

INFLECTION: THE DARK BELOW

A story by James J. Dominguez

Inspired by the video game Inflection,
written by Clinton McCleary

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> disk load

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> open doc001

Opening...

DOC001

It's funny how something can be just like you remembered it, but also completely different. Today is the first time in almost twenty years that I've been in this cabin, and it looks and smells exactly as I remember it. Even the stairs creak in a familiar little melody when I walk on them, like a barely remembered song from my childhood.

And yet, everything is wrong. It's too small, too old, and somehow fake, like a studio set for a TV show. It's like my memories are more real to me than reality, so seeing, hearing, and smelling it again feels like my senses are lying to me. I'm sure the weirdness will pass. After all, this is going to be our home for the next few weeks, maybe months. (God, please don't let it be months.)

It isn't all bad, of course: the woods are right on our doorstep, front and back, plus it's a short walk to the nearest swimming hole and only a half hour hike to the lake if we want something grander than a wide spot in the creek. July is nearly gone and August looks set to be perfect - all signs point to a month of mild sunshine dappled by the pines. I'm glad we weren't here a few weeks earlier during the hottest part of the summer, not least because this place doesn't have any cooling.

The kids will no doubt take some time to get used to it. They've had separate rooms for a few years, so having to share a bedroom again will probably cause some friction. Still, for such dramatically different children, they get along surprisingly well. Shiloh grew into such a quiet and sensitive little bookworm that I worried he wouldn't be able to really connect with his big sister. Jeannie is so loud and so energetic, a lover of soccer and softball and gymnastics. When she hits her teenage years and figures out which sport she really wants to concentrate on, she's going to be unstoppable.

Polly has been amazing through all of this. I owe everything to her, literally. She was the first person to read my original novel, and I only got an agent and started talking to publishers because of her insistence that it was a great book. Luckily, everyone else seemed to agree with her. That book paid for a big, beautiful house in the suburbs, a couple of cars, private schools for the kids, and the state-of-the-art word processor that I am typing on right now.

All I need now is an equally great follow-up novel, which is precisely why we're here. Hopefully being back in grandma's old cabin will get those stubborn creative juices flowing and I can get this book finished. My agent won't be the only one who will be happy to see a complete manuscript. I need to get this done for Polly.

DOC001 closed

> open doc002

Opening...

I was feeling nostalgic today, so I went for a walk in the woods. It's funny how when you're walking in the woods it can look like a random jumble of trees until you return somewhere familiar. Stumble across a place where you spent a large piece of your childhood, and suddenly you remember every detail. Today I saw a gnarled old pine that once lost a branch, leaving behind an oval scar in the bark that always looked slightly like a woman's face to me. I knew that tree, and I looked ahead to a familiar boulder: car-sized, pale brown, and mottled with lichen.

If I hadn't suddenly realized where I was, I might have tumbled right into the well. The tree and the boulder triggered a subconscious alarm in the back of my head, and without knowing why I stopped dead in my tracks. No more than two feet on front of me yawned a dark hole in the earth, surrounded by a low wall of irregular gray stones.

Back when I was a kid, this well had been covered with a circular wooden lid that retained only the smallest flecks of the green paint that had once covered it. Today the well was wide open, and it scared the heck out of me. My kids have been running around in these woods for two days and they could easily have fallen in. The mortar between the stones is crumbling to dust, and I'm sure one solid kick could have caved in one side of the wall.

I didn't have equipment on hand to make it genuinely safe, but I did what I could. I gathered some fallen branches and criss-crossed them over the opening to form a makeshift cover, then drove some thinner branches into the ground like stakes to create a very basic fence. I knew it wouldn't do much, but it's better than nothing. Next time I'm in town I'll buy something sturdier and more eye-catching, like brightly-colored rope and metal stakes, and build a more secure barrier.

