implements and he held it above him with both hands, thrusting the smooth wooden handle into the neck of the snarling undead thing that was now on top of him, its foul breath a noxious cloud reeking of the graveyard. Its mouth snapped open and closed mere inches from the man's face; its tongue darting at him like a crimson cobra.

But it was its eyes... So filled with a single-minded purpose: an insatiable hunger.

And pure malevolence.

God help him, the creature was strong.

The man could feel his arms quivering as he struggled to hold the fanged abomination at bay and keep its hypnotically white teeth from closing in on him. The one thing that kept his elbows locked was the thought that if he surrendered to this thing, it would go after the boys next.

Speaking of whom...

"Dad?"

A familiar voice from somewhere off to the man's right.

It sounded like Rob standing in the doorway leading from the garage into the laundry room.

And it was enough of a distraction to the ravenous and bloodthirsty thing that would soon have its way with him.

The man felt the creature hesitate for the briefest of moments, and the man—whose survival instinct was now in complete control—used it to his advantage.

He thrust his right knee into the creature's groin—not really expecting the typical reaction such a move would produce. But it still created enough leverage to throw the creature off-balance so that the man was able to roll it off of him.

"Rob, get back in the house and lock the door!" the man screamed as he staggered to a crouching position, brandishing what he now identified as his long-handled spade. Not an ideal weapon, but better than he'd hoped. Never taking his eyes off of the creature that was now skulking toward him on all fours, the man could see out of the corner of his eye that Rob was still standing in the doorway.

"Rob! Go inside! Call 9-1-1! NOW!" The man gasped, his blood pounding in his temples. Distantly, absently, the dwindling logical and rational part of him wondered what Rob would even say to a 9-1-1 operator, and—worse yet—who would believe him.

The creature tried to circle him like a predator, but the man kept its movements restricted with threatening jabs of the spade, prompting it to hiss at him.

The man didn't know how long he could keep this thing at bay—he was tiring fast. And he suspected that whatever appetite it was that drove this wicked creature, it would outlast him.

If it hadn't been for Rob leaving the door from the garage to the laundry room ajar, the fanged abomination would have had its way that night, and the man would have been spared a longer struggle—but paid the price with what remained of his soul.

Ginger, the family lab who was never one to miss the opportunity to escape through a door left carelessly open, darted out into the garage before suddenly stopping in her tracks with her hackles raised and a fearsome growl rumbling in her throat as she discovered the creature that the man still somehow managed to keep at bay.

The creature's gaze shifted to the dog, and the man noted what he thought—and desperately hoped—to be the slightest flicker of uncertainty in the thing's eyes. The last lingering spark of humanity that still remained within the inhuman creature.

And the man acted on this briefest of hesitations.

Without thinking, he shifted his grip on the spade to wield it like a spear before he drove it with all his remaining strength into the creature's chest where its heart once pumped life.

The abomination reared back its foul head, fangs bared, and a guttural gurgling howl tore from its throat as the man leaned into the spade with all of his weight to drive it in as deeply as possible. A thick, black ink-like ichor oozed from the gaping hole in the thing's chest.

Exhausted, the man finally released his grip and stumbled backwards, hoping that his efforts would not turn out to be futile and only delay the inevitable for him and his boys.

The body of the inhuman thing staggered backward a few steps before slumping to the garage floor with a dull thud, the spade still protruding from its seeping chest.

Still driven by fear and adrenalin, the man acted quickly. He somehow corralled Ginger back inside the house, having to practically drag Rob by the arm with them back through the laundry room and into the kitchen. The boy had seemed catatonic while the man fumbled for his phone on the kitchen counter. He could barely manage dialing 9-1-1 with fingers that wouldn't stop trembling.

By this time, Ethan had wandered out of the family room, his homework forgotten.

“Dad, what's going on?”

The man could only stare blankly in response at his youngest son while an automated recorded message yammered through his phone's speaker that all circuits were currently busy, and that he should try his call again later.

