

Melody Jackson v. The Hound from Hell

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Published by BMB Johnson at Smashwords

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the City of Portland and of course Lafayette Street itself where my youthful mind spent a good deal of its processing time meandering. And while the events in these books may certainly not have occurred, they were written to feed that tumor-like nostalgic part of my brain which in all adults eventually grow as big as pumpkins.

Prologue

The air was dank and smelled heady of compost and fresh kill. Melody spun around, but because of the darkness and thick wood she was unable to find her bearings.

In the distance came the breaking of branches and a soft snort of some large animal. In her mind, she went through the list of possibilities:

Bigfoot? *Unlikely.*

Bear? *Anything's possible, I suppose.*

Wolf?Wolf??? *Oh crud. YEAH! It's a wolf.*

The blood-curdling howl that sounded next confirmed her fear and from the sound of it's determined footfalls it could be nothing else.

Canis Lupus were not unknown to these black woods -- at least as far as she knew. Melody wasn't entirely certain how she got here in the first place, though knowledge of this land seemed oddly instinctive.

Melody turned and ran, shouting as she did so. "WOLF," she cried. "HELP! WOLF!"

Madly, however, something in her brain made her afraid she might be taken out of context, so she explained as she ran.

"Just to clarify, I'm not asking for your help, Mister Wolf, but rather protection from you! In case you were wondering."

Melody tripped over one of the many sprawling roots, and fell forward onto her chest. Covered with dirt and helpless, she rolled over only to find the snarling beast staring down at her, ready to leap upon her person and most likely tear her to pieces. Its mouth was open and dripping saliva and....

Scene One

Bernie Jackson found his daughter wrapped up in her sheets, whimpering mutedly as her pillow was shoved into her mouth. He shook her awake, and she lashed out, kicking him in the rib cage with her one free foot.

Melody opened her eyes wide, and stared at him as though in terror. A moment later the girl relaxed her expression as the image of her father, and not a saliva-producing Wolf, was standing over her.

"I'm going to let that slide because you seemed to have been in the middle of being eaten by a monster." He was clutching his midsection as if from pain, the squashed remnants of a soft brown cookie squeezing between his fingers as though dough from a pasta machine.

"What time is it?" she asked, yawning. She leaned over to switch on her lamp.

"Two A.M.-ish," he said.

She leaned on her elbows and shook her head at him. "Cookies at this time of night?" she scolded.

"Midnight snack," he defended. "It's a thing."

"Just don't get crumbs in my bed," she said, putting on her glasses.

"I won't if you don't give me any more sleepy-time roundhouse kicks."

"Promise," she said, and held up her hand, clearly showing him her fingers were crossed. She reached for her lamp again and paused. "Wait. You came in here to check on me?"

"Yes."

"But you first went to the kitchen to grab a cookie? Even though I was screaming in terror?"

"To be fair," he said, "I started keeping a bag next to my bed."

Melody's face turned to a drowsy grimace, but then relaxed. Finding that answer acceptable, she finally switched off the light and set her glasses on her nightstand.

"So," Bernie said, "I guess you're okay, then?"

"Goodnight, Dad," she said.

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"I think I hear Mom calling you."

Bernie sighed. "You're making that up," he said. "But don't let it ever be said that Bernie Jackson can't take a hint."

He turned, bid his daughter goodnight once again, and closed the door behind him.

Melody opened her eyes and stared into the darkness. It had been a long time since she had had a nightmare. Though when she did it was usually someone trying to break into the house, or finding the bathtub had been overflowing for hours and the flood waters were ruining her First Edition Dickens collection. She wished she knew what had triggered such a horrific dream, although she suspected the leftover mac and cheese might have been slightly past its prime.

"Dad!" Melody called out.

Bernie opened the door quickly as though he had been waiting on the other side of it. "Yes, Darlin'," he said.

There was a pause, and finally Melody said, "Nothing."

Bernie smiled at her, and closed the door.

Melody listened for the sounds of his footfalls upon the squeaky floorboards. Annoying as it was, she had to admit to herself it was nice to know that her father would still come running if she were distressed. However, she didn't want him to make a habit of it publicly.

Scene Two

Melody twirled her eggs around on her fork, and let the dark, yellow yolk trickle down the utensil.

“So, why aren't these eggs all the way cooked again?”

Bernie sneered. “Because your mother thinks a runny yolk adds more flavor.” He was unshaven, and looked tired. His dark, thinning hair was more disheveled than normal.

“You know,” Lonnie began. “I'm never going to cook for you people again. And then where will you be? Starving, and sitting in dirty clothes in the dark.”

Bernie pointed at the pad of paper labeled “Grocery List” magnetized to the refrigerator. “Mm,” he said. “In that case, we will need to add lots more cereal to the list.”

Lonnie rolled her eyes. Also unshowered, she looked much better groomed and put together. “So, what was this nightmare you had last night?” she said, getting straight to the point.

“Oh,” Melody said, finally placing the egg into her mouth. “So he told you, did he?”

“Yes,” Bernie said. “HE did. Things sometimes just fall out of HIS mouth.”

Lonnie smirked, and dabbed at her husband's face with her napkin. “Like that bit of egg just did, huh sweetie.”

Bernie scowled at her.

Lonnie turned then to her daughter. “I would like to say that he was just concerned about you, but at the time it did seem more like town gossip.”

Melody's eyes narrowed. “Well, for your information,” she said. “I was being attacked by a wolf.”

“A wolf?” Bernie raised an eyebrow. “Well, now don't I feel a little shee...”

Lonnie raised a finger at him. “Do *NOT* say ‘sheepish’, Bernie Jackson.” She rubbed his temples and whispered softly, “*Shhhh*. Go to sleep.”

Melody nodded and smiled. “Anyway, I'm still wondering about the trigger. Did either of you notice any howling off in the distance last night?”

Her parents raised their eyebrows collectively at each other to communicate some concern, but then just as collectively shook their heads.

“I thought maybe it was because I was reading something scary before I drowsed off.”

“Oooh,” Bernie said, rubbing his hands together. He loved scary stories. “What was it? Lovecraft? King? Koontz? Something about Vampires or Zombies?”

Melody rolled her eyes. “Don't be crass,” she said. “It was ACD.”

Bernie's eyes narrowed in confusion. “The band?”

Melody shrugged her shoulders, and squinted her eyes closed. “Arthur Conan Doyle?”

The full name didn't seem to make things any clearer for Bernie.

Melody closed her eyes. She couldn't believe her father was acting so stupidly. *Everyone* knew who Arthur Conan Doyle was.

“Really?” Lonnie said, pinching Bernie in the arm. “The band? He wrote Sherlock Holmes, you dolt!”

Bernie shrugged.

Suddenly, Melody's stomach began to hurt. *What if her father were having a stroke. That might explain things. It was possible for people in their late-forties to have brain hemorrhages, right?*

She leaned forward and stared intently into her father's eyes, though she wasn't sure what she was looking for. Especially in the darkness of the room.

"Mom," she said. "Do we have a flashlight?"

"I *know* who he is," Bernie said. "I'm not a total idiot. I've just never heard anyone ever call him ACD. Have you, dear.?"

Lonnie sat down and began to eat her eggs. "I don't know everyone in the world," she said diplomatically.

Bernie was adamant. "It's never been done," he said. "Also, I can't think of one spooky story he might have written that would cause anyone to have nightmares."

"Huh?" Melody's eyes widened. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Every one of his stories is dark and broody. Okay, *maybe* scary was too strong of a word.....*why I am even trying to explain myself?*" She turned to her mother, pleading with her eyes for help.

"Just give it up, dear," Lonnie said. "Your father can go all day with no ammunition."

"Well," Bernie said, and raised his eyebrows as if waiting for a response.

"Well, what?" Melody wanted nothing more to do with this conversation. She was getting tired and crabby, already.

"What *ACD* story were you reading last night? Did it have any wolves in it?"

Melody shrugged. "Hound of the Baskervilles. And I don't know yet. I hadn't gotten that far in the story."

"Spoiler alert," Bernie said. "It was a big dog and, except for the Zoo there aren't any wolves wandering around in Portland. Coyotes, maybe."

"It *could* have been a coyote you heard," Lonnie said.

"Maybe," she returned, seeming skeptical. "You two are certain you didn't hear anything?"

Bernie put down his fork. "I didn't hear any horrible noises until you started screaming from your bedroom."

Melody stared off into space as though the dream were still affecting her. She then recalled the dream to her parents, at least what she could remember of it.

"I wouldn't worry about it," her mother told her. "Sometimes dreams are just there to clean up the thoughts in your head. I'm sure it's not some *ill portent*."

"Yeah, funny you should mention ill portents, though," Bernie said before filling his mouth with an entire sloppy egg.

Melody suddenly looked up with mild if not slightly irritated interest. There was definitely something her parents weren't telling her? "Is there some homeschooling test that you forgot about?"

"No...." Lonnie's eyes darted around, suspiciously.

"Mother?" Melody began to rise from the table. "You're being awfully cagey about something."

"Yes, dear," Bernie said. "You know how your daughter don't like the cagey."

"I may have forgotten to tell you your second cousin is coming over to stay for a night or two."

“A NIGHT *OR TWO!*” Melody sat down in her chair gruffly and propped her head on her fists. “Which cousin?” she asked in a depressed tone, though neither of the choices were great ones.

Lonnie didn't answer at first. She looked over to her husband, who was smiling broadly.

“Well,” he said. “Go ahead and tell her.”

“What does it matter, Melody?” she said. “They're all good.”

“It's Jimmy, isn't it?” she said, scornfully.

“You should just be thankful it isn't both of them,” Bernie offered.

Melody groaned and hid her face under a pile of arms and hair. From under this mound came another query. “When exactly should I start being thankful?”

“I believe seven o'clock!”

Melody lifted her head. “WHAT?” she roared. “AS IN... *TONIGHT?!!*” She sprang from the table.

Bernie snapped his fingers and pointed at her plate. “Breakfast,” he said.

“I am no longer hungry,” Melody informed him.

“So, I can have it then? I need you to say the words.”

Melody growled in her throat and turned towards the kitchen door. “EAT IT!” she exclaimed.

“Waitamminute. Just where are you going there, girly?” her mother asked, standing up from the table.

“I'm running out of time,” Melody said, hurriedly. Her face was already red and puffy as if from exhaustion. “I need to baby proof everything in my room.”

“He's not a baby,” Lonnie called out, but by this point she was only saying it to the swinging kitchen door. She turned to her husband. “The kid is five,” she said. “True. He's a walking drool-pit of disaster, but how much damage could he really do?”

“I think this is a wise move on her part.” Bernie cleaned his daughter's plate by wiping it up with a piece of toast as though it were a dish rag. “Maybe we should start doing the same.”

Lonnie reached over and kissed Bernie on the nose. “Fine,” she said. “You can start by dirty-proofing the dishes.”

Bernie laughed sarcastically to himself. “I'm being serious here.”

“You're both being ridiculous,” Lonnie told him, stacking the plates and dishes neatly in the sink for her husband. She then handed him a bottle of soap, a washcloth and a towel. “Also, I shouldn't really need to coddle you by bringing you all of the supplies.”

Bernie rose from the table and grunted loudly as he took the two steps to the sink. He then turned on the water and began to fill a small, brown tub. “Two words,” he said, not bothering to turn to his wife. “Boba Fett Collector's Plate.”

Lonnie laughed. “Your math skills are about as good as your character assessments.”

Bernie shook his head. “Totally besides the point,” he said. “The boy is a menace, and that plate has yet to be replaced.”

“It was an accident, Bernie,” Lonnie said. “And it wasn't like that Star Wars plate was a family heirloom. I'm sure you'll find a replacement Bilbo Foot at a garage sale someday.” She came from behind and wrapped her arms around his chest. “Just think of the thrill you'll experience when you do!” She kissed him on the back of the head. “You'll probably even tweet about it.”

Bernie turned around to look at his wife through small slits in his face. "Bilbo Foot? Really? And don't patronize me, lady. I have the death sentence on several systems."

Lonnie laughed, and snapped Bernie with a towel. A sharp whack! filled the air, and a pain similar to that of a bee sting (Bernie's words), now occupied his once comfortably pain free backside.

The two then chased each other through the house until Melody yelled out for them to stop being so weird.

Bernie, grumbling under his breath, and then begrudgingly returned to his sink.

"Why do we have so many dirty dishes after one breakfast?!"

"Because you didn't do them last night like I told you."

Bernie shook his head. "Well, regardless of how it happened....I suggest while Jimmy's here, we stick to paper plates and plastic silverware."

Lonnie placed her hands on her hips. "I hope you both are not going to be like this when that poor little boy's here. I don't want you making him feel guilty about that one little mistake."

"You're only saying that because he didn't break any of your stuff."

