

Tyler Markham  
Wyandotte, MI  
tyler.markh@gmail.com

Approx 4,700 Words

## Leslie Road

By Tyler Markham

Mrs. Lower rapped on her chalkboard and scrawled three bullet points in neat, cursive handwriting. Nicholas recited them aloud with the rest of the class, who did so with the enthusiasm of wet concrete.

“One. I will not, under any circumstances, go to Leslie Road,” the class said in unison.

“Two. I will not ask anyone to go to Leslie Road, under any circumstances. Three. If I do so, they will never come back.”

Mrs. Lower addressed Nicholas. “Do you understand, Nick? Can I call you Nick?” All eyes were on him, and he wanted to shrink to the size of an ant.

“Yes,” he said.

“Is that a yes that you understand? Or a yes that I may call you Nick?”

“Both. Yeah, both. Sorry.”

She stood, smiled, and erased the board. “Everyone give a nice welcome to Nick, who just moved here from Connecticut.”

“What's the capital of Connecticut?” asked the girl beside him. Nicholas didn't know if she was asking him, or the teacher, so he sat and waited for her to answer. He worried his voice might crack.

“That is a fantastic question, Louise. Let's start there today, shall we?”

An hour later, they went out to recess. Nicholas loved recess at his old school. He and his pals John and Jeremy would play soccer together—he was always the goalie since he was taller than most of the other kids—but now he had to start all over. Find a new Jeremy and John, because Nicholas knew when you moved away people always said they would see you, but they never did. They didn't at the school before that either. Sometimes he wished there was a way to never lose a friend, but he knew that was impossible.

Nicholas scanned the playground. It looked old. There was a half-dome cage stuck in the ground like some great wreckage, with kids climbing on it and throwing rocks at one another. People lined up behind rusty swings because only two out of the four had seats, and there were three benches, all empty besides one. The girl who asked what the capital of Connecticut was, Louise, Nicholas remembered, sat in the middle with her hair hanging over her face as she read a book.

Nicholas took a deep breath, attempting to calm his nerves, and sat next to her. It was difficult to make new friends, but his dad said if you never try you'll never have any.

“Hi,” he said. “Whatcha reading?”

She stuck one finger up in the air and kept her eyes on the book. “Let me finish this page.”

He waited in silence, and she marked her place with a dollar bill and set the book aside.

“I like to use a dollar bill because you never know when you’re going to need it.”

“What can you even buy for a dollar anymore?” Nicholas asked.

She thought for a while. “I’m reading a book called *Murder on the Orient Express*. It’s really good. My parents let me read it.”

“I’ve read that one—”

She interrupted him. “Don’t tell me what happens!”

“I won’t.”

They sat in silence. It made Nicholas nervous, so he asked the only question he had.

“Why is Leslie Road so dangerous?”

She looked over her shoulder to where the teachers were smoking cigarettes and leaned in. “There are a lot of stories about it. No one but the older people in town remembers when it was a normal road. My grandma remembers. She even remembers the woman the road was named after, Leslie.”

“I figured,” Nicholas said.

Louise ignored him. “She told me she had a big family out there. Three kids and her husband. Her son went off to war in the 1940’s and never came back. She got sad. She stopped coming out, and eventually so did her family. People got worried because they could smell something really bad, so the cops checked in on her. She killed and buried her family in the basement.”

Nicholas could barely open his dry mouth to reply. “Why would she do that?”

She shrugged. “My grandma said it was because she didn’t want anyone else to leave.”

“Oh,” he said. “Why is it just her house out there? Wouldn’t they have removed that one first?”

“They couldn’t get close enough to tear it down.”

He almost laughed. Might as well have been a ghost story around a campfire. Why wouldn’t they be able to take it down? He went to tell her how crazy it was, but when he saw the harrowed, worried look on Louise's face, it made him think otherwise.

“You see that kid over there?” she pointed at a younger boy, seven or eight by the looks of him, in line for the swings. His jeans were ripped at the knee, and not in the cool way.

“Yes.”

“That’s Cameron. His brother went out there, even after everyone told him not to, and they never found him. His dad insisted on going, too, and they never found him either. He lives with his grandparents now. His mother is sick.”

“What with?”