He thankfully never had any reason to call 9-1-1 ever before, but he didn't think that the lines to emergency assistance could ever be too busy to accept any more incoming calls.

Something was drastically wrong.

“Dad?” It was Ethan again, the boy's voice sounded distant and fading. “What's wrong with Rob?”

The man couldn't bring himself to raise his voice above the cacophony raging inside his head: a steady ringing in his ears accompanied by his throbbing pulsebeat combined with that mechanical voice buzzing through his phone and into his ear.

He tore his gaze away from Ethan toward Ginger who was nervous pacing through the house, but stopping just long enough to whine and sniff vigorously at the bottom of the door leading out into the garage.

Before the man knew it, his vision started swimming, and he could feel himself crumpling to the floor, his phone slipping through his fingers and clattering to the floor.

And then his boys had been on him, clinging to him...

...Like they were now in the cold and gray park where the man used to take them almost every weekend during the spring and summer once upon a time back when their world had been greener and full of laughter and life.

Before this waking nightmare that had become their lives.

The park had been the only place he could think of as a temporary refuge away from what remained of civilization after the rise of whatever these bloodthirsty creatures were. There was something about all the seemingly vacant neighborhoods that had felt too ominous to him, as if a hidden danger lurked everywhere in the shadows and inside the abandoned houses behind the darkened windows. The park, at least, was wide open—which made it seem somehow less threatening to him. And up until now, the man's instincts had seemed to be correct—they hadn't encountered any of the creatures since he'd killed the one in his garage.

The man refused to refer to the creatures as vampires—even though they exhibited many of the same characteristics as the fictional monsters, from what he could recall. His memory was becoming more unreliable it seemed; the line between the real and the imagined was blurring too much.

Even so, vampires were creatures of fiction, plain and simple, conjured up by the imaginations of writers and filmmakers.

Whatever these things were, they had to be something else.

The man didn't know if it was because he was still shaken after narrowly avoiding death (or worse), but he began to wonder now if even the park was safe. That maybe being out in the open without any shelter was even riskier than hiding in the deserted neighborhoods. More creatures might be lurking there, as he feared, but at least there would be more options for shelter from the cold nights—along with improved access to food and water. And maybe it was better to keep moving and not get so settled in any one place.

The question, though, was how was he going to convince the boys to leave the park and return back to the neighborhoods when he had expended so much effort convincing them that getting away from all those brooding and darkened houses had been their only chance for survival.

It turned out that he didn't have to do much persuading—probably because his sons were just as tired as he was of sleeping on the cold ground, fearful to even light a campfire in case it drew unwanted attention. So there were no objections from the boys to the idea of returning someplace familiar where they could sleep indoors on a carpeted floor, at least—if not a bed or a couch—and potentially even have more convenient access to indoor plumbing and food and water. Even if it meant increasing the likelihood of encountering more of the vampire-like creatures.

Even though the man still stubbornly refused to think of the creatures as vampires, there was still enough of a similarity for him to place his faith in the belief that these creatures were also nocturnal. So he and his boys shouldered their near-empty backpacks and walked through the dreary afternoon in the relative safety of daytime. Their progress was intentionally slow-going, because the man knew they couldn't be too cautious.

His head was a foggy and throbbing burden atop his neck. Days of almost no sleep and even less food and water was taking its toll on his endurance. He could see the weariness in the faces of his sons, too, but they at least had the advantage of youth. Plus, he had insisted they sleep while he stood guard—at night to watch for the creatures, and during the day to watch for any of their fellow survivors who might rob them of their meager and dwindling possessions.

Of course, one could only forego sleep for so long before it hijacked one's body regardless of imminent danger. As it had when Rob had spared him a grisly fate with a stake to the carnivorous creature's chest.

The man still couldn't shake the image of Rob's haunted face afterward. And he hoped that image would be an added incentive to stay awake when sleep wanted to have its way with him.