It wasn't until I had finished placing branches that I realized exactly where I was: the well had been near that old shack. I peered through the trees and undergrowth, and there it was: the boulder partially blocked my view, but I could see a roof of unpainted wooden shingles, the upper part of a wall, and the corner of window. An icy shiver trickled down my spine like cold water, and a forgotten childhood fear came rushing back.

I'd hated that shack, and I don't even remember why. All I can remember two decades later is that I was so frightened of it that it had given me a recurring nightmare. As I stood there, a vivid image from those dreams popped back into my head for the first time in decades: the door of the shack swinging slowly open, revealing an old man dressed in dirty underwear and undershirt. I don't remember his face, but his hands were bright red with blood.

Gooseflesh prickled up by arms at the memory, and I looked back to the shack in a moment of panic, expecting to see that door creaking open on its hinges. It was nonsense dream logic, of course: even with the boulder there, I could see there was no door on the side of the house that was facing me. Even so, that long-forgotten nightmare left me feeling unsteady and scared.

Next thing I knew I was jogging out of the trees and into our yard, breathing hard like I'd been running. Memory can be a powerful thing, and it seemed like my childhood fears rushing back had completely pushed away all other thoughts: I have no recollection of running back home.

I have to tell the kids to stay away from that place. I mean, it's private property of course, and that well is deathtrap, but honestly, I'll just feel better knowing they aren't going anywhere near it. Maybe it's crazy to pass on my childhood fears to them, but it will prevent me from worrying.

DOC002 closed

> open doc003

Opening...

I think there's something wrong with Jeannie. Polly tried to reassure me that everything is okay, but her behavior has definitely taken a strange turn.

I know that she loves being here in the woods. She adores swimming and running around, plus she's a terrifyingly good tree-climber. I've seen her go from ground level to high-enough-to-make-dad-worry in ten seconds flat.

So why does she seem so withdrawn? I'm used to her being talkative and funny, always eager to tell us about her latest conquest on the sports field or the most recent embarrassing thing one of her many schoolfriends did. She's been so quiet, though, and she seems to be getting worse.

Last night Polly made hamburgers, which are usually Jeannie's favorite. Instead of demolishing her burger and asking for another, she just sat there picking at it, tearing away small scraps of the bun and leaving them in a pile on the edge of her plate. Even Shiloh noticed her odd behavior; I could see him giving her sidelong glances. He might be young, but he's already good at reading moods.

Eager for something to talk about, I broached the topic of the well. I told them where it was, explained that it was old and dangerous, and instructed them to steer well clear of it. Shiloh gave his big sister another sideways look, which struck me as odd, then gave me a bright smile and promised to stay away.

I wanted to keep the conversation going, so I asked Jeannie if she'd had a good day. She didn't reply, or even look at me, but just shrugged her shoulders and carried on shredding her burger bun. Shiloh gave her another look and then replied on her behalf, telling me about how they swam in the creek and he saw a frog, and then they started building a treehouse.

That was when Jeannie broke her silence, asking her mother if she could be excused from the table. Polly rightly pointed out that she had barely eaten anything - while the bun was in pieces, the burger itself looked untouched - but Jeannie said she wasn't hungry. A standard parent-child negotiation followed: Polly asked if she was sick, Jeannie said she was fine but just not hungry, so Polly touched her forehead and declared that it wasn't warm. Eventually she was excused and stalked off to the bedroom.

I've tried to tell myself that it was just typical pre-teen moodiness, but I'm still worried. The transformation has been so extreme that she seems like a different child. Is that kind of stuff normal? God, I don't know. She's my first kid, and I was never one for reading those parenting magazines.

After Shiloh went to bed I confided my worries in Polly, but she assured me everything was fine. Our family has been through some changes lately, she reminded me, reassuring me that Jeannie's behavioral changes are probably just a natural reaction to that. She started using her soft voice, the one she always uses when she's trying not to upset me, and pointed out that we'd left home in something of a hurry. We hadn