She took her pointer finger, swirled it in a circular motion, and crossed her eyes.

“Oh,” Nicholas said and looked down into his lap. “What do *you* think is out there?”

“Don’t know,” she said and grabbed her book up again. “But if you look just right, you can see her house out there. I would know. I live right next to it.”

Nicholas left school that day with a lot more questions than he had before. He got upset when he found out that his father had gotten a job in Michigan. Friends from back home told him how cool it was, with its large lakes and deep forests, but Hornwood wasn’t like that. It was a lot like Connecticut, actually. Small. But no matter how small, or boring this place could be, at least he had his dog, Penny, to keep him company. Maybe even Louise now.

He entered his new home, a short little place compared to their old home, which was big and white and sat on a hill. It still smelled of the paint his parents put up last weekend, and he weirdly liked the smell. Just like gas, something that should be gross, but you're drawn to it nonetheless.

Nicholas got on one knee and listened in the house. There was nothing, at first, then he heard a thump from down the hall, which was sure to be Penny jumping out of his bed. Claws hit the hardwood floor, and at a rapid pace, she barreled down, missed the entrance to the living room, slid, and righted herself.

“Penny! You been sleeping, old lady?”

Her butt wiggled in response, and she approached and put one paw out for Nicholas to bump.

His parents weren't home, still at work, or the store, he supposed, so he thought he'd take Penny out on a stroll to see the rest of Hornwood. There was a candy store downtown that he saw, and he knew he had a little bit of cash, so he went and grabbed her leash from the hook on the kitchen door. Penny followed him the whole way.

He bent down in the light coming through the screen door, latched the leash to her collar, and stepped out onto the front yard with Penny nearly pulling his arm out of its socket. He tried to train her to be good at it but was unsuccessful from the moment they adopted her. She was a bird dog originally, chasing ducks and geese out of corn fields so her owner could shoot them down. She still thought she was sometimes.

Nicholas looked to the left and right down the road and tried to remember where downtown was. It may be to the right, down the street towards the gas station, or toward the left where a bunch of cars were flying by. Before he was able to make his decision, Penny yanked at

his arm. The leash leaped out of his hand and skittered along behind her as she ran down the road toward a squirrel gnawing on a lonely chestnut by the street. The first day he was home alone, and this is what happened. He ran along behind her, calling her name. She didn't listen. The squirrel juked to the left, then the right, Penny right behind it snipping at its tail. It jumped, latched onto a tree, and scampered up into the cloak of the leaves, its half-eaten chestnut long forgotten for easier pickings. She barked, but at this point, Nicholas thankfully caught up and snatched the leash.

“Crazy girl,” he said, and led her back inside.

At the dinner table that night Nicholas asked his parents about Leslie Road. “Where is it?” he said. His mother and father looked at one another across the table and had a silent conversation. Even if they weren't speaking, he knew what they were doing. Trying to decide whether they wanted to tell the truth or not. “I just wanted to be sure so I don't go near it. We talked about it at school today since I'm new.”

They broke from their unspoken speaking and smiled at him. “It's nothing to worry about, buddy,” his dad said. “We're not so sure about it ourselves, but the realtor was sure to tell us to keep you off. Something about waste in the ground from a farming leak. It's just like the edge of a cliff. You know you shouldn't jump off the side right?”

“Right,” he said. He shoveled a forkful of ramen into his mouth. “A girl at school told me it was because they could never get the smell out. From all the dead bodies.”

His mother scoffed and set her fork down. “Who told you that?”

“A girl named Louise. She also said some people went missing out there a couple of years ago.”

His mother shook her head and let out a humorless chuckle “Those kids. Yes, some people went missing *around* there a couple of years ago. There was never any evidence that they went in there, though. Shouldn’t be something you stress about though, Nicholas.”

“Always gotta be some sort of story behind everything, don’t you remember, Jen?”

“I suppose,” she said.

“Would you guys take me to it? Just so I know what it looks like. To be safe, and all.”

“I think we can do that,” his mom said.