After what seemed like at least an hour of slow and steady progress under a slate-gray sky through the eerily silent suburban streets, without encountering a soul—living or otherwise—Ethan spoke up.

"I want to go find mom..."

Rob sighed in exaggerated exasperation, as was his way. "I told you—"

The man cut him off abruptly—he didn't have the strength to break up another scuffle between them. "Rob..." he uttered in his best warning tone, just above a growl.

"I don't know where your mom is, Ethan," the man admitted, knowing it wouldn't be enough to placate his son. He tried to put himself in his son's place; if put in a similar situation, he would have wanted to know his mother's whereabouts, too, when he was Ethan's age.

Of course, his parents hadn't divorced and his mom remarried.

"I'm sure she's with Steve," he added. "Hopefully they're someplace safe." Despite the divorce, she was still the mother of his children—he harbored no ill will towards her or her new husband.

"I don't know why she didn't come find us to make sure *we* were safe..." Ethan started to whine. The man could hear the fear and hopelessness in his son's voice, and he almost winced at the added weight in his chest.

"I'm sure she would have if she could have," the man cajoled, making a conscious effort to keep the reproach out of his voice. "Maybe we can try to find her once we get a better idea of what's going on."

"Why don't we go to her house now?" Rob offered with a sudden and surprising change of heart. He was pointing off to their right. "If we take that street all the way to the end and hang a left and then another right, we'll be close to her neighborhood." He shrugged and offered the weariest smile the man had ever seen. "That's the route I took the one time I snuck out of the house because you grounded me—remember?"

The man couldn't help but chuckle in spite of himself. He had been in no mood for laughing back then, when he'd gone to Rob's room to find him missing and the window open a few inches. A panicked phone call to his ex-wife revealed that she was already on her way to his house with Rob in the car to return the jailbreaker.

But now, because of the memory from a time when life seemed almost painfully normal, he couldn't help but chuckle. And it didn't take long for the laughter to become contagious. Soon all

three of them were daring to be discovered, laughing loudly in the middle of a deserted neighborhood street.

When their laughter finally tailed off, the man felt like he could take a deep breath again. And maybe he was becoming delusional, but he swore he felt the slightest surge of optimism. He even thought he caught Rob and Ethan eyeing each other with good-natured amusement instead of venomous disdain. It might be good for their morale for them to do something about which they were in agreement—it might encourage more future cooperation between them. Plus, he knew they were both worried about their mom, even if Rob wouldn't admit it out loud. And who knew: maybe they *would* find the boys' mother and her husband safe and sound. There would be safety in numbers. Plus, he was pretty sure Steve owned at least a few guns that would come in handy.

On some level, the man knew he was rationalizing. But he also knew it would be getting dark soon, and he certainly didn't want to be caught out in unfamiliar territory when the moon rose, and those creatures would be on the prowl.

"It'll take us about a half an hour or so—maybe forty-five minutes, even," Rob interjected, searching his memory. "But at least Ethan and I know her neighborhood pretty well."

Whether it was because of the man's improved mood after the shared bout of laughter or just simple weariness—or both—the idea sounded perfectly reasonable to him. So they changed course and headed in the direction Rob described, staying out of sight the best they could by avoiding the main streets and sneaking through yards whenever possible as the dim daylight continued to fade.

It was just after sunset when the trio arrived at the man's ex-wife's house. A two-story colonial, it was dark and silent like every other house they had passed. The man still couldn't decide if the vacant streets and seemingly abandoned houses were preferable to at least some indication of activity. The oppressive silence still seemed so unnatural and threatening to him—perhaps even more so as the first few cold and impersonal stars emerged into the blackening sky. The man couldn't shake the feeling as if they were under the scrutiny of countless hidden pairs of eyes, just waiting for them to let down their guard—like he had back in the park.

They were walking cautiously up the driveway when suddenly Ethan sprinted toward the garage and around the back of the house.

"Ethan!" the man hissed as loud as he dared before taking off after him up the driveway.