"It's probably because you were making him nervous. Every time he moved, your eyes would get huge, and then you'd start to make that "yip" sound.

Bernie's eyes narrowed. "Yip sound?"

"Yeah," she said, smiling evilly. "Like a little dog barking at the neighbors. Although in your case, I assume it was some unconscious response."

"Okay," Bernie said, grabbing the drying towel from her. "I get the point."

Lonnie raised up her hands in acquiescence. "But by all means, put your precious collectibles away for a day or two. Just don't go nuts if he breaks a cup. I don't want him traumatized more than he already is."

Scene Three

Melody began to mumble incomprehensibly under her breath as she worked frantically on securing her most important papers into bankers boxes.

Her father stomped into her room, eating a banana.

Melody looked up at him with a sweaty and nauseated look on her face. "What are you tramping around so heavily about?" she asked him.

Bernie finished the last of the banana, and then held the peel in his hand as though it were a washcloth he had just found on the floor of a gym locker room.

Melody pointed to her trash can with her eyes.

"I make an insane amount of noise when I approach, because you once yelled at me claiming that I was 'sneaking up on you'," Bernie replied, using finger quotes on the last phrase. "That kind of treatment stays with a guy."

Melody shook her head. Her father knew how much she hated finger quotes. Why he insisted on using them was beyond her. "I was five at the time," she said.

"Ah," Bernie said, with a knowing grin on his face. "The angry period."

Melody pointed to the boxes she had been compiling. "I don't suppose you want to make an attic run?"

"Not especially. Though I'm not sure how packing up everything and placing it in storage is baby proofing. It might be easier to just put the actual boy behind concertina wire in the back yard."

Melody shrugged her shoulders. "I don't have a problem with that."

"That's where you and social services probably would disagree," Bernie murmured.

"Anyway, Jimmy's not that bad. Sure, he's a little rambunctious..."

"Did Mom make you come in here and say all of that?"

"I'm not going to lie to you."

"The tip off was you using the word rambunctious. That's not usually a word that comes out of Bernie Jackson's mouth - except under coercion."

"Anyway, if you really want to load your stuff up into the attic, I'll gladly hold the ladder for you."

The Jackson family attic access was simply a hole in the ceiling in the middle of the hallway. If one wanted access one had to place a ladder, the more rickety the better, underneath said hole and then pull one's self up.

Prerequisite: Upper arm strength and constitution of an Olympic athlete. The belief that one is completely immortal unnecessary but highly recommended.

"I can't believe we haven't installed one of those nice pull-down ladders yet like normal people have."

"Well," Bernie mused, "the next time I find five hundred dollars worth of change between the couch cushions, we'll head over to the local Handyman store."

Melody pursed her lips. She wasn't sure if she wanted to continue with this argument. She was fairly certain those ladders didn't cost that much. However, even if they were only a dollar the likelihood of its installation prior to the necessary completion of this task was nil. The one thing she DID know was that she really really did not want to go up into that attic. Melody had never heard good things about the place.

She began to shuffle her feet. "You guarantee there's no bats or rodents up there?"

"No guarantees," Bernie said with a straight face.

"Can you at least guarantee that I won't fall through the floor once I'm up there?"

"I'll say this, if you just stack the boxes around the rim of the opening and stay on the ladder you definitely won't fall through the floor."

Melody shook her head. The place was sounding more and more like a deathtrap by the minute.

"I wouldn't go exploring up there, in other words," Bernie finished.

Lonnie breezed through the hallway and into the bathroom. She then stuck her head back into view as though surprised to see them both standing there. "The attic's just fine," she said, somehow guessing the conversational topic. "It's just a little hot and stuffy. Don't listen to your father. There's nothing dangerous up there in the least."

Bernie pointed in the general direction of his wife with his thumb. "Your mother exaggerates," he said.

"It's mostly fabric, baby toys and old clothes."

"Fabric?" Melody appeared confused. She wondered how many textiles her mother owned. There was an entire room in the basement dedicated to the stuff, and now the attic? It was odd, mostly because she rarely saw her mother doing any sewing.

"Yeah," she said, stepping out of the bathroom with a toothbrush in her mouth. "I'll tell you why someday... when you're really really bored."

She jammed a toothbrush into her mouth, and began to brush vigorously. She then turned back to the bathroom sink and turned on the water. Melody closed her eyes when she heard the faint spitting sound in the background, but didn't say anything. There were just certain disgusting noises which should be kept private. Minus the toothbrush, Lonnie stepped back into the hallway. "Just hold the ladder for your father. He can put the boxes up there for you."

Bernie groaned and then plastered a fake smile on his face. "Yes, dears," he said.

Scene Four

The attic was essentially as Bernie remembered it. Hot, smelly and unneighborly. The headroom was non-existent and the floorboards few and far between. As for the items being stored, there was no order to any of it. Boxes were tossed about with little care, as though the person storing them simply wanted to leave this place as soon as humanly possible.

There was only one natural light source – the window at the west end. Closest to him, the window facing the east was darkened with paint. The sight of this sent a shiver down his spine, though he wasn't certain why.

As a child, Bernie recalled that the attic was one of his haunts. When he was Melody's age, young Bernie possessed the ability to climb up the hallway walls and escape into these recesses without even the aid of a ladder.

He and his friend Chuck Conroy...!

"I just remembered why I don't like coming up here," he called down to his daughter. When she returned a questioning response, he added, "Because every time I do I remember something from my past."

"Isn't that a good thing," Melody asked him, hauling one of the boxes up the ladder.

"I don't know," her father said. "I haven't decided yet."

What had happened to ol' Chuck? he wondered.

"What was it you remembered this time?"

Bernie told her about his friend. "We used to hang out up here as though it was our fort. Of course, the fun ended when Chuck tried to stand up and a roofing nail stabbed him in the head." Bernie pointed to the various nail spikes sticking through the boards.

Melody squinted at where her father was pointing. Once her eyes had focused on one of the pointing protrusions she grabbed her mouth and gasped. For a moment, Bernie was afraid she was about to vomit.

"I have to go," she said, dramatically. However, after a few moments she returned with another box. "That's horrible," she said. "Was that the same Mr. Conroy who lives down the street?"

Bernie rubbed his chin and thought about it for a bit. "Yeah," he said. "I guess it is." He hadn't spoken to Chuck in years. "He just hasn't been as fun since he started going by Charles."

Melody laughed at her father. "You never could stand the classy folk," she said. "Anyway. That's it. No more boxes."

He slapped his hands together as though he were knocking off dust. "And no more memory lane." He spun around to better position himself towards the exit and his foot knocked a box of jelly jars. The containers clanked together violently and Bernie suddenly lost his breath. He leaned forward and let out a gasp of terror.

Melody popped her head up. "What's the matter, now?" she asked him.

Bernie only stared at her for a moment. "I really don't know," he said, finally. "Some whispered words flashed in my head: *They're in the jars. Release them from the jars.* And suddenly I had the feeling you get when you just realized you've had a library book overdue for ten years."

Melody grimaced. "You used to keep your library books in jars?" She smiled at him evilly.

Bernie shook his head, but didn't respond to her question. Instead he said, "I want out of here before I remember I'm the Manchurian Candidate."

Scene Five

Melody placed her hands on her hips and looked over her room. Everything was battened down. Small items and papers she cared about were stowed away and out of arm's reach from creepy little fingers. Now if she just had a deadbolt lock for her door she could finally feel at ease.

She sauntered into the living room, satisfied with her work. Her parents were both watching television. The good Doctor was on the screen dealing with robots wrapped up like mummies.

"Pyramids of Mars, again?" Melody asked him. This was her father's favorite Classic Doctor Who episode for reasons she couldn't even fathom.

Bernie said, in one billowy breath, "The fact that you can look at a scene and determine with accuracy the title of the story in under three seconds warms my heart so much that I will let your slanderous tone slide."

Melody smiled. "I'm not sure how or why you two can sit here so calmly when you know what's going to be coming through that door any minute now. I mean, we should be discussing the itinerary. There's still so many unanswered questions, like:

"Where's he going to sleep? What rooms are he allowed in? Do we have to feed him? Why is he coming by himself? Did his sister file for legal separation due to irreconcilable differences?"

Lonnie looked over to her husband, then back to her daughter. She held her hand open flat, and curled up one finger for each question she answered as if checking them off a list. "We were actually thinking your bed. All of them, of course. Yes. And we'll let him tell you that himself. It can be the icebreaker. And see previous answer."

Melody's eyes grew wide. "MY BED?! NO no no no no....No."

"Melody," her mother said in a soothing tone. "It's only for a night or two."

The girl was adamant. "Do you know how much damage one of those Jansen kids can do in just an hour? Let alone *a night or two*. I guarantee you'll be buying me a new mattress by the end of this. In fact, I'm going to start looking through catalogs right now." She stormed into the kitchen.

Bernie paused his show. "Don't worry," he told his wife. "We don't have any mattress catalogs."

"Maybe we should have Jimmy sleep on the floor in our room."

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Bernie stood up at the mention of this. "Besides last time we tried that he had a tantrum because he missed his soft bed. No one slept that night."

Lonnie began to beat on her lip with her forefinger. "Well, you and I have a nice soft bed."

"Don't even think of what you're thinking, young lady," Bernie grunted, folding up his arms. "Besides if we give in to Melody's crazy demands now, they'll never be an end to it. She already treats me like a child."

"Well..."

Bernie raised a finger to cut her off.

"I'm just saying that you *could* sleep on the floor and pretend you're camping. You know how you like to pretend you're doing things."

Melody yelled from the kitchen. "Here's a nice one. It senses when you're too hot or too cold and adjusts the temperature accordingly. Oh, and it's on sale!"

Lonnie yelled back at her. "Even if you had mattress insurance, which you don't, there's no way you'd get enough for that old clunker of yours to upgrade to a bed that seems nicer than any of our kitchen appliances!"

There came a growl from behind the kitchen door. This was followed closely by a harsh rapping on the front screen door. The knock, if such it could be called, was unpleasant and acerbic, and seemed as though it were caused by more than one person.

Lonnie and Bernie looked at each other. "Jimmy," they said standing up in unison. Lonnie went for the door while Bernie took a defensive position in front of the television set.

"Oh no," he said under his breath, loud enough for his wife to hear. "I forgot to secure the TV to the wall."

Lonnie shushed him and opened the door, smiling brightly. The opening revealed her cousin Joanie, and in front of her, still banging on the screen with both open palms, was her son, Jimmy. The boy was short but massive, and built like a red-striped tank.

"Hi, Jimmy," Lonnie said, sweetly. She smiled at him, not expressing her extreme annoyance at the noise and damage he was most likely causing her door.

The boy failed to acknowledge her existence.

She looked up at Joanie. "Hi," she said, in a more subdued tone. "Come on in. How's Rock?"

Lonnie opened the door, and both Joanie and Jimmy stepped into the house. Jimmy continue to bang on the door as he walked, and then turned to do the same to the big comfy chair just inside the house.

"Jimmy, please stop," Joanie said, looking somewhat frazzled. "He's stable now. But we're still waiting to see if he's going to be able to walk." She tried to smile, but this quickly faded into a frown. She pulled a tissue from her purse and began to dab at the tears from her eyes.

The woman wore all brown, from her frock coat to smart skirt. However, every bit of her outfit was wrinkled, or spotted with food stains. Her hair was dark, mottled by gray, and was kinky as though it hadn't been washed in days.

"OH, Joanie," Lonnie said, embracing her cousin. "He'll be okay." As the two women hugged, Jimmy turned and was now banging on Lonnie's hip.

"Bernie, dear," she said, slightly muffled. "Why don't you get little Jimmy some juice."

"Little my foot," Bernie said under his breath. He was currently in the middle of unplugging the television set. Out loud, he said, "MELODY, COME TALK TO YOUR COUSIN."

"SECOND COUSIN," Melody roared back.

"Thanks, you two," Joanie said, a little more composed. She dabbed at her eyes some more.

"Whoa," Jimmy said. "BIG TV!"

Bernie chuckled to himself. "Yes, but unfortunately, little man, it has to go to the shop for its biannual pre-damage maintenance review." He took the boy by the hand. "Now let's go see about that juice."

Jimmy smacked his lips. "Maybe a snack, too?" He stuck out his tongue and wagged it around loosely and for a moment Bernie thought the boy might be possessed.

"Whatever you want, little man."

Bernie pushed on the normally swingable kitchen door, but found that it wouldn't budge. He knocked softly. "Melody," he said. "Jimmy would like a snack."

"I think there's something wrong with the door," Melody confessed. "You might have to call someone."

"What seems to be the matter?" Bernie was still calm, but there was a contained anger in his voice – like a teapot about to whistle, or rather an enraged herd of elephants about to break through their enclosure and run amok. "We don't want li'l Jimmy to not feel welcome."

"I'm not sure," she said. "I think maybe the hinge snapped."