They drove him to see it after dinner. He thought it would be far, but no, it was right down the street, only a couple of stop signs and turns and they were there. It didn’t look scary at first, but when his dad shifted the car into park and they stepped out to look at it, from a safe distance, of course, Nicholas felt sick to his stomach. You couldn’t even see the road itself, because it was covered by a chain link fence taller than his father and mother combined, with winding vines, dogwood shrubs, and hazels covering its cheese grater skin. The wind swept up, cold against his wet skin, parting the leaves to give him a small glimpse out onto the road, then covering it again, then revealing its secret for Nicholas to bend his neck to see. There was a house out there on that lonely road. Just like Louise mentioned on the bench at recess. He tried to get a better look at it, and stepped closer, wanting to see, to get a glimpse at the thing he was not allowed to, when his mother put his hand on his shoulder. He yelped and stumbled back away from it. The house disappeared from view.

“Jeez, kiddo, it's alright, it's alright,” she said. She hugged his head close to her, and he pulled back embarrassed. “As long as you don’t go out there everything will be okay. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said, and they went home. He slept that night and didn’t sleep, and slept again. He thought of the house on Leslie Road.

Nicholas came back from school the next day and took Penny for a walk. The entire day he couldn’t help but think of that house out there, lonely on that road, pockmarked with weeds and grass. How could people go missing out there? There wasn’t anything but the house. Not even a tree.

He took a right at a stop sign. Penny sniffed at the grass, peed, then kept going. The kids at school warmed up to him today at least. He was asked to play soccer, and even though he wasn’t the goalie he had a good time. Louise finished *Murder on the Orient Express* and they got to talk about it. She was happy that they let the murderers go. They deserved it, she said.

He took another left, but Penny took a right, and hard. Too hard. He hadn’t been paying attention to her as she watched a squirrel skip from the side of the road through the tall, unkempt grass, under the bushes, and through the fence that blocked Leslie Road. His shoulder made a popping noise as if a suction cup had just been pulled from a tile. His heart skipped, then stopped as he watched her struggle against the fence, her slim body wedging itself against the dirt and the chain link. Her head was through to the other side, snapping and biting at the squirrel running off down the empty road. Nicholas ran for her. He reached for her leash, but as soon as he bent down, she was through the fence and running off down the road, following the squirrel into the distance.

He yelled for her. She didn’t even stop to look back and disappeared over the horizon. It was like he just watched Penny jump from the doors of an open plane as he held her parachute in his hands. Who would go out there and find her, if everyone was too scared to? She might come



home, but there had been another time when she ran away and they found her after four hours of looking, dirty and smelling of poop and murky river water. She seemed happier in the woods.

But this wasn't the woods.

He watched the leaves sway on the fence, hoping to get a glimpse of Penny again when he did. She was sitting on the porch of that house out there. As if she were waiting for him. Maybe she was.

"Penny," he yelled. She didn't move. He couldn't leave her out there. He just couldn't go home to an empty house, wait for his parents to get home, and tell them so they could shrug their shoulders and go about their lives. She needed him. He needed her more.

He made sure no one was watching and went to climb through the hazel and under the fence when he felt something yank on his shirt.

"Are you insane?" Louise said from above him. Her hands were on her hips now. She hadn't even taken her backpack off yet. "I told you you can't go out there."

"Penny is out there!"

She looked at him confused.

"My dog! My dog, Penny, is out there. I can't just leave her there."

She shook her head slowly and put a soft hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry about your dog," she said. "But if you want to survive, you'll have to wait out here."

"It's a bunch of bullshit!" Nicholas yelled. "Everyone in this town is telling me that I can't go in there. What, do you want kids to go in there? Because I'm going."

"There has to be another way."

"No, there isn't."

She bent down to where he sat and extended her open palm. It was a lighter. “I know I can’t stop you. They couldn’t stop Cameron’s brother, either. If you need to go, at least I can offer you a light. None of our flashlights have batteries.”

“Whatever,” he said. He climbed under the fence from where Penny made her way through and looked back to see Louise walking into her house, and locking the door. He shivered when he saw the house.

The air shifted around him as if it were taking notice something new had stepped in its path. Welcome, it said as it pushed at his back, we never get visitors, please, come in, come in. He was barely a foot from the fence when he thought about yelling for Penny again, but something stopped him and told him it wasn’t a good idea. He was a visitor, yes, but he didn’t want to become a permanent resident, despite his insistence that none of this was real.