But the boy had already rounded the corner and retrieved what seemed to be a spare key to the back door from a nearby flowerpot.

"Ethan, wait," the man barked again, his voice still cautiously just above a whisper.

All the house's windows were dark, and the man strained his ears for any indication of a sound from inside the house. All he could hear was the rustle of the night breeze through the trees, which sounded even louder than usual since there were no other neighborhood noises—not even the once customary distant hum of traffic. The garage door was closed, so the man had no idea if his ex-wife's or her husband's cars were in there.

"Can we go inside, Dad?" Ethan was insistent.

The man looked to Rob for his input, raising his eyebrows and shrugging expectantly.

Rob gave no sign, appearing to also be listening intently for any warning signs. Then he looked to Ethan and then back to the man before nodding his approval.

The man took the key from Ethan and motioned for the boys to get behind him. Taking one more look around like a cautious burglar, he slid the key into the lock, and for one nightmarish second, he swore it refused to twist. His heart sank at the notion that he was using an outdated key, and they wouldn't be able to get into the house after having walked all this way. The perceived weight of the sightless stares from all those unseen eyes behind the darkened windows surrounding them suddenly felt even heavier.

"You gotta jiggle it a little," Ethan barked, startling the man so much he jumped.

The man did as instructed and the key turned reluctantly.

Steeling himself, he twisted the doorknob and gently pushed the back door inward—wincing at the squeal of hinges which sounded way too loud in the seemingly impenetrable stillness of the night.

He motioned for the boys to stay back as he ventured into the dark and silent house.

Finding himself in the kitchen, he didn't dare flip on any of the light switches he spotted. A shaft of icy moonlight through the window over the sink offered just enough illumination to make the shadows and silhouettes appear even more menacing.

The man crept farther inside, tiptoeing over the hardwood floor, wincing at every creak—pausing only to retrieve a lethal-looking butcher knife from the block of knives on the counter by the stove. He was tempted to make a quick inspection of the refrigerator for future reference and to temporarily appease his growling stomach, but he hoped there would be plenty of time for that after he'd checked the entire house.

His heartbeat thrumming in his ears, he stole his way into the dining room—grateful for the footfall-muffling carpeting—where he had a clear view of the living room, which seemed to be just as vacant as the rest of the house so far. He'd only been in his ex-wife's house a few times—and only briefly, so he was navigating by fragments of memory.

Passing the stairs leading to the second floor, he suddenly felt too exposed, and his knees began to tremble. He lay a hand on the railing and took several shuddering breaths to try to steady himself, straining his eyes to peer through impenetrable blackness leading upstairs. He knew he'd have to go up there eventually, but he also knew he would have to gather up whatever remained of his courage.

Brandishing the butcher knife, he edged past the staircase and into the family room, which—thankfully—also turned out to be vacant. As was the nearby half-bathroom.

The man was beginning to convince himself that the house had been abandoned—which was not the worst scenario, even if the boys' mother wasn't anywhere to be found. In the short term, if his hunch proved to be correct upon a complete inspection of the house, he would find food and water for the boys and himself, and then conduct a search for his wife's husband's guns. In the long term, though, it would mean that the whereabouts of his ex-wife were still unknown—and that would only make the boys worry about her even more.

He had backed out of the half-bathroom, and was about to open the nearby basement door to venture down there, when he bit back a scream.

Two figures were standing right behind him, and thankfully he immediately identified them as his sons before he could react with the butcher's knife and skewer one or both of them.

"Goddamn it," he cursed under his breath through gritted teeth. He'd almost felt his bladder let go.

The boys were staring at him wide-eyed, wielding knives of their own, presumably from the same place he'd gotten his.

"Sorry," Rob whispered. "We couldn't wait anymore."

The man exhaled a slow and shuddering breath and planted a hand on each of the boys' shoulders. He had to bite back a bark of relieved laughter. "You almost gave me a goddamned heart attack."

