

# The Cave

By Kyler Ericksen

The cold fall air bit at his lungs, leaves crunching beneath every step. The woods were quiet this time of year, and darkness covered the landscape in the cloudy night. His breath came out in clouds, fading away into the air puff after puff. A warped tree had caught his eye, pausing his pace.

“Carl? Are you all right?” said a voice behind him, making him jump and whip around.

“Oh, Laura, it's just you.” He replied with a sigh. The distant voices of Noah and Hazel were laughing a bit far off, approaching.

“Are you all right?” Laura repeated, looking at him, concerned.

“I don't know why I let you guys talk me into this, the only people who ever talk about this cave are the old people who just want to creep us out,” he huffed, shrugging away from her and walking off towards the approaching voices.

“And here I thought you wanted to,” she replied, “mister ‘nobodys ever really gone missing”

“Hey I only said that cause-” he began, but was cut off by Noah coming around a group of bushes, flashlight in one hand and Hazel's hand in the other.

“We found it,” he exclaimed, smiling at them and then continuing, “it's just around the corner. You alright, Carl?”

“I'm fine, it's nothing, let's just get this over with.” The group left towards the direction Noah had indicated. They reached a rough gap in a forested hill, lichen covered stones spilling from the void-like opening. Carl clicked on his flashlight, walking up to the person-sized crack and shining it in.

“It's like there's nothing in there,” he said, frowning. The flashlight illuminated a few yards into the space, but not as much as it should have.

“Ooh spooky,” said Noah, stepping up beside him and smiling, shining his flashlight in as well. “Let's go in.”

“Wait, are we sure about this? It just doesn't feel right,” Carl said, fidgeting with his jacket zipper, cool and smooth in his fingers.

“Oh don't worry,” Laura said with a laugh, “I'll protect you.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him in, and he uselessly grabbed Noah's arm to try and stop her. They all slipped through the opening, one by one. Right after getting through, Noah's flashlight flickered out. He paused to wack it against his hand, pulling away from Carl and hitting the end of it again and again against his palm to no avail. Carl swallowed hard and turned to Laura, her grip tight now, and shined his flashlight on her.

Her face was decrepit and sagging, her eyes shriveled back in her skull. Thin slits on her lips leaked brown blood that mixed with a thin line of drool dripping off her chin. Her skin was dry and flaking, one cheek growing a thin layer of mold and the rest clinging at its edges almost desperately as if in an effort not to all slip down to the ground like a blob of jelly. Her long brown hair was gone, only a few thin wisps remaining. Instantly he shrieked and jumped back, landing right on Noah who caught him as both of their flashlights tumbled to the ground. Carl slipped to

the sandy ground immediately, grabbing his flashlight with a shaky hand and directing it back on Laura.

Her strikingly normal face stared back at him, hair and soft youthful face returned. She had an expression of surprised hurt in her restored eyes. She had stepped back at his outburst, but now stepped toward him again. He took in a shuddered breath, whole body trembling. Silence stretched as sat there for a second, still shining the light on Laura, the whole group shocked out of saying anything. He shifted and sat on a rock near him, still shaking. Laura took another step forward as Noah moved to crouch beside him.

“Are you alright? What was that all about?” Noah asked.

“Nothing, it’s fine, just my imagination,” Carl said with a deep breath, looking down.

“Are you sure? Cause that didn’t look like nothing,” Hazel said, her fading Texas accent tinging her concerned words. Carl stood wearily, still shaken.

“Let’s just get out of here,” he said. Turning around and shining the flashlight, he walked deeper into the cave, passing Laura.

“Um, I thought you said you wanted to leave,” she said, and he paused.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, turning around and pressing two fingers to his temple and rubbing there for a moment.

“Why are you acting all weird,” Hazel said, clearly uncomfortable now. Laura nodded and shifted, stepping over beside Carl.