Nicholas puffed out his chest, held his head high, and began walking down the moon-cheese road towards the house. It wasn’t even that far, closer than his own house as a matter of fact, but with every step, it felt as if he weren’t getting any closer, just farther from the other side of the fence. He looked back and saw nothing but chainlink.

Penny was still on the porch, thankfully, and was lying with her head on her paws, chewing at the squirrel she successfully caught. He could have smiled if it wasn’t for the beating heart in his chest. He scanned the area, feeling a little more at ease, and saw that the road was not infinite like he had once thought, stretching into nothingness forever, but was stopped and capped at each end by large concrete barriers, and flanking it, going a hundred feet left and right was the fence. Trash and things were littered all over the barren soil. Balls, torn-up chip bags, and nondescript wrappers swam around his feet as if he were standing knee-deep in water. One

piece of trash caught his eye though, and he picked it up. It was a photo. On the front, something was scribbled in nearly illegible handwriting, worn away from the beating of multiple winters.

We will miss you.

It was a photo of Cameron, an older lady who Nicholas assumed was his mother, standing tall and smiling behind him, with her arm wrapped around the waist of his father, and next to Cameron a kid who looked a lot like him, but taller. His brother. He looked up to see if Penny was still on the porch and was ashamed to say it wasn't to make sure she was alright, but he was. How could he have come out here? He was warned by so many people, and he did it anyway. He tried to muster that same courage, but when he saw that Penny wasn't there anymore he started to hyperventilate. Where could she have gone? She wasn't behind the house, or by the fence line. Maybe she was on the back side where he couldn't see, but he knew she wasn't. She was in the house now, and it felt like the road wanted him to be, too. It seemed wrong, impossible, that anything bad could happen to him out here with Penny. Cameron was real, but the photo in his hand and the idea of Cameron's dad and brother disappearing out here didn't seem so real. What could really happen? Nothing was here, so why be afraid?

He threw the photo, and started again, a little more pep in his step after calming down. The sun was up, and quite beautiful for autumn. It was warm on his skin, and he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The air was sickly sweet with the smell of dying foliage, and when he opened his eyes a vast green landscape replaced the barren square of land. It must have been something he missed before but this little plot was nice, really. Why would anyone be scared of it? A couple of people went missing, so what? Maybe they wanted to go missing and this was their way out, or some rich guy just didn't want to share his plot.

Nicholas walked into something hard and fell onto the manicured lawn of the home on Leslie Road. He rolled from side to side clutching his ankle. From the ground, he could see the newly placed shingles on the roof. He could have sworn the place was falling apart when he saw it just minutes ago, but it was a happy surprise.

He stood, rubbed his ankle one more time for good measure, and scanned the house for any sign of Penny. She wasn't on the other side of it, but that was fine. He was going into the house anyway.

He walked up the steps that creaked to the world but not to him and through the entryway into a beautiful foyer with a crystal chandelier dancing in the light of the window above. He took a deep breath. He smelled perfume, maybe, or something sweet, and under it a tinge of sourness like a rotted apple.

It reminded him of their old home in Connecticut, and when he looked around, it was. The crystal chandelier in the foyer was now the more modern one that his mother bought when his dad was at his last job. It looked like an underwater bomb, ready to blow with the slightest touch. The smells changed too, and the sounds. He heard the claws of Penny down the hall.

Nicholas smiled and walked down toward where he thought Penny would be. His old bedroom. He went to flick the switch on the wall but felt nothing, and shrugged. He stepped one foot in and felt it drop down, then another, and another. He didn't remember that his room was down the stairs but he couldn't remember exactly anymore. It was foggy like the air around him.

He reached the bottom of his bedroom and heard the barking of Penny at the edge of the room.

"Hey old girl, what are you doing down here? We've gotta get back—" He almost said home. Weren't they home already? Penny barked again, but he still couldn't see her in the dark

room. He expected to hit his bed as he walked but kept going. Boy, the things you remember. She barked again. He was getting closer, and so was that sour sweet smell. He stopped and this time the bark came from below him.

He stopped.

He wasn't in his bedroom. He wasn't even in his house. He was in the basement of the house on Leslie Road, and behind him, the real Penny was barking her head off. His foot was suspended over a hole in the floor, and at the bottom, he found the source of the smell. There were countless bodies in varying forms of decay. Some skeletons. Some were half eaten by rats and others just bloating over. He could recognize one of them, Cameron's brother. His lips were pulled into a grin.