The boys managed nervous smiles.

"It's OK," he tried to reassure them. "Since you're here, you might as well help me check upstairs." He leveled a cautioning finger at each of them in turn. "Stay behind me... Keep your eyes and ears open... And if you hear anything other than me or your mom or Steve, you run like hell—you understand me? And you don't stop until you can't run anymore. Don't worry about me—I'll catch up with you later." He could feel his stomach clench at the ease with which he was able to lie to his trusting sons.

Their eyes still wide and staring, the boys nodded with visible uncertainty.

"OK," the man gestured with the butcher knife. "Get behind me. We're going for the stairs."

Rob and Ethan did as instructed and took their places immediately behind him as he made his way back through the dark hallway and towards the even darker staircase leading upstairs.

The man was about a third of the way up, when he felt a gentle tug on the back of his light jacket. He had to bite back a scream as he forced his tensed muscles to relax. He turned his head slightly to his right, keeping his peripheral vision locked on the pitch-black landing above.

"What?" he whispered, hoping his tone wasn't as terse as it sounded to his own ears.

"The third step from the top," Rob whispered back. "It creaks."

The man almost let a bark of relieved laughter escape his throat. He nodded in acknowledgement instead.

Not that I can see well enough in the dark to count the steps, he mused to himself. But such an observation demonstrated, at least, that his boys were at least cognizant of such things—a survival instinct that would hopefully serve them well.

The man's eyes must have been getting used to the dark, because he thought he could make out the last few steps before the landing. So he stepped over that creaky third step as he'd been advised. And judging by the uninterrupted and almost suffocating silence, both of his boys avoided that same step, too.

Five closed doors confronted them—four bedrooms and a bathroom, he assumed. He had no idea which was which—not that it really mattered, since they were going to have to check all of the rooms before he would be content enough to commit to spending the night here. He braced himself, making sure the boys stayed right behind him, and headed for the left-most door.

Surprisingly—or not surprisingly when considering how ominously silent the house was—all four bedrooms and the bathroom turned out to be empty. They even made sure to check the master bath and the adjacent walk-in closet.

During their inspection, the man noted the absence of any kind of sign of a hurried departure. There were no empty dresser drawers yawning open or an unusual amount of bare closet hangers to indicate a hasty gathering of clothes.

So either his ex-wife and her husband just simply vanished (unlikely), or they were in too much of a hurry to leave that they didn't even bother packing (more likely), or they were so rushed that they only took with them the barest of essentials that wouldn't be readily apparent to anyone else (most likely).

Or... They'd been taken.

The man couldn't decide if this last scenario was actually the most likely—or the very least likely.

Selfishly, he ultimately decided he didn't care all that much at the moment—since the safety of his boys was his most immediate concern right now. Plus, exhaustion and the stress of exploring and inspecting the house was finally taking its undeniable toll on him. And the last time he let fatigue get the better of him, he almost wound up dead or worse if it hadn't been for Rob's quick reaction.

As the three of the regrouped on the upstairs landing after their inspection, the man could see the same fatigue mirrored back at him in the faces of his two sons—to the point that they didn't seem as concerned about their mother's absence, either, at the moment. He suspected their focus was on whatever was in the refrigerator.

So he led Rob and Ethan back downstairs, all of them slightly more at ease upon having cleared the house to their satisfaction. Their first stop would be the kitchen to raid the refrigerator before camping out in the family room for the night. It was more toward the back of the house, and would therefore, ideally, offer them a little more response time in the event of an unwelcome intruder.

The three of them gorged themselves on a feast of deli meat and cheeses from the fridge, ice-cold bottled water, handfuls of salty tortilla chips, crisp apples, and juicy tangy oranges. The man felt as if his stomach would never be full—and after watching his boys devouring their food, he couldn't help but think the same thing about them.

Of course, with a full stomach came the inevitable grogginess—which was irresistible when compounded by physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. And before the man knew it, his boys were fast asleep sprawled out in the U-shaped sectional. As for himself, he surrendered to the plush recliner closer to the TV.