Bernie responded melodically. "I think something else is going to snap in a minute." He placed his fingers in the crack of the door and slowly began to pull it towards him. "It seems like the hinge is fine," he said, gritting his teeth. Once the door was all the way open, the true issue was revealed. "I see your problem. Someone has pushed the kitchen table against the door."

Melody smiled sheepishly. "I forgot that the door swung both ways."

"You forgot that?"

"Well, actually," she said. "I was counting on you not thinking of pulling it open."

"I see."

Jimmy began to dance up and down and push his way into the kitchen. "Snack," he said. "Snack snack snack."

Melody closed her eyes when confronted with this verbal assault. The "Sn" sound emerging from the boy's mouth seemed to mostly originate from somewhere inside his nose. It arrived as a hissing tone which she found most unappealing. When she opened her eyes, she glared at the boy and slowly educated him on the correct pronunciation.

"The word is *snack*!" she told him. "S.N.A.C.K...not S.M.P.H.A.Q.U.E. or whatever sound you are making."

Jimmy seemed to find this instruction hilarious and began to giggle uncontrollably.

Bernie simply stared at the boy. He then turned and smiled at his daughter for two reasons: One, because in a moment he was going to pawn Jimmy off on her; and two, because he was very much glad she was nothing like him.

Melody's face fell flat. She knew what was going to happen next. "I just want to state for the record that the burden of responsibility should and shall not fall on me. Simply because we're in the same general category, that being *not adult*, doesn't mean that we share any common interests. Nor should I be considered mentally mature enough to take care of another human being." This last comment stung a bit for she knew it to be an untruth, but she was willing to 'take one for the team' as it were if it meant possibly removing herself from the equation. "I mean," she continued. "What am I? A nurse? A bouncer? I'm just not qualified."

"You're *legally* qualified to watch a little kid, and if that's good enough for the State of Oregon, then that's good enough for me."

Bernie shuffled backwards out of the room and began to sing softly to himself as he let the door close slowly in front of him. "Second Cousins ... Identical Second-cousins, you and he, You whine alike, you yell alike you even kind of smell alike...What a kooky pair."

Before the swinging door completely cut off any further communication from her, Melody properly timed the following sentence: "You don't... even know... the right..... words."

"SECOND COUSINS," Bernie belted before returning to his television set.

Melody's eyes narrowed as she stared at the boy in front of her. She opened her mouth once...twice, and then closed it. She had absolutely nothing to say to him. She had no idea how to even start a conversation with this boy.

"I'm sure it would be fairly one-sided affair anyway?"

"Wha-?" Jimmy looked at her, his eyes swirling around in his head as though they were little tops.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I'm referring to this theoretical conversation we would have."

Jimmy laughed. "We not conversationaling," he said.

Melody stared at him. "You're not all there, are you?"

Jimmy hummed.

"I mean, you're there physically, but your brain is really someplace else. Is that the case with all children your age? Or is there something seriously wrong with you, specifically?"

Melody suddenly sat down. She felt distraught. "Oh my," she said to herself now. "Was I like this?" She picked up a pad of paper from the note caddy next to the phone, along with a pen. She began to write:

THINGS TO ASK MOM.

1. Me – Age 5? Moron?

She tapped her cheek with the pen. "Well, I might as well use this time efficiently...as scientific study," she said, turning her focus on the boy sitting in front of her. "Assuming you're normal, how do you feel about human life?"

Jimmy sat down. "Huh?"

"You know, do you know other people exist? Are you aware of your own sentience? How about death? Do you think of it as someone taking a nap, or are you cognizant of its permanence?"

Jimmy simply smiled at her, inanely.

Melody sighed. "Let me take another approach. Have you ever had a goldfish which seemed to look *just slightly* different every six months or so?"

Jimmy giggled at her, but Melody could tell this time it was just for show.

She tapped on her face more aggressively, as if this agitation might congeal thoughts into words. "Well," she said, finally. "I can see that this is clearly going nowhere. How about I read and we just have a little quiet time? Hmmm?"

"Game," Jimmy said, suddenly. "Game game game." He seemed insistent.

"No games," Melody told him. "I did not sign up for any games. I know how little kids are with board games. Pieces end up in black holes and rules are treated as though the cause of leprosy."

"No," Jimmy said, and held up his hands miming some action.

"Oh, you want to play a video game."

"Yep yep yep," Jimmy confirmed.

"As far as you know, I don't have any video games," she told him. "Unless you brought one yourself. Did you bring one?"

"Yep yep yep," Jimmy confirmed again. He quickly arose from the table, alighted through the swinging kitchen door and was gone.

Melody pursed her lips and smiled. “The discussion of video games makes him disappear,” she said. “Good to know.”

Scene Six

Lonnie came back into the house through the front door.

“Well,” she said. “Joanie is headed back to the hospital to spend the night with Rock.” She sat down in the chair as though from a great height, and looked around. Jimmy was sitting playing a hand-held video game, Bernie was watching TV and Melody was nowhere to be seen.

“Why is the bedroom TV in here?” she asked.

“Because,” Bernie said. “The living room TV is at the *shop*.”

Lonnie raised an eyebrow at him. “The shop?”

He looked at Jimmy and then to his wife and gave her a wink. He whispered, “It’s in the bedroom, being safe.”

“Oh,” she said. “I see.”

Softly out of the corner of his mouth, he added, “The boy was being a little too handsy when he came in. Sure he’s quiet now, but he’s too much of a loose cannon for my taste, if you know what I mean.”

Lonnie smirked at Bernie and turned to face the hallway. “Melody!” she shouted.

There was no response.

“I think I actually heard her grimace,” she said. Lonnie turned her head towards the hallway. “Jimmy wants to show you his game!”

Jimmy looked up at her with a blank look on his face. He shook his head and went back to staring at his screen.

“You don’t think she chewed her way out through the back of the house, do you?”

Lonnie smiled.

Bernie seemed annoyed. “Maybe since everyone’s quiet for the moment, we leave things that way.”

Lonnie leaned forward and patted her husband on the knee. “You always did like your quiet.”

“You know,” he said. “I really really do.”

Jimmy suddenly threw his game on the ground and yelled, “When do we eat dinner around this place?”

Bernie sighed. “That snack wore off already, huh? Did your mother pack you any food?”

“*Bernie*,” Lonnie chided. “Stop it. I can make us some hamburgers and French fries,” she said, emphasizing the possibility of food to Jimmy by raising her eyebrows at him.

Jimmy seemed to like this idea very much. He smacked his lips at the air and then flapped his tongue around. “Yeah, yeah!” He then clapped his hands together and shouted, “Hangleburgers, hangleburgers...”

Bernie raised an eyebrow “It’s like watching a train collide into a herd of sheep in slow motion,” he said. “I just can’t avert my eyes.” He reached out blindly in an attempt to slap his wife on the knee. “Honey,” he said. “Make my eyes look away!”

Lonnie leaned over to Bernie and whispered. “I don’t want to be there when he comes to that realization that the *hangleburgers* aren’t real meat.

“I don’t think we’re insured for that,” Bernie said.

“Oh, stop it,” Lonnie told her husband. “You can come help me make dinner.”

Bernie raised his other eyebrow, emphasizing his displeasure at leaving the comfort of his own chair..

“I know it's basically just opening a box and a bag and shoving a couple of trays into the oven. But maybe you can come in there and block the door for me, and keep our meat-free culture safe in obscurity.”

Bernie frowned. “I would,” he said. “But my heating pad just warmed up and my back is killing me. I promise to wash dishes later.”

Lonnie rolled her eyes. She kissed her husband on the forehead, and then punched him hard on the arm. She then turned and yelled for Melody to come and help her in the kitchen.

Melody yelled back. “I think dad should help. My presence would only serve to perpetuate the stereotype that a woman's place is in the kitchen!”

Lonnie groaned. She placed her hand on the swinging kitchen door, and stopped. She turned to Jimmy who was staring up at her hungrily. “Now don't come into the kitchen until I give you the thumbs up,” she told him.

Jimmy stared up at her with a hurt expression on his face.

Lonnie groaned. “Okay,” she said. “I guess you can help me make the food, but I will have a few caveats, young man.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “You coming?”

The boy stood up, and grunted as though he were an old man. His response was in the positive, though oddly spoke. His voice started high and drifted downward slowly. “Suuuuuree I wiiillll,” he said.

Lonnie hoped this was in imitation of some cartoon character, as the tone sent a shiver down her spine.

“Well, young man,” she said. “Let me just caution you to not read any of the labels. This is going to be a simple dump and shove mission. Do you like tomatoes on your burger?”

Jimmy began to wail as though Lonnie had hit him on the toe with a roofing hammer.

“Okay, okay,” she said. “No tomatoes. How about just for me, uncle Bernie and cousin Melody?”

Jimmy, who had stopped, began to wail once again.

“Okay, okay!” Lonnie stressed. “No tomatoes for anybody. How about I just toss all of them outside in the compost, eh?”

Jimmy said nothing as the swinging door came to a halt, but he smiled brightly at the idea of removing all of the tangy red fruit from the premises.

“You're in complete control of us now, aren't you?” Lonnie said under her breath.

Scene Seven

Dinner went off without a hitch. That is, at least, the consuming of it. From Melody's point of view, there had been a lot of banging coming from the kitchen during its preparation. Also, a lot of crying from Jimmy. However, even though the boy took part in, or at least had been witness to, the creation of the night's meal, he somehow didn't seem to notice there was anything out of the ordinary. Melody cautioned her mother not to mention to Jimmy that the bulk of his burger was soy and not ground up cow, at least not until his mother was at the door, bag in hand.

"Ow," Melody said, dramatically, after someone kicked her under the table. She glared at the boy sitting next to her. As he ate, which was a horrible scene of gnashing and snorting, Jimmy hummed to himself as if lost in his own world. She imagined, however, that he was also most likely swinging his feet around. His upper torso showed the evidence of that fact by its tempestuous movements. He looked a little like a buoy floating on the ocean in a slight breeze. She scooted her chair closer to her father.

Suddenly, her shin was struck again, and she realized it was actually her mother who had done the striking.

Melody shrugged her shoulders at her, and Lonnie mouthed some words to her silently. Melody sighed and shook her head, getting the gist.

"So, Jimmy," she said, propping her head up with her hand, and feigning interest. "Where's your sister on this lovely evening?" She hoped that the girl wasn't arriving via a second drop off.

"Hospital," Jimmy said, not looking away from his food, and barely bothering to take his fingers out of his mouth to respond.

Melody raised an eyebrow. Jimmy's twin sister, Donna, who was more normal than her brother could sit still for longer periods of time *and* eat like a human being. She knew that something had happened to his father, Rock, but wasn't certain what it was exactly. Her mother had made some announcement a few days ago, but Melody had been in the middle of writing one of her scripts and had not paid close attention. Obviously controlling both Jimmy and Donna at the hospital would have been too much for his mother and father (and all available nursing staff) to handle. Now, though, her interest was piqued.

"Visiting your father?"

"Yep." Jimmy breathed heavily through his nose as he both ate and spoke at the same time. Conversing only seemed to increase the intensity.

"Is he okay?"

"Dunno."

Melody looked at her parents, wide-eyed. *Doesn't he even care? Or can he just not care about more than one thing at a time?* Currently, it appeared his food was holding him more enraptured than any worries about the safety of his father. She thought for a moment about pulling his plate away and demanding that he show some sign of emotional attachment, but was afraid of getting bitten.

"What happened to him?" she continued in her questioning.

"Fell off the roof."

Fell? she wondered to herself. *Or jumped?*

Melody repeated the comment. "Wow. If my father had fallen off the roof, I would be worried sick out of my mind."

Jimmy didn't say anything.

Melody patted her Dad's hand with the end of her fork. "Believe it or not?"

Bernie took a bite out of his hamburger and held it in his mouth a few moments while he stared at his daughter, conflicted.

Jimmy suddenly stopped chewing and Melody thought the boy might be about to show some concern. Instead, he said, "More French fries."

Lonnie shrugged her shoulders at him, and smiled, "*Sorry, Slugger,*" she said. "I make the fries and then I have to portion them all out equally or Bernie and Melody here fight over them."

Without changing his expression, Jimmy got up from the table and sat down in his corner with his hand-held game. Soon, he began to make queer little electronic and squawking sounds, as though in imitation of it.

"I guess your conversation is over," Bernie said. "And for the record," he said, turning to his wife, "I have never fought over French fries. I may have coveted someone else's fries and maybe whined about not getting enough, but I would never argue about it in the hopes of getting more."

"Of course not, dear," Lonnie said.

Melody's eyes were twitching and huge. "And you want THAT to sleep in my bed? That kid's got some major problems!"

"He has Asperger's. He doesn't know how to react to the world and the environment the same way we do."

Bernie began to smile.

"What?"

"I just realized how thematic this meal was."

Lonnie seemed confused. "Why?" Then it sunk in what he was talking about. "Oh, because of the..." She shook her head at him, frowning.

Melody grabbed a piece of paper and a pen from the bureau, and asked her mother, "How do you spell that? I want to look it up and make sure he's not going to stab us while we sleep." She then added, "Thanks, Now I have two nightmares to deal with."

"I think when you look it up you'll realize just how ridiculous you're being."

"We'll see," she said.

Suddenly there was a howl, and all of the Jacksons ears perked up. The sound seemed to be coming from inside the house.

"The wolf," Melody whispered.

The howl came again, and this time they were all able to pinpoint its source. It was coming from the floor.

They turned just as the boy was raising his head into the air, and letting go a howl for a third time.

Scene Eight

“See,” Melody said. “My dream was a portent. I never mentioned my nightmare in front of Jimmy, right?” Melody said. She stood up from the table, her eyes huge. She wanted to run away, but wasn't sure where to.

Suddenly, Jimmy stopped and resumed playing his game as though nothing had happened.

The Jacksons simply looked at each other.

Finally, Bernie said, “Someone should ask him why he suddenly started doing that.”

“He's your relation,” Lonnie said.

“No, he's not!” Bernie said, defensively. “Joanie is *your* cousin.”

“By marriage.”

“Not ours, though. I'll have no part of this.” Bernie tossed his napkin down next to his plate dramatically and rose from the table.

“Sit down, Bernie Jackson,” Lonnie told him, and he quickly did so.

“Yeah, Dad,” Melody said, nervously. “We're safer if the circle remains unbroken.”

“Oh, right,” Bernie said. “Because that's a thing.”

“Oh for...,” Lonnie said, and stood up and walked over to the boy. “Hey Jimmy,” she said softly. “We heard you making some howling sounds a little bit ago. Is there a wolf in your game?” Then she said to herself more softly. “I really hope that's the case.”

“Yup,” Jimmy said.

“Oh, okay,” Lonnie said, somewhat relieved.

“Not a wolf, though,” he said. “Dog. Big big dog.”

“Oh, it's a howling dog in your game. That's sounds like fun.” She turned to face the other two and smiled.

Bernie returned a thumbs up.

Lonnie slowly inched her way next to the boy. “Can I play, too?”

However, to her horror, instead of the latest iteration of Pokemon, there was only a cracked, blank screen. Jimmy continued to push buttons as though the device were still operational. “Big Big Dog,” he said again, and a strange, slightly mad smile appeared on his face. “The Hound from Hell.”

Wide-eyed, Lonnie quickly rose to her feet and returned to her family. “It's my assessment,” she said. “That the last time he threw his little game on the ground, it broke, and now he's compensating by imagining that it's still working. There's absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Then why do you look terrified, Melody thought to herself.

Outside the house, there was a roar of a fast-moving car and the squealing of brakes in front of their house.

“Now what?” Melody said.

“Let's see.” Both Bernie and Lonnie ran to the front window, each of them peeking out of a different part of the curtain.

“Oh my goodness,” Lonnie said, pulling the fabric open a little farther. “It's Chazz.”

A towering woman hopped out of a dark blue sedan, and ran to the little weather station across the street. It had been weeks since she had last been here, and the building had seemed dormant for more than a month.

"MALI," the woman cried. "MALI, MALI..."

"Lonnie," Bernie said, nervously. "Lonnie, Lon Lon...The door's open."

Melody squinted, suddenly appearing at the middle window. She stared into the open maw of the little weather station. She would have assumed that if some service technician had careless left it open, she would have been able to see some equipment inside, or a flickering computer screen.

However, there was nothing.

Only blackness.

Lonnie gasped. "Oh oh oh. It is, isn't it?"

"So you did you see it?" Bernie said, talking quickly. "The door is open."

Chazz ran up to the building towards the open door, however as soon as she reached the small set of stairs, the door slammed shut with a loud, percussive thump! She pounded on the door, calling out for her girlfriend Malika over and over again. Finally she ended up in a heap on the doorstep, sobbing.

"You saw that, right? You saw that."

"Bernie, YES! I saw it," Lonnie intoned.

Melody sighed. She didn't look frightened, though. She looked angry. "We need to burn that building down!"

Scene Nine

“Stay here,” Lonnie said. They had been watching Chazz weep on the steps for several minutes, frozen in place, before any of them spoke. “I’m going to go talk to her.”

Both Melody and Bernie nodded, dumbfounded as Lonnie left the house. Melody watched her mother walk across the street and approach the other woman cautiously.

After their last adventure with the Woman in White¹, things had finally started to return to normal. Chazz, however, had not been quite the same. Obsessed, she had made a weekly vigil across the street, often spending the night sitting on the steps. The rest of her time was spent in a fruitless attempt to track down the two mysterious men who had also been present during the phenomenon.

Lonnie approached Chazz cautiously. She sat down next to her, and placed an arm around her shoulder. After some time talking, the larger woman fell into her arms. Though Chazz sobbed loudly, Melody couldn’t make out any of the words of the conversation that followed.

“Maybe we can finally get an update from her,” Melody said, referring to the fact that Chazz had been incommunicado and inconsolable for the past month.

“Maybe,” Bernie said, clutching the curtain in a death grip. “And maybe one of us should turn around and see what Jimmy’s doing behind us.”

“One, two, three, that person’s not going to be me,” Melody said.

“Fine,” Bernie said. “I guess I’ll have to be the adult here.”

“You are the adult here,” Melody informed him.

Melody watched her father’s eyes as he turned around. He seemed both relieved and worried at the same time. However, his fingers finally relaxed from the curtain long enough for him to give his daughter a thumbs up. “Still playing his game,” he said.

“That’s not entirely reassuring,” Melody said, and then gasped as a horrible thought occurred to her. “The door was open,” she said.

“I know,” Bernie said. “I’m pretty sure I mentioned that a couple of times.”

“No,” Melody said. “Don’t you get it. The door was probably also open when Jimmy started howling.”

“So?” Bernie seemed confused momentarily and then his brow began to knit itself a sweater of realization. “*Something came out.*”

Melody nodded, and in a raspy whisper said, “*The Hound from Hell.*”

[1: See Episode One of the first Season: Melody Jackson v. the Woman in White, for the rest of that story.]

Scene Ten

Lonnie returned to the house just as Chazz was starting her car.

“So,” she said. “How's Jimmy doing?”

“Jimmy's fine,” Melody said, quickly. “Now tell us what we want to hear.”

Lonnie sat down and the rest followed. “Chazz is still sad and depressed, but she's actually coherent now. I think she's finally starting to come out of her funk. She even has a few leads on Hairy Mike and his friend, but hasn't found them yet. At some point she was cognizant enough to get her cousins to run her shop for her. I don't think it's doing very well, though, but at least she won't lose it.”

Melody wanted to learn a different part of the story. “Why did she happen to show up when the door was opened? Did she sense it? Did she say anything about that?”

“She said she didn't know why, but that she was suddenly pulling down our street and saw that it was open.”

Melody and Bernie looked at each other.

“What?” Lonnie questioned. “What am I missing?”

“We think that when the door opened...something came out of it. We think that's why Jimmy started howling.”

“Oh great,” Lonnie said. She turned around and saw that he was sleeping on the floor, his game lying at his side.

“I think we should burn that Nintendo, too,” Melody said.

“Enough with the burning,” Lonnie told her. When she looked over to Jimmy, her expression immediately changed. “Aw,” she said. “He's so peaceful when he's sleeping. Almost sweet.”

“Unless 'almost' is Esperanto for 'Light Years away from',” Melody smirked, “then we are definitely NOT on the same page. In fact, our pages are on opposite ends of the Library of Congress.”

Lonnie shook her head, disapprovingly. “Bernie, help me pick him up and take him to Melody's bed.”

“Again with Melody's bed,” Melody said. “I thought we all agreed we were going to put up a tent in the backyard and make him sleep out there.”

“No one ever said that.”

“Well, if he's possessed by a hound from hell, I don't feel safe with him sleeping in the same house.”

Lonnie turned to her husband, and placed her hands on her hips. “Bernie tell your daughter that Jimmy is not possessed by a hound from Hell.”

Bernie smiled dispassionately and shrugged his shoulders.

“Not you, too?” she told him.

“You have to admit the timing is a little odd. I'm not saying we should lock him up in the basement or anything, but maybe Melody should sleep with us tonight. And we'll lock our own door ... just a little bit.” As he said this, Bernie held two fingers in front of him and pinched them together as if he were clamping a housefly by the wings.

Lonnie shook her head, but eventually agreed that under the circumstances this might be the safest thing to do. After all, as silly as it sounded, possession by a *Hellhound* did not seem out of the realm of possibilities lately.

The three Jacksons working together managed to put Jimmy to bed without waking him. They left the door open so they could hear any movement and quietly tiptoed back to Lonnie and Bernie's bedroom.

"That kid is heavier than he looks," Lonnie said, wiping her brow.

"Yeah," Melody said. "Imagine him crazed and coming at you with a butcher's knife."

Bernie suddenly appeared. He dropped a makeshift mattress, which had been constructed by wrapping a sheet around a large piece of foam, onto the floor in front of his daughter. "Or swinging a Cat o' Nine-tails above his head," he said.

Melody raised an eyebrow at him. "You want me to sleep on the floor?"

"Well, you didn't think you'd be sleeping between your mother and I, did you? You're not ten years old any more."

"The gentlemanly thing to do would be to give up your side of the bed to me and take the smelly piece of foam for yourself."

Bernie looked at the girl as though she were crazy. "I'm your father, not a gentleman. And I also have a bad back. Just pretend you're camping."

"Well, since you've never taking me camping that's going to be a tad difficult to imagine."

Lonnie attempted to break up the dispute. Her eyes were droopy, and she didn't seem to be in any mood to listen to the two of them argue, however casually. "Oh, Bernie just sleep on the floor, already."

Melody grabbed her pillow and stuck her chin out at her father. She then slid under the covers.

"Well," Bernie said. "At least the nice TV is in here."

Lonnie groaned as she got into bed. "No TV tonight, Bernie. I'm too tired."

Bernie's eyes narrowed. "Don't I at least get a kiss goodnight?"

Lonnie's eyes closed as her head hit the pillow. "Melody kiss your father," she said, sleepily.

"Yuck," Melody said. "No thanks." She picked up her father's pillow and dropped it on his face.

Bernie shook his head, and sighed loudly. "The perfect end to a perfect day."

Scene Eleven

It was midnight when the first howls woke them up again. Melody, the first to hear it, bolted upright in bed. She sat breathless in the dark, waiting for another vocalization before waking anyone else.

"Where did that even come from?" she whispered to herself. For awhile she wondered if she had just imagined it. Climbing out of bed, she carefully stepped over her snoring father, and pressed her ear up against the door. She listened intently in the direction of the young weird boy sleeping down the hallway in her bed. However, from that direction only came a wet breathing coupled with the occasional cough and snort. Unless the boy was howling in his sleep, the source of the ululation was not Jimmy.

On her knees she walked over to the side window and then to the windows overlooking the porch. The howl sounded again, but this time seemed far off in the distance.

Lonnie suddenly popped her head up. "That sounded like it came from Mt. Tabor," she said, groggily. Mt. Tabor was an extinct volcano in the center of town. It had its woodsy areas, but there were just as many houses as trees.

"Not far enough away," Bernie said, also apparently awake.

"But you're right it does sound like it's coming from that direction," Melody said. "And no it's not Jimmy. I already checked that."

Lonnie got out of bed, and shook the pillow next to her. "Get up, Melody," she told it.

"Over here, Mom," Melody said.

Lonnie yawned. "Oh, yeah. You were talking earlier, weren't you." She got out of bed, stepped on Bernie a few times, and opened the bedroom door. She was extremely thankful when Jimmy wasn't standing there, ghoulish and drooling. "All clear," she said. She then walked to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Bernie followed. "Did you hear something?"

"No," she said. "I need to use the bathroom. So kindly turn around and give me a little privacy."

"Sorry, sorry," he said, holding out his hands in front of him. "I thought we were in sleuth mode."

"We are," she assured him. "But even Nora Charles needs to tinkle sometimes."

From the bedroom, came a resounding, "Oh, come on!"

"Go and check the backyard," Lonnie told her husband.

"Don't worry, Dad," Melody said, stepping up behind him. "I'll come with you."

"Great," Bernie said. "Now I feel safe."

The two investigators navigated the dining room in the dark and paused at the swinging kitchen door where Bernie took a deep breath.

"What is it?" Melody asked him.

"I thought I heard footsteps," he said. "Little ones." He looked around, but didn't see anything.

"There's a flashlight in the bureau," Melody said. She stepped quickly over to the indicated piece of furniture and retrieved her prize. She thought she had heard the footsteps, too, but was not certain of the direction from which they had come.

Shining the light towards the hallway she hoped to possibly find her mother drowsily tripping out of the bathroom. Not finding her quarry however, she shown the beam across the living room.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Check behind the table,” her father said, grabbing the flashlight away from her.

Just then there was a fumbling of the dining room chairs and a scream as if from a tiny dinosaur. “RAAAAARRRR!”

Both Melody and Bernie screamed in terror, but the light beam quickly found its source. “Jimmy!”

Jimmy stood there giggling. His hands were formed into pretend claws, his lips pulled back as he roared at them once again. “I scared you,” he said. “I scared you.”

“Yes,” Bernie said, laughing half-heatedly and patting the boy on the head. “You are a very scary individual.”

Jimmy roared again.

Lonnie entered the room.

“Jimmy's awake,” Bernie told her.

“I see that,” said Lonnie. She bent down to the boy's level. “That's a pretty powerful roar,” she told him, though in her sleepy state the comment sounded more sarcastic than complimentary.

Jimmy agreed.

“Say, have you heard any howling?” Lonnie asked the boy.

Jimmy's face went blank, and he formed his lips into an “o” shape. He then shook his head.

“Like a big dog or a wolf.”

“Wolf!” Jimmy shouted, liking this new game. He howled then like a little, baby wolf. “Hooowooo,” he said, lifting his head up to the sky.

Melody shook her head. “Nothing like last night,” she said. “Which confirms my theory.”

“Possession?” Bernie said, wedging his arm between his chin and his other arm at his waist.

“By the *Hellhound*,” Melody agreed.

Suddenly, as if queued to do so, another distant howl filled the night air.

“That was close,” Melody said.

Jimmy let out a squeak, and began to shiver. Melody didn't know if this was Jimmy playing around or if he were actually frightened. The boy squatted down and grabbed Bernie's leg, shaking like a leaf.

“Okay,” Bernie said, trying to kick the boy off. “It's okay. The nice Hellhound is outside someplace. We're perfectly safe in here.”

“Dad,” Melody whispered. “Where do you think the howling was coming from?”

“I couldn't tell,” he said, nervously.

“It sounded like it was coming from the front yard this time.”

So far no one seemed to have been able to pinpoint the exact origin of the howling. It was almost as though it was coming from random locations every time it sounded.

“Okay,” Bernie said, “then we should...”

He suddenly felt a distinct lack of Jimmy's tugging on his leg. This coupled with the

front door currently sitting wide-open made his heart leap a little in his chest. "I think Jimmy's outside." He ran to the door.

While her feelings on the subject leaned a little on the side of letting the boy get eaten by a hairy beast, Melody agreed that this would not reflect well on them as babysitters. "Let's go," she said, right behind her father.

As soon as they were on the porch, chills ran down Melody's spine. The air seemed to be charged with static, putting her instantly on edge.

"Did you see where he..."

From behind the bushes of the creepy house next door, came a loud angst-ridden howl.

"This is getting serious," Melody said. "What if there really is a Hellhound?!"

"Where did Jimmy go?" Bernie all but stammered, scanning the neighborhood.

"I don't see him," Lonnie said, just as concerned. "Oh my god, Bernie. What if there's really some beast out here. Why would he go running off? I thought he was scared."

"He's an enigma," Melody said, leaning over the railing. "I don't know. I don't understand any of his thought processes." She whispered into the darkness as loudly as the confines of a whisper would allow. "Jimmy?!"

There was some rustling, and then another somewhat muted snort of a sneeze, followed by the voice of a human.

Melody strained her eyes to see who it was walking down the sidewalk. "Mrs. Muir?"

A tall, slender, almost stick-like figure wearing a yellow pea-coat and large circular glasses looked up at Melody and her father. On a leash in front of her was a small dog, sporting a too-large white cone around its head. Before she could greet them, the dog sneezed, the sound of which was highly amplified by the presence of the cone.

"Good evening," Mrs. Muir said, waving at them. She seemed in a great hurry.

"Was that your dog that was making with the howls, earlier?" Bernie asked her.

"I'm afraid it might have been," the woman said. "I do apologize if Herman woke you. He has a scratch on his eye, and well, you can see what I had to do." She indicated the cone around the dog's neck with her eyes.

Melody smiled. Mrs. Muir was a high-school English teacher. Herman was named for Herman Melville, though the girl felt the scrawny little dog did little to live up to the name.

"No," Melody told her. "We were already up." She began to laugh, and pointed to her father. "Dad thought there was a wolf running around the neighborhood."

Bernie's social-friendly smile faded. "I did not," he said.

"I tried to tell him it was probably just a coyote or a dog with a cone around its neck..."

At this, Mrs. Muir's expression turned dour. She picked up Herman in her arms. "A Coyote, you say?" Her eye began to noticeably twitch. "You can't expect a Coyote to be running around the city, can you?"

"They've become almost as common as raccoons," Bernie said. He produced an apple from his pocket and took a harsh-sounding though clearly *nonchalant* bite from it.

Melody's eyes narrowed at her father and was at once annoyed with his constant snacking, while at the same time also impressed with his preparedness. *If they were ever trapped someplace, it would surely be a long while before the Jackson's starved to death.*

"Seriously?" she asked him, aloud. "You're not pregnant are you?"

Bernie stopped chewing momentarily, but made no comment.

“Well, how many howls did you hear?” said Mrs. Muir. “Maybe we can reconcile them?” She seemed to consider something in her mind. “Let's see, Herman howled just then.” She pointed to the bush.

Melody and her father looked at each other. “We've been hearing howls all night,” she said. “Herman just howled the one time?”

“Well,” Mrs. Muir started, and trailed off. She seemed to become more agitated by the moment. “He has been sneezing quite a bit. Perhaps you might have mistaken those...” She stopped when the two people on the porch emphatically began to shake their heads. They seemed to be looking past her now at something across the street.

“Oh my,” Mrs. Muir said quickly, grabbing Herman into her arms. With a little squeak, she added, “I've got to go.”

“Dad,” Melody said, unable to look away from the black void in the field behind the weather station. “Do you suppose that's Jimmy over there?”

There came a distinct snort and some rustling of unknown origin.

Bernie simply continued to shake his head, though Melody was unsure if it was still in motion from earlier.

From the blackness came a metallic squeal, like from a massive hinge. The picture that first formed in Melody's head was that of a circular metal door from a submarine—and an old, rusty submarine at that. She and her mother had actually heard the sound once before, though it was in the daytime and not quite as scary. They had never been able to identify it.

“No slam,” Bernie said.

“That's what I thought, too,” Melody told him. “Submarine?”

Bernie shrugged. He seemed lost in thought. Then he shook his head and his eyes cleared. “Wait...what?”

“What do you think it was?” Lonnie asked. “I thought it sounded like tearing metal.”

Bernie shuddered. “I seem to recall someone talking about a sound like that on the Spooky radio.” This is what Bernie called his late night radio shows which dealt with odd or possibly supernatural occurrences.

Lonnie descended from the porch and stepped out into the yard. “It sounded like it came from over there, right? But there's nothing over there.

“The only door is on the front of the station, Melody said. “And it's wooden and light-weight.”

Lonnie shook her head. “Why are we talking about a door?”

“I thought the sound came from the sky,” Bernie said, batting at his lower lip.

Lonnie scowled at them. “It clearly came from the ground.” She then began to scan the yard and called out for the small boy.

Bernie turned to Melody, shaking. “Where could that weird little kid have gone? We can't leave him out here.”

Melody stepped off the porch and began to search the surrounding foliage. She found a stick in the grass and used it to poke around inside the bushes every few feet.

“Pay dirt,” she said finally, and there emerged from the darkness the giggling of the boy. “I found him.” She looked up at her father. “You grab him around the torso, and I'll knock him unconscious with a coconut.”

Jimmy giggled at this as though this were the funniest thing he had ever heard. He then dashed through the bushes in an escape attempt. “You can't catch me!” he roared.

Melody grabbed at his arms, but as the boy was suddenly slipperier than a greased pig she immediately lost her grip. Melody wondered if this was due to some evolutionary mutation.

“Dad!” she said. “I was completely serious about the coconut!”

Jimmy, who was now running wild, darted through the yard towards the street.

Bernie froze.

“Dad!” Melody said, running after the boy. She knew that her father was terrified at the unknown goings on across the street, and it was madness that the only thing Jimmy seemed to want to do was to run towards it. But she needed his help – and fast! “I’m not going to let someone else disappear over there!” she said, in reference to the lost Malika who had been grabbed by the creature during their adventure with the Woman in White. “This one would definitely be on us.”

Jimmy serpentine whenever Melody got close to him, eluding her.

“JIMMY, NO!” she repeated over and over again.

Finally, a blur of motion appeared behind Melody, and grabbed Jimmy under the armpits just as he was about to reach the sidewalk across the street. Melody was relieved to see it was her Mother, and not some slack-jawed, quadruped.

Lonnie Jackson grunted loudly as she attempted to lift the young boy in her arms. “Bernie” she said. “Come help me with the big bruiser.”

Bernie was there quickly, and gasped as he lifted the boy in his arms. “We’ve got to stop feeding this kid anvils for breakfast,” he said.

Jimmy laughed maniacally at this and wriggled and squirmed in his uncle’s arms.

Another loud explosion of tearing metal filled the air, following by a percussive thump vibrating underfoot.

Melody and her mother looked at each other extremely seriously and they both turned to face the cold, unseen emptiness behind the weather station.

“Do you have a flashlight?” Lonnie asked her daughter.

“NO!” Melody was adamant about this. While she did actually have a flashlight with her – she *always* seemed to have a flashlight with her – her exclamation was directed mainly in opposition to her mother’s intention.

From there came a scratching and a rustling in the underbrush.

Lonnie leaned closer, and cupped her hand around her ear. “What is...?”

Melody could clearly make out a snort! and some banging as if on a wooden door. With her free hand, she grabbed at her mother’s cupped hand, and forcefully attempted to drag her across the street to their home. “Come on, Mother,” she scolded. Catering to Lonnie’s mothering instincts, she added. “It’s getting cold out and we don’t want Jimmy to get a sniffle.”

Zombie-like, Lonnie uttered, “Yeah, perhaps you’re right.”

The two skittered across the street and found Bernie wide-eyed and on the porch, clutching Jimmy as though a life-preserver. “What did you guys hear over there?” he muttered.

“Naught but for the knocking knees of my scaredy-cat father,” Melody said, quickly.

“Hey I did my part once I was able to swallow all of the organs that had accumulated in my throat. I have a broken spine to attest to that.” He pointed with his eyes at Jimmy. “But what are we thinking here?”

“About what?” Lonnie climbed to the porch and sat down in one of the Adirondack chairs. “For me, I was thinking of starting with a beer and not stopping until either they or I was gone.”

Bernie sighed. "That sounds like a great idea, actually."

"Good plan," Melody said. "You both get drunk and I'll protect us all from the massive dirt-marine full of ghost eating Bardos."

"What I meant is, are we thinking this building might have a basement? I was hearing machinery."

"We all heard different things," Melody said.

"But Malika could be down there?"

"Bernie!" Lonnie shouted. "You were there when that thing took her. You know that thing came from another plane of existence. If she's down there, it's only temporary."

Bernie sat down in the chair next to her, still clinging to Jimmy. "There has to be a non-crazy explanation," he said under his breath. While he was always open to the supernatural and the things weird, when it was staring him in the face logic always attempted to prevail.

"I would love it if there were," Lonnie said.

Scene Twelve

The four of them made an encampment in the living room. Not because it was the best tactical location – in fact it was the poorest in that regard as it was the room with the most exits and windows to defend– but it had the advantage of being the most comfortable. Lonnie found enough sleeping bags and cushions for everyone, including Jimmy. They microwaved s'mores, popped popcorn, and made a night of it.

The front door was locked and dead-bolted, and a chair had been propped up against the knob.

Bernie looked around the room nervously. “Do you think we should board up the windows?”

Lonnie, who had some binoculars in hand, shook her head. “I will be on point most of the night,” she said. She then turned to Melody. “General,” she said to her. “What about those troops² of yours?”

Melody shrugged her shoulders. “I don't really have any means of direct communication with them,” she said. “Usually I just happen to be outside, they see me and stealthily move to my location and pass me a coded note.”

Bernie raised his eyebrow. “Code? What if you can't figure it out?”

Melody snorted. “Please,” she said. “It's usually pretty easy. It's either simple backwards writing, or if they're really trying to be stealthy, the words are anagrams.”

Bernie snorted back, but made no further comments.

Lonnie, sitting on her knees in front of the window, stared across the street watching for any movement.

“So,” Melody asked. “Any addition to your hypothesis on the source of that noise?”

“Nope,” said Lonnie.

Melody's eyes grew wide with realization. “But we all agree that it sounded as though it was coming from inside a building?”

“Yes!” Bernie agreed. “That makes more sense. And yet it totally makes NO sense.” He then noted. “There's no other building over there. Also, the sound clearly came from the sky.”

“There's no building, anymore, you mean,” Lonnie said. “Once the Sun comes up, I'm going over there with a shovel.”

“A shovel?” Bernie displayed a look of confusion. “I don't think we have the proper permits...”

“Dad, it's not like we're going to rent a backhoe and dig up the entire lot. It's just a shovel, and we'll put the dirt back.”

[2: The “troops” in question are three boys who wander around the neighborhood as though the military guard of Lafayette Street. See last episode for more details.

Bernie didn't like where this was going. Digging on government property under the auspices that something mechanical might still work working in an underground bunker seemed foolhardy. It was the government after all. They might very well know exactly what was going

on and didn't really want a couple of bumpkins from the neighborhood prowling around. He supposed it wasn't like they were breaking into Area 51 or anything, but still...there could be power lines or something equally unsafe.

"Well," he said. "I just want to make my dissent known on the subject."

"So noted," she said. "Just know, however, that I'm going to get to the bottom of this mystery even if I have to *dig* to it myself." Lonnie bumped Melody's shoulder with her own. "Get it?"

Melody closed her eyes and wished the corny away. "You turning into Dad now?"

"Why," Lonnie said, straight-faced. "Am I freezing up at the sight of danger?" She and Melody slapped their hands together over their heads at this.

Bernie seemed crestfallen, although he managed to clarify. "It was just a couple of seconds. And seriously it was more that I stood steady in the face of danger. There's something to be said for taking a global view of the situation. It doesn't do to just have everyone running around willy nilly!"

Melody opened her mouth to spit out a hilarious send up, but stopped. She knew her father felt badly for his inability to act, earlier. And she knew also that if he were certain she was in real danger, he would give up his own life to save her. Instead, she smiled and said "thanks for keeping it together, Dad."

She then looked over to Jimmy who was currently lying on his back in the center of the living room. His tongue was sticking out of his mouth, giving him the appearance of a dead possum on the side of the road.

"Little hellion," she thought to herself, and smiled. She was very thankful, however, that he wasn't her little brother. Having him in the house for two days was enough. She was just glad that he wasn't sleeping in her bed, contaminating it with who knew what all.

"Melody!" came the voice of her Mother. By her tone, this hadn't been the first time she had spoken.

Melody turned and shrugged at her.

"It'll be dawn in a few hours so we should try to catch some shut eye," Lonnie said. She turned back to the window, binoculars over her face. "But first, go and get the yard tools."

Scene Thirteen

Under the lackluster protest of Bernie Jackson, Melody and Lonnie departed for the field across the street.

"I'm not sure what we're going to find here," Lonnie admitted. Melody noticed that her expression seemed strained and forlorn. It was a look which didn't give Melody the confidence she had moments before, though the girl did not let on about her trepidation.

"I'm just hoping we won't really have to do much digging," Melody said. Working with a shovel wasn't exactly her forte. She found it an awkward tool. Also the dirt in Portland, because the entire town was built on an ancient creek bed, was very rocky and intractable.

"Don't be such a baby," Lonnie said. "We'll take turns if we have to."

Turns? Melody grumbled to herself. She thought about suggesting they simply tell Jimmy there was candy buried at that spot, but thought better of it. While the boy on a sugar hunt could probably muscle and claw his way to the bottom of a hole faster than a team of miners hunting for gold, she imagined this would be a violation of several child labor laws.

Lonnie approached the back of the lot with caution. In front of her was just as she had remembered it. A grassy field, with the occasional mole hill. She stopped in the center, and spun around. Finally, she jumped up and down.

"I don't see anything here that could have made that noise," Melody said.

Lonnie snapped her fingers at her daughter. "Hand me that shovel, will ya?"

Melody did as instructed, but her expression was cool. There weren't any indentations in the ground. No outline of a former foundation. No indication that this was ever anything but an empty field.

Lonnie sunk the end of the garden tool into the ground, and stepped on it. There was a loud *kerthunk*!

"I think I found something," Lonnie said, excitedly.

"Yeah," Melody said. "And I think I know what it is."

Her mother got on all fours and began to work the dirt and grass out of the way of her prize. Disappointed, she revealed a large, bulbous rock.

"Big iron door?" Melody smiled, hopefully.

"Keep it up, smart guy," her mother told her. Lonnie got up from the ground, dusted herself off, and spat into the palms of her hands.

Melody shook her head. "What was that bit of a nastiness for?"

"Better grip," her mother told her, and grasped the handle brusquely.

"Well I call it guaranteeing that you'll be doing all of the digging yourself."

"Suit yourself," Lonnie said, shoving the blade of the shovel into the ground once again. "I'll just keep all of the glory for myself then."

Suddenly from slightly above them, came a stern voice. "What are you two broads doing down there?"

Melody made a sound in her throat, equivalent to an "Eep". She winced, hating when she made squeaky, girly sounds, and chastised herself.

In front of her, standing in his raised driveway, was a white-haired, older gentleman. In his hand was a clipboard as though he were at the ready to write down any misdeeds Melody and

her mother might be about to commit. “He stood there, on his high mount, like Charlton Heston as Moses in some big budget Biblical Epic.”

Suddenly her mother nudged her in the arm and the girl realized that she was saying this last part aloud. While she was gradually able to control this more each day, the girl still had the occasional habit of narrating aspects of her life as though she were the narrator in her own documentary.

“Melody,” she said out of the corner of her mouth. “Ixnay on the alking-bay.”

“What was that?” the old man asked her.

“Balking?” Melody shook her head at her mother. “I think you mean alking-*Tay*”

“Whatever,” her mother said, still out of the corner of her mouth. “Just stop doing it.” Out of the front of her face, she said “Hello, Mr. Rogers. How are you on this glorious day?”

Although she had never spoken with the man, Melody had heard his name bandied about the house more than once or twice. Always was it coupled with the word to match his dour expression: Cranky Mr. Rogers.

“And what of this 'broads' comment?” Melody whispered. “Could he be more sexist?”

“He’s from a different generation,” Lonnie’s told her.

Melody squinted fiercely. *The nerve of him.* This wasn’t his property. They weren’t doing anything wrong, other than perhaps digging on government property without a permit. But that certainly wasn’t his concern. *Or was it?* Melody became lost in thought. Was it possible that Mr. Rogers was an ex-CIA agent always on the prowl for wrongdoers and ne’er-do-wells. Maybe he even broadcast this information nightly over his CB radio. Melody looked up at the great antennae which rose up from the back of the man’s house like a parapet. No matter his affiliation, Melody decided, no good could come of arguing with the man. He didn’t seem like someone who would ever listen to reason.

She was about to tell all of this to her mother when she realized to her horror that Lonnie was already deep into conversation with the old man. The two seemed to be speaking on friendly terms and of all things, laughing.

“What’s going on?” Melody asked her Mother. She had been so long into her internal monologue she was unaware even of the topic.

Lonnie grimaced. “Where were you?”

Melody shrugged. “Standing right here.” She knew her mother was referring to her mental detachedness, but she refused to admit that in front of a stranger.

“You’ve met my daughter, Melody?” Lonnie asked Mr. Rogers.

“I’ve seen her around,” he said, smiling. “Although she doesn’t say much.”

Say much? Melody simply stared at the man. She never spoke to him because his facial expressions indicated that he didn’t want to have anything to do with her – or for that matter, the known Universe. Perhaps there was some social convention from earlier in the century of which she was unaware, but she was certain his social queues were contrary to amiability.

Lonnie laughed. “That’s funny. Normally she’ll talk your ear off, if you let her.” Lonnie turned to her daughter. “Mr. Rogers thought he heard a bell last night, but he and his wife didn’t see anything out here.”

“Bell?” Melody objected to the interpretation of the noise, but didn’t speak up. She was still reeling by this smile on the old crank in front of her. What was his game? she wondered.

"I'm sure the noise sounded different depending on what angle you were in relation to it," Lonnie explained. "And also what objects it was reflected off of it would certainly come into play."

"So, we're going to keep digging?" Melody was confused where all of this was headed.

Mr. Rogers spoke up then. "I have a metal detector that you two broads can borrow. I was just about to go and get it."

Again with the broads, Melody scowled. *Doesn't this person know what century it is?*

Mr. Rogers smiled and left for his garage. Once out of sight, Melody exploded, though she did so as quietly as possible.

"What is going on?!" she said, practically jumping up and down.

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Rogers hates everyone in this neighborhood. And you're talking to him and being all friendly and he's letting you borrow his equipment...and *seriously with the broads!*"

"Okay, take a breath," Lonnie said. "I used to think he was a bit... gruff, as well. But over the years we started talking, and little by little I realized that that foul expression on his face is just the way his face is made." She placed her hand on Melody's shoulder. "You know, you're not always smiling, either. I'm sure a lot of people might be put off by your...oh, let's say *stern countenance*."

Melody folded up her arms and frowned dramatically. How dare her mother say this to her. Where was this even coming from? She suddenly felt her skin quickly turning pinker by the moment.

As suddenly as Mr. Rogers had departed, he returned with the promised object in hand.

Melody caught a glimpse into the man's garage for an instant before his door shut. The place was immaculate. Every tool had its place. The walls were lined with tidy work benches while still allowing enough room for his old Studebaker.

She thought then about the way her father kept their own tools: In a rusting metal shed, dark and filled with spiders. Items tossed in with little care. For this outing, Melody had to dislodge the shovel from between a pickax and the lawnmower. In the process she knocked over some precariously placed containers of old, unsorted odd and ends onto of her head.

Melody began to wonder if there was a correlation with crankiness and tidiness. If it meant saving herself from tetanus, it might be worth it to strive to make her father's life more unpleasant.

"We should have Jimmy stay with us more often," Melody said suddenly, beaming.

Lonnie and Mr. Rogers looked at the girl blankly.

"Never mind," Melody said. "Carryover from some thoughts in my head."

"Anyway....," Lonnie said, taking a hold of the metal detector. "How does this thing work." She leaned over to Melody and told her, "And don't let your father see me with this. He's been wanting one of these things forever."

"Has he been thinking of starting a bottle cap collection?" Melody asked her, confused. She occasionally saw older men in parks waving their discs over the ground for hours on end, but she never heard of any of them finding buried treasure, or for that matter, anything of value.

Lonnie laughed softly, raising her eyebrows at her. "I'm sure there's plenty of other uses." She looked over to Mr. Rogers, and said, "Kids, right?"

Mr. Rogers pursed his lips and placed his hands on his hips, but said nothing. He didn't have to. Melody knew exactly his feelings on children and their ways.

“Let me show you,” he said, taking the device back into his possession. He then demonstrated to Lonnie how all the buttons worked and the meanings behind all of the bleeps and whistles. Seemingly entranced by the thing, Mr. Rogers began to make the sweeps around the yard himself. It was only matter of minutes before he had a hit. The detector went off with a loud, excited siren sound very near the spot Lonnie had started digging.

“This is a big one,” he said. “The needle just went off the charts.”

Scene Fourteen

Bernie chose this moment to amble over to the field. He was almost strolling. His hands were in his pockets. He was whistling. And oddly, he had changed into a plaid shirt.

"Where's Jimmy?" Lonnie said with a confused look on her face.

"I tied him to the back fence post so he couldn't get into any more trouble."

Mr. Rogers turned around and raised his eyebrow at this comment. Though as far as Melody could tell it wasn't a completely disapproving sort of eyebrow raise.

"Please say you're kidding," she said.

Jimmy, who had been apparently playing on the porch of the tiny weather station, suddenly ran up to the group. His arms were out at his sides as though he were a single-prop airplane. Sputtering noises erupted from his mouth as if to illustrate this ruse.

"Kidding!" Bernie said, raising his arms. "I'm the opening act for Jimmy, the amazing flying boy."

Melody rubbed her eyes. Jimmy was wearing the very same shirt now as her father, and she pretended as though she couldn't tell them apart.

Lonnie smirked. "Did you two get up early and get into my Butterick patterns?"

"Nah," Bernie said. "He just happened to have a matching shirt in his luggage. I thought it would be adorable if we started dressing alike." He walked over to Mr. Rogers, eyes wide and hungry. "Say," he said. "Isn't that the XR-40, slim-line Metal-Boy Pro?"

The old man plugged one of his thumbs in his suspenders. "The very same," he said, proudly.

Bernie nodded his head, licked his lips and held out his hands. "May I?"

Lonnie stepped in. "Okay," she said. "Nothing to see here. I'm sure that thing is prohibitively expensive, Bernie, so don't get any ideas."

"And I'm sure new users need special handling gloves," Melody said, liking the game. "Do you have special handling gloves, Dad?"

"Rubbish," Mr. Rogers said, handing Bernie the device. "It handles like a dream. You'd be a damn fool to buy any other model."

Bernie wiped his mouth as though he were drooling.

"Anyway," Melody said, in an attempt to change the subject. "Mr. Rogers, it seems, just found a large hit."

"Oh, yes, yes," the old man said. "I did indeed. Looks to be flat and about five to six feet across." He placed the detector at his side. "Fairly deep, too."

Bernie clasped his hands together, and cracked his knuckles like a pianist before a concert. "So, this machine can get to a pretty good depth, then?"

Mr. Roger's cluckled. "Oh," he said, rocking on his heels. "A good ten to twelve feet if it could an inch."

"What do you think it is?" Lonnie asked him.

"Oh, hard to say. Could be some sort of cap or plate to keep someone from breaking whatever is underneath it. Though it's most likely an old oil drum or septic tank."

Lonnie seemed disappointed in this. "How about a door?"

Mr. Rogers laughed at this. "A big metal door? Unlikely. Nah, my money's on oil tank. Used to be a house here that burned down. They would have back-filled the basement without

bothering to clean out the debris. Most of these old houses originally used coal for heat, but some of them were upgraded to oil. Not uncommon. I'm not entirely sure when the old place burned down..."

All three of the Jackson's, practically in unison, shouted, "Nineteen thirty-three!"

Mr. Rogers seemed taken aback by the quick response of such seemingly obscure information, and seemed a little disappointed that they had broken up his meandering, folksy story-telling timing "Okay then," he said, but didn't seem to have anything more to offer after that.

"I don't suppose you have a backhoe in that nice garage of yours," Melody said.

"Don't mind her," Bernie said, reaching over to cap her mouth with his hand. "She's a monster without her morning coffee."

Melody broke free and took a few steps from her father, glaring at him.

Mr. Rogers scratched at his head. "Whaaall," he said, dragging the word out, thoughtfully. "I wouldn't recommend that course of action. First of all you'd need a permit, then you'd need to call gas and power to make sure no lines were going through that part of the yard. Also, neglecting that, since none of us owns the property, digging it up would be downright..." He held onto the pause, seemingly forever. "*Un-neighbourly*."

Sort of like calling someone a dumb broad? Melody thought to herself, bitterly.

"Well, thank you for your assistance today, Mr. Rogers," Lonnie said. "It was very eye-opening."

"Yes, Bill, thanks," Bernie agreed, and then leaned closer. "I don't suppose you'd have any brochures lying around for that slim-line Metal-Boy, would you?"

Mr. Rogers smiled. "I think I can rustle you up one or two."

"Come on, Bernie," Lonnie demanded. "We've got to get Jimmy ready to go. His mother's picking him up this afternoon."

Melody smiled crookedly. She knew this was probably a lie, and she normally didn't approve of such things, but she really wanted to go back home. Also, she truly wanted to believe her mother's rhetoric.

"Oh," Bernie said. "I do NOT want to miss that."

"Swing by later and I'll have the brochures for ya. And then we can talk shop a bit." He patted Bernie on the back and took his toy back into his garage.

"So," Melody began. "Is everyone around here secret friends with all of the crabby neighbors?"

"I think maybe your crabby detector just needs to be adjusted," Lonnie told her.

They walked across the street, which took three to four times longer than necessary as Jimmy tugged and pulled every which way, his attention diverted by anything and everything.

"Even the creepy guy next door?" Melody asked. "I know my detector's not off on that one."

Bernie raised an eyebrow at her, and indicted with his eyes the house to the left. "Mr. Sheniganses? No, you're right about him. He's pretty much a jerk."

"No," Melody corrected, and pointed to the deteriorating house to the right. "That one."

Bernie's face went suddenly blank, and he seemed to almost refuse to look in that direction. "No one lives there, Melody," he said, very seriously. "That house has been abandoned since I was a child." He then seemed to fall into what was apparently a trance.

Melody opened her mouth and although her father had already turned away, he said, stopping her: “And I don't want to hear anything more about it.”

Lonnie, who was already inside with Jimmy, added, “What your father said.”

“Alright. Alright!” Although, at least in her mind, Melody would never be done with it. How could she? Especially after that weird conversation. There was something about that creepy old house her parents seemed to be keeping from her, and she was determined to find out what it was. However, today was not that day. The Jacksons currently had two important projects on their plates. One, get Jimmy out of the house, And two, solve the mystery of the Hound from Hell. At the moment, she wasn't entirely certain either one of them was possible.

Scene Fifteen

Clearly in tune with the rhythms of the Universe, Lonnie's prediction of Jimmy's mom's arrival was perfectly timed.

"Oh, thank goodness," Bernie said at the sound of the rap on the screen door.

Lonnie gave him a sharp kick in the ankle. She directed his attention to Jimmy who was standing inches away from him.

"...thank goodness *thhhhaat* the screen door still works after all the excitement?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Good save, Dad," Melody said from the hallway.

Lonnie, grimacing, opened the front door. What she found there was a large fruit basket with legs. "Erm, *Hello?*"

"Sorry if I'm late," came the voice of her cousin Joanie from somewhere behind the cellophane barrier.

"Oh, my," Lonnie said. "Let me take that off your hands." With a minor struggle and Bernie's help, they managed finagle the awkward basket through the door and onto the dining room table. "You shouldn't have," Lonnie said, and gave her a hug.

"Oh, it's no trouble," she said. Joanie still looked somewhat frazzled, even with Jimmy out of her hair for a night. "I really appreciate you watching Jimmy. I hope he wasn't too much of a handful,"

"Oh, no trouble at all," Lonnie told her.

Melody's eyes narrowed at the lie. Sparing the woman's feelings was one thing, she thought. Making it seem, however, that they'd all be happy babysitting in the future was absolutely unforgivable.

"How's Rock?"

Joanie looked distant for a moment. "He's doing okay, actually," she said. "Although..."

Bernie and Melody chose this moment to start wandering away from the conversation. Bernie began poke at the fruit and stare at it hungrily.

Joanie continued on in the background. "...He seems to think his surviving the fall was some sort of a miracle."

Bernie spun the basket around, and pointed at the bag of pistachios and smiled at his daughter. He rubbed his belly and stuck out his tongue as though a hungry bear.

Melody giggled at this.

"Yes, I'm afraid he's turned suddenly rather religious on me." She began to laugh nervously.

Bernie then picked up a card which had apparently fallen down the side of the basket. He pulled it out and showed an expression to Melody which seemed to say "Uh oh, what's this?"

He read the card to himself and frowned dramatically. Shrugging his shoulders he held up the card for his daughter to read. It said, "Get well soon, Rock".

Bernie put his hand to his mouth and shook his head.

Melody began to giggle ever harder.

"Well, goodbye, you two," Joanie shouted over to Bernie and Melody. "Thanks again."

With stunned and guilty expressions, they waved back.

"Anytime," Bernie said. "And thanks for passing along the basket."

Once Joanie and Jimmy left, the house felt like a completely different place. Quieter, cleaner...Like the bad spirits had been exorcised.

“ANYTIME?!” Melody said to her father in a chastising tone.

“She caught me at a difficult moment,” he said. “Besides I’m sure with a kid like Jimmy, she knows that when someone says ‘Anytime’, it’s just said to be nice.”

“That logic only stands until she’s desperate,” Melody informed him. “Then under the veil of ignorance she’ll pull out the *Anytime* card, and then we’ll be stuck.”

“Oh for the love of...” Lonnie shook her head and sat down, placing her hands over her eyes. “He’s just an energetic little boy. It’s not like you even had to change any diapers...or really do anything other than keep him from running out into traffic.”

Bernie ignored his wife’s comments.

“Well, if it comes up again,” he said, smiling. “We’ll can always move to Europe.”

Scene Sixteen

It had been several days since the tense moments of the phantom howling had permeated their lives. The Jacksons began to relax and they soon fell into their old routines. Bernie even brought out his old Atari and played some games. Melody was writing, and Lonnie was catching up on her knitting.

“*Cuddlethwumps!*” Melody said, suddenly.

“What'll what?” Bernie said, trying not to look away from the screen. He was currently in a heated skirmish in a game called “River Raid”.

“It's a word I just made up,” she said.

“That's, uh, nice, dear,” Bernie said, using his entire body to maneuver the controls.

“Aren't you going to ask me what it means?”

Bernie, whose plane had just now crashed into an oncoming bridge, sighed. “Let's see if I can figure it out. Cuddle – thumps?”

“Thwumps,” Melody corrected.

“Right right,” he said. “Makes sense. Let's see. Something related to the physical abuse of a cute stuffed animal?”

“No, it's an exclamation,” she said. “It doesn't actually mean anything.”

“Man,” Bernie said. “You really ARE bored, aren't you.”

Melody slumped in her chair. She *was* bored. Normally she was self-entertaining. She almost always had a project she was working on or some sort of self-study she found enticing. But here she was, restless. She hoped that she wasn't turning into one of those adrenalin junkies needing the fix of the next big scare. She assured herself, however, that she was just being silly.

In the end, it seemed as though the howl of the hound was nothing more than vapor. A trick of the ear. Melody was even starting to believe that perhaps it really was that little dog with the cone over its head.

“Do you...?” Melody stopped as she was suddenly interrupted by a loud vocalization of some massive canine.

“There must be a full moon, tonight,” Bernie said, dropping the Atari Joystick at his feet.

“...When the moon rose brightly in the sky, the howling returned with a new and aggressive vigor.”

“Melody,” Bernie said. “Snap out of it.”

“I'm going over there,” she said, with nervous emphasis.

Bernie shook his head. “I really don't think that's a good idea. I'm afraid your mother and I forbid it.”

He looked around the living room for support, and came up short. “Isn't that right, Hon?”

Lonnie wasn't currently in the room, though she had been there but a moment before. Finally she burst through the swinging kitchen door carrying a rucksack and a portion of rope wrapped loosely over her shoulder.

“Okay,” she said. “Let's go solve a mystery.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Melody said, smirking. “We can't. Dad forbade it.”

Lonnie shook her head. “Don't be ridiculous, Bernie,” she said.

“It's not safe,” he said, dourly. For a moment he looked as though he were about to break out into tears. “I won't have my wife and daughter suffer the same fate as Malika.”

“Strength in numbers, Dad,” Melody told him. “Strength in numbers.”

“Yes,” Lonnie agreed. “You’re coming, too. Whatever it is can’t get all of us.”

Bernie grumbled under his breath and shook his head, but he knew there was no point in arguing. Either he took a stand and didn’t go, letting the women in his life go off without him, *or* he went along *with* them to suffer the same fate. “You might have to carry me over there, though,” he said, annoyed.

Lonnie sighed and shook her head. “Go and get your little red wagon and we’ll drag the big baby with us, Melody,” she said. “I’m headed over.”

Bernie began to cough, and then raised up his hands. “Okay,” he said. “Okay, I’m coming. I think I’d be safer going up against the Hound from Hell than riding in that rusty old wagon.”

The three walked surreptitiously across the street. As the moon was full, the neighborhood was almost bright.

Across the street came a muted growl, followed by a loud clank. As Lonnie approached the lot, she placed her hand up to her mouth.

“Oh my goodness,” she said.

Melody’s senses suddenly became heightened at this reaction, even though she had yet to see what her mother had seen.

“What is it?”

Her mother didn’t respond.

Melody skipped ahead, and suddenly wondered why she hadn’t seen it from the street.

Ghostly transparent, and larger than life, was a two-story home.

“Holy Hannah’s houndog!” Bernie said, coming up behind them.

Melody didn’t know exactly what to say. She wasn’t one to swear, but the standard exclamation failed to cover how she wanted to react to this vision.

“Cuddlethwumps!” she tried. While this was close to providing the necessary scratch to the itch, the word also left her feeling unsatisfied. “BIZZLESNAPS!” she tried instead, and it felt better.

The house was reddish-brown and transparent on every level. Melody could make out the rough details on the wooden siding – the chipped paint, the splinters – but she could just as clearly see through the kitchen furnishings on the opposite side of the wall. In the same respect she could see through the antique icebox, the glass bottles of milk inside of it, the wallpaper behind that, and even the claw-footed bathtub in the next room.

“It just depends on how you focus your eyes.”

“Here,” Lonnie shouted excitedly. “Look here.”

Melody stepped close to her mother, and followed her gaze through a transparent double doors into the cellar. There was a large, round, iron dome on the floor of precisely the same dimensions as reported by Mr. Rogers metal detector.

“That’s no septic tank,” Lonnie said, under her breath, eyes wide in their sockets.

Melody had to agree. “And it’s not an oil tank, either.” Although at the moment, she wished it were.

A hooded figure stalked into the room below them and made its way over to the dome. Melody noted that the thing was almost *floating* across the floor from one end of the basement to the other. It was almost as though it were on a track.