"Nick! Hey, buddy, welcome, welcome. Stay for a while, huh? We have a place for you here. Glad you got to meet my brother, he told me you were coming! Here, come. Sit, sit." he said.

Penny barked wildly behind him.

"Really? You have a place for me?"

"Well, sure! It isn't like the kids at school are going to miss you, or Jeremy or John. They've all moved on already. You don't need friends like that, do you?"

"No," Nicholas said. He was crying now. "No, I don't"

"Well hop on in!"

He went to step forward and stopped. "Can I bring Penny?"

The man's sagging smile dropped. A piece of his cheek flipped open, revealing a black mass of tongue.

"No. No room."

Penny was foaming at the mouth, snarling at the pit in front of them now.

“Come on, it's alright. You could always visit her!”

“I could always visit her,” Nicholas said.

“Now come on in,” said the corpse, and the person next to him, and the next. All in unison.

*Come in, come in, come in,* they chanted. Nicholas closed his eyes and felt the love from within. Somewhere where he could stay forever and never have to leave. Friends that didn't have to say they would visit because they were already here, and always would be. He took a step off of the floor and fell.

Penny snatched the back of his collar before he was able to fall down the deep chasm. She pulled. He sank a few more inches. Her claws screeched on the broken concrete of the house's floor until she caught on the lip. Nicholas swatted at her and missed. He didn't want to go. He wanted to stay here with his friends. She pulled, and he was up an inch. She pulled, and he was up another. His friends below reached out for him, and he reached back, but they were getting farther away now.

“Penny, please. I want to be with them.”

He was up on the concrete floor but Penny was still dragging him. The voices got louder. *Stay, friend. Stay with us. Please. Don't leave us like your friends left you. Please. Please.* Penny's hot breath stunk on his face. She licked him, furiously. Yanked at his collar. The voices faded slightly. These weren't his friends. He looked down there and saw nothing but bodies, writhing like a mass of worms trying to get out of the pit. The smell finally hit him and it was like hell had been brought up from the belly of the earth and plopped down there in that basement.

He stood, and ran, Penny on his heel, up the creaky stairs. The house changed. It wasn't his. It wasn't beautiful. All over the walls in jagged cracks was the word stay, weathered and filled with dust. The voices called from below, then next to him. He jumped to the side over a hole in the floor. He kept having the feeling of going back downstairs, to have family, and friends, forever. Penny kept him there. Every time he turned to the voices she barked, grabbed at his pant legs, and brought him back to the real world, where friends may not be forever, but at least they were real. They hit the front door, which he swore was open when he got there and it was stuck. He banged against it and bounced back. It was solid in its frame. The voices were louder now. Scrabbling could be heard, soft and malevolent on the stairs. He stood there, breathless, the whole house stealing whatever he had left as he watched Cameron's brother ascend the stairs, then another bloated corpse, then another behind it.

Penny was wild now, taking guard in front of him, barking, over and over.

*Why would you want to go out there where you could be hurt, Nicholas? Stay here with us. We never leave. Neither do our friends.*

"No!" he yelled "Friends are supposed to leave. People aren't forever, and neither are you." He pulled the lighter from his pocket and flicked its flame. He scanned the floor, found a piece of drapes, and picked it up. It was damp. He tried to light it, but it wouldn't catch. The corpses came closer. He flicked the lighter again. It only blackened the edges. Penny barked. They were mere feet away now. He flicked the lighter again and it finally caught. Nicholas threw it the best he could and it landed between Penny and the corpses. They shied away as if the light were burning them.

*You'll never be safe from the world. You'll die with no one you little shit.*

"Maybe you did," he yelled to the house. "But at least I have one friend who cares."

He turned his back to the corpses and kicked the door as the flames spread to the carpet and up the wallpaper. It jumped open, and the rush of fresh oxygen sent a smattering of flames to the corpses, who all screeched into the open halls. Penny and him jumped off of the moldering deck, and down Leslie Road, the voice of Leslie fading with the sounds of his and Penny's feet and paws scrabbling towards, and back under the fence towards Louise. His friend.