Somewhere a clock was ticking too loudly in the otherwise unbroken silence as the man watched his boys sleep. Now that he finally felt like he could give his brain a much-needed rest, it was finally dawning on him just how surreal his situation was. And not just evading horrifying vampire-like creatures, but taking refuge in his ex-wife's house, of all places.

The realization brought with it a dull twinge of bitterness, like an aching joint aggravated by an impending storm. The boys shouldn't have to wonder where their mother was, because she should have been with them. Why she had to leave them—him—he couldn't understand. He'd tried to be an attentive and devoted husband... Why hadn't that been enough for her?

The man shook his head to clear it and sighed—which sounded especially hollow in the dark silence of the house, broken only by the ticking of that clock. He knew there was no point in digging at old scarred-over wounds—especially when he should be focused on the safety of his boys. But he was just so damned tired...

He remembered a quote that had stuck with him over the years for some reason—he thought it might have been Nietzsche: “When we are tired, we are attacked by ideas we conquered long ago.”

The man had enough to worry about; he couldn't afford to let himself get distracted by events that had already come to pass that he was powerless to change. So he forced himself to focus instead on the ticking of that clock, wherever it was, letting it lull him to a much-needed—and in his humble opinion, well-deserved—slumber.

The man's last conscious thought before sleep took him like an over-eager lover was that he really should go look for Steve's guns, just in case.

But then he was out.

The man dreamed.

He was back in his own bed in his own house, the morning sun and birdsong streaming in through the open window, the curtains swaying in the breeze.

He could almost feel the pleasantly warm and soft mattress beneath him, and the slightly cooler sheet on top of him. It felt like the time before his wife had left him because he could sense her presence somewhere in the house. She was probably making breakfast downstairs—he thought he could hear the muffled clatter of pots and pans (or something) as well as cupboard doors closing. And was that the invigorating aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting up the stairs and into the bedroom?

Then he heard the bedroom door open with a quiet squeal of hinges. And there she was, looking just as he remembered her when they were first married, when it seemed like her love for him would never tarnish into the inexplicable seething disdain she had for him in the final years of their marriage.

And his heart swelled. A small, hopeful part of him was trying to convince himself that *this* was reality; that he had just awoken from the dream where he and his sons were evading vampiric monsters. Seeing her this way again made it seem impossible that the woman he'd once loved and pledged his life and heart to could have ever mutated into the hateful harpy for reasons he never understood.

As she approached, he could see her hair was aglow in the morning sunshine, an amber halo of waves and curls framing her smiling face, her lips red and inviting, her skin like porcelain.

But it was her eyes—her eyes seemed to shimmer with their own internal light as she fixed her gaze on him, her lips curving into a saucy smile.

Then in a blink, she was seated beside him; he could feel the weight of her next to him. Then he could feel the tickle of her hair brushing against his cheek, her lips on his neck. Kissing at first, then gently nibbling in the way she knew he liked.

Then she was biting him, just below his jawline.

And from somewhere an impossible distance away, he thought he could hear muffled screaming. It almost sounded like his boys.

But because this was a dream—or the *real* reality after the nightmare about the vampires—the man ignored the phantom screams and surrendered himself to the eerily familiar pleasure of his (ex-)wife's face buried in his neck, blissfully oblivious to the screaming of his boys that was, in fact, all too real.

The man was also unaware that his physical body outside of the dream was slowly being drained of blood by a creature that bore only a vague resemblance to the mother of his sons, its fangs

sunk deep into his throat. She had already fed on her current husband, but that wouldn't keep her from feeding on her ex-husband, too. And then her sons.

And somewhere, deep in the far recesses of the man's still-conscious mind that was slowly receding into blackness as he slipped closer and closer toward something worse than death, one final thought flickered like a lone candle flame before being snuffed out:

He never checked the basement.