Bernie wriggled his way between them, taking care not to touch the ghostly house in front of him.

“For the love of...Bernie. What...?” Lonnie nearly lost her balance.

“I can’t see,” he said.

“Dad,” Melody scowled. “The house is completely see-through. What are you having a problem with?”

“I know,” he said. “But where I was standing there was a big rock in the way, and I couldn’t see that guy in the basement.”

The floating figure reached down to a wheel, which more precisely resembled a pressure lock from a submarine portal, and began to turn it without difficulty.

The Jackson’s held their breath as they watched in pensive horror. The wheel produced a high-pitched metallic squeal.

“That’s the sound,” Melody said softly to herself. “And I can guess what that distant clank is going to be.”

Who was this person? Melody thought. What was going on? Had something ritualistic occurred all of those years ago on Lafayette street? Something evil?

The thought was unimaginable. Of course she realized that humans in the past had perpetuated all kinds of horrible acts, she had never suspected something like this would have been going on in her own front yard.

Suddenly, Melody found that she was unable to move. Fear had worked its way throughout her entire body, paralyzing her. If the cloaked figure turned around at this point, she didn’t think her nerves could take it. At the moment, what she wanted to do more than anything on Earth was to run away and hide under her bed.

The cloaked figure, thankfully, failed to look in their direction, even when Bernie gasped loudly as the lid was opened.

With the help of some sort of pulley system, the figure lifted the heavy door, exposing a brick-lined well leading to some unseen depths.

“It’s a well to Hell,” Bernie said, his voice suddenly raspy. He then repeated the sentiment a few more times as if a chant to make the whole thing go away.

“Don’t be daft,” Melody told her father out of the corner of her mouth. In her heart she knew there probably was no such place. There just couldn’t be. If it existed at all, at least in the way that theologians might think of it, it had to be a construct of the mind-scape. A place of terrors populated only by dreamers. She refused to believe there was a physical land of eternal torture where all the *bad people* went.

“Although,” she said, aloud. “With our recent *Bardo* and *HellHound* outbreaks lately, that might explain a lot.”

Just the same, once the great, iron portal was lifted, she swore she could hear the distant screams of tormented souls.

“You hear that,” Bernie said, wide-eyed. He turned to look at the two of them. “We live across the street from a *Hellmouth!*” His eyes were red and practically shaking in his skull.

Lonnie unbelievably took a few steps toward the diaphanous double doors which at one time would have lead into the basement. However, before Melody or Bernie could reach out and stop her Lonnie found herself simply standing in the middle of the ghastly projection. There she stood, still on the flat, physical field, failing to tumble into the nethers of the as of yet unproven

dwelling. She stood there a few moments seeming dumbstruck. Finally, Lonnie slapped her hand to her thigh and then turned and ran as fast as she could back towards their own house.

Melody and her father simply looked at each other, unsure what to do next.

"I guess the show's over?" Melody said, nervously.

Bernie appeared stunned. "I never expected your Mother to just take off and leave us."

Suddenly, Lonnie returned with a cylindrical object in each hand. Closer examination revealed these to be spray paint cans. One white and the other orange.

"What's going on?" Melody said.

Lonnie, however, didn't reply other than by her actions. She seemed wild-eyed and determined. She then began to spray lines all along the field, constantly looking around the transparent house as she did so.

"I think she's making a map," Melody told her father.

"I get that," he said. "But what I don't understand is why."

Beneath them, the figure in the robes continued on, now waving his hands about and mumbling some incantation in a foreign tongue. Some steam or smoke began to rise out of the well.

"It's him I'm worried about," Melody said. Was this cloaked person really there? she wondered. Or was it simply some ghostly impression on the environment?

Lonnie dropped both of the spent canisters of paint on the ground and took a few steps back. She then pulled a small camera out of her pocket, and snapped off a few shots: Some with the flash on, and some with the flash off. She continued to do this until the memory card was full. She then simply sat down on the grass as though all of the energy had been drained out of her.

Perhaps in no small part due to the presence of the Jacksons observations of it, the vision of the house slowly began to fade away. However, before it was completely gone, Melody, who never took her eyes off the man in the cowled robe, saw a black blob-like object emerge from the well beneath them. The form was mostly amorphous, but it seemed to have legs and the ability to move about on it's own.

Now alone in the darkness, they all heard that indeterminable sound again. A loud clank of the metal door coming down. In the distance, a mournful howl of some massive beast filled the air.

"I think that was an historic record of how the Hellhound came into our world," Melody said, still unable to take her eyes away from the spot. The field, which was now just a field, albeit with crisscrossing lines which now formed a roughly painted blueprint of the house.

"Fine," Bernie said. "I'll buy that. But why show us this?"

"Who?"

Bernie shrugged his shoulders. "Whoever," he said. "Whoever shows these types of things to the people who are shown them."

Melody shook her head. "I don't think it has anything to do with us," she said. "I think it's just a process that was triggered by some source of energy. This ghost house is a remnant of something that happened in the past. Either it presents itself periodically, or something triggered it. Maybe Jimmy, maybe whatever triggered the woman in white. I think we need to find Chazz and her team of investigators.

"Regardless," Lonnie said, sitting on the grass. "I think whatever this was is over now."

Scene Seventeen

Bernie flipped off the television set. The news had just gone on ad nauseam about a possible fire ant infestation on Powell Butte. This was later revealed as a hoax. Local scientists discovered that some prankster had simply dyed a mound of regular ants with red food coloring.

"Is anyone else super bored?" he asked the room.

It had been weeks since the Jackson's had heard another howl, let alone anything else paranormal or creepy coming from across the street.

Lonnie's pictures had not revealed anything ghostly, with the exception of odd, blurry lights and orbs. No spirit house, no cowed figure, no well into hell. No proof whatever.

Chazz also seemed to have disappeared off the face of the Earth. She had failed to make her weekly contact to her family, and her old friends from the Police Department had been searching in vain for her all around town.

Other than that mystery, Lonnie and Melody had to admit that they were, actually, a little eager for something odd or adventurous. It seemed like life may have returned to normal on Lafayette street once again...and it was driving everyone crazy.

"I ran into Mrs. Rhoads at the end of the block and she kept going on and on about how she missed riple coupons," Lonnie said. "I thought I was going to lose my mind."

Bernie smiled, viciously. "You used to love talking about your couponing prowess."

"Yeah," she said. "That's what I'm all about, Bernie. Domestic housewifery." She scowled at him. "I don't suppose it never occurred to you that the only reason I mention chores was because I was hoping you might take a hint and help out."

Bernie only raised an eyebrow at this and cracked his newspaper in front of him. "I folded some towels only last week," he said, indignantly.

"No wonder you've been so tired lately," Lonnie said, scowling back.

Melody didn't want to admit her own addiction to the bizarre and phantasmal. Now it seemed if something wasn't completely off-the-wall she didn't even want to hear about it. "I wonder if this is what ghost hunting groups go through. Always on the lookout for their next fix."

"Maybe," her father said.

Melody shook her head. She didn't like it. She had always strongly and adamantly opposed to anything habit-forming – with the possible exception of chocolate. She drank only herbal tea, she played only cooperative board games. "What was my point?"

Bernie shrugged his shoulders. "I keep telling you I can't hear the conversations that go on in your head.

"Oh, yeah," Melody said. "I remember now." She continued with her thought. There had to be some outside force insinuating itself into their lives.

"Gobsknuckles!" she said suddenly.

"Another meaningless exclamation?" Bernie asked.

"Sort of," she said. "Though this one has a specific purpose: to denote frustration."

"I might start using that one," Lonnie said, with a wistful look in her eyes.

Melody sat back into her chair, and closed her eyes. She tried to examine what the woman in white and the hound from hell, along with this possible external addictive force, might both have in common.

It did occur to her that there might be some sort of funky gas leaking up from the sewers. Mixing paint, yard chemicals, and detergents for years could probably come up with all kinds of weird concoctions. This thought then led to the inexorable conclusion that everything they had so far seen might be a delusion of sorts.

No, but then what of Malika? Was she simply hiding in the weather station, perhaps suffering the same effects.

Maybe Chazz and Malika never existed either. Maybe there was never a woman in white. Maybe she and her parents were still in their beds, wasting away into nothingness, knocked unconscious by the gas.

It was a horrible thought. She wondered if there was a way to prove otherwise.

Then suddenly a thought struck her.

“DAD” she said, popping out of her chair.

Her father shrieked and threw the remote control up in the air.

“Call your Uncle Frank.”

Bernie eyed the girl suspiciously. “Uncle Frank died years ago,” he told her, eyes narrowed.

One aspect of the test, passed, Melody thought. If this was a dream, her father might not know that, or Uncle Frank in this deluded reality might still be alive. Now if she could get her father to call him and find that his phone number was disconnected, or reassigned to someone else, that would be proof enough for her that they were inhabiting the real world. “Please call him,” she said. “I have something to ask him.”

“I think you might have suddenly lost your mind, young lady. They don't have phones in Hell if you're wanting to ask him if he has a pet dog.”

Melody placed her arms between her knees, becoming more annoyed with her father by the second. “Just caaaaaalllll.” Why did her father have to ruin such perfectly laid out reality tests.

“What exactly are you trying to do here, Melody?” her mother stepped in. “Make your father squeal like a little girl. Because there's much easier ways to go about that.”

The girl sighed and explained her suspicions.

At first her father laughed the idea away, but then his eyes became distant with obvious concern. It seemed to be an idea he hadn't considered.

“Where exactly did you meet Chazz and Malika?” he said, snapping his fingers at his wife. “Quick,” he said. “Pop quiz.”

“I told you already,” Lonnie said, grabbing a hold of the snapping hand and effectively quieting it. “It was at a local crafting conference. We are not under the influence of some gas! This *is* reality.”

“But how do you know that?” Bernie still seemed unconvinced.

“Call it woman's intuition.”

Bernie's facial muscles relaxed a moment. Woman's intuition was stock that he could feel comfortable buying into. Suddenly, his eyes grew large, and he snapped his fingers again, pointing at his daughter. “Melody's a woman,” he said. “And it was her idea in the first place.”

“I think the problem is she's too much like you.”

Melody furrowed her eyebrows at this accusation.

Lonnie explained before her daughter could protest. “You both think everything's a conspiracy.”

"I absolutely do NOT," Melody said.

"Two words," Lonnie said. "Brainwashing gas. Just how far back in our lives would you allow this to go to prove your theory? Maybe your father and I don't even exist. Maybe you're just a brain in a vat in some laboratory and everything you've experienced has been some virtual reality environment."

"OH MY GOD!" Bernie yelled. "that is NOT beyond the boundaries of believability!"

Melody smirked at him. He was so gullible sometimes.

"No," Lonnie said, standing up, as if to give a speech. "Woman in White, real. Chazz and Malika, real people. Hound from Hell, to be determined, but there's definitely something weird going on."

"And we're back to the well to Hell fifty feet from our driveway," Bernie said, almost pouting.

Lonnie raised up her hands. "I don't know what to tell you, Bernie," she said. "I'm going to bed."

Bernie began to point around the room, seemingly at random objects. "But the... And the..."

"I'm going to bed, too," said Melody. "You want me to get you a glass of warm milk or something?"

Bernie shook his head.

Melody leaned forward and gave her father a hug, and he squeezed her back tightly. If he had wanted warm milk that would have given her pause. Fortunately, he passed this final test.

"You going to stay up?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm going to watch a little television. It calms my nerves."

"Turns them to a puddle of goo, you mean."

Bernie chuckled to himself. "Yeah."

"I take it's a no to that warm milk then?"

"Yes," her father said, almost seeming offended by the question. "Gross."

Melody smiled. "Just making sure," she said.

They said goodnight and Melody wandered down the hallway. She imagined if they WERE under the influence of some partially toxic gas, they probably wouldn't be experiencing all of the mundane aspects of life. She would think their existence would be broken into only quick exciting clips with no boring bits like small talk, brushing of teeth and going to the bathroom.

Her bedtime business complete, Melody heard the following coming from the television:

"Next on Svengoolie, Peter Cushing, in '*The Hound of the Baskervilles*'. This preceded her father's exclamation, "That CANNOT be a coincidence."

Melody chuckled to herself, and came back out to join him. They popped some popcorn during the commercial break, and turned out the lights for added spookiness. Not long after, Lonnie, aroused by the noises, came out to join them. Bernie laughed at all of Sven's corny jokes and the Jackson's huddled together, enjoying themselves as a family for the first time in a long time.

###

About the Author

BMB Johnson lives in Portland with a family of humans, too many cats, and just enough Guinea Pigs. Likes the concept of rollerblading but not the practice. Reads comics, plays vintage computer games and new designer board games and is a gigantic slobbery fan of Doctor Who.

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