“He’s just trying to mess with us,” Noah said, brushing off the tension a bit. “Look, he even tried to trick us into going further in.” Noah gestured at Carl, as if to prove his statement. Carl attempted a smile and nodded, willing to go with that story. Noah knelt to grab his dropped flashlight just as Carl’s winked out too. The girls screamed, pulling the two boys into a group.

“Not funny, guys.” Laura said sternly, gripping at Carl’s jacket sleeve. “Turn the flashlights back on right now.”

“I’m trying,” Carl said, clicking the on switch back and forth and smacking the end against his palm like Noah had done. They stuck to each other for a moment and their eyes adjusted. The clouds had cleared outside and the moonlight filtered in through the gap incredibly well, like the moon itself was just outside the opening.

“I’m done,” said Laura, leaving towards the opening.

“Me too,” Hazel said, breaking off from the boys to hurry after Laura. Carl looked back to see what Noah would do. Back a good distance behind him a form writhed on the ceiling of the cave, crawling towards them at a remarkable speed. Its body was warped and pale rotting limbs jutted unnaturally. A thin layer of semi-transparent, stretchy skin kept it all assembled. Thin fingers kept it anchored to a dark ceiling, and an unnatural glow illuminated a couple inches around its body. With a nauseated shudder Carl realized it was actually crawling backwards, its head bent backwards impossibly to look at them across its body. It smiled with sharp teeth and black spittle, shrunken eyes contrasting its smile with deep sorrow.

Carl screamed a deep guttural scream, whipped around, and ran. He burst past a startled Laura and Hazel. He didn’t look back, focusing on the opening. The further he went, however, the further away the doorway seemed until he tripped and fell, the oddly earthy ground softening the impact as his shoulder hit the ground. Sharp pain burst from his arm. Desperately he turned to see how close the creature was. It wasn’t there. The whole cave was faintly illuminated now, just as the monster’s skin had been. His friends called to him from a distance

back, jogging to catch up. Carl shuddered and curled into a ball on the ground. His mind swirled as if unable to focus on anything but the image of the monster crawling on the cave's ceiling.

His friend had nearly reached him after a few seconds, and Carl glanced up. They reached him and warped, hazy voices tried to make sense to his ear. Someone, maybe Noah, grabbed him by both shoulders and tried to help him up. The pain in his arm exploded again and he must've screamed because the touch pulled back quickly. The new pain returned some clarity and he saw Noah holding his hand up to the illuminated walls to reveal moist red. Noah made some quick, harsh noise, probably a curse, and turned back to Carl. The girls crouched beside him, talking over each other and trying to get a response.

A head rolled between the girls, eyes white and skin green. It smelled foul and bits of flesh plopped off of it as it came to a stop. Its few wispy hairs peeled off its skull and started inching toward him, other bits of the head like its bared teeth and one of its milky eyes wiggled as if trying to do the same. Carl bent away from it and retched, the girls flinching back from him. They didn't see it, why didn't they see it, nobody else could see it. Carl looked back again with dread, unable to move, but the head was gone. Glancing up to the girls, still crouched there, it only took him a moment before he emptied his stomach again at the new sight, this time in their direction. His mind was fuzzy, he couldn't comprehend much, but he could see the girls now disfigured faces. Laura was back to her sagging skin as before, and Hazel's face was green and sickly as if it had contracted the same plague as the disembodied head from a second ago. Carl had no more scream in him to give. Everything swirled and he blinked.

His head rocked back, trying to prevent another bout of nausea. Looking up, the white skinned ceiling creature was back again. Thin lines of black dribbled from its mouth and landed around Carl's face. His body was petrified now, and he could only look up in horror. His friends faint shouting tried to reach him, with a dull ringing of a phone even quieter in the background. The edges of his vision blurred and darkened as the creature crawled slowly towards him down the side of the cave. Its body rotated, its head going the opposite way so that it spun twice around until stopping and facing an almost natural direction, about a foot away from his face. Its smile widened as it slowed even more, the sorrow of its eyes deepening. The closer it got the darker his vision became. Unconsciousness overtook him once the face was mere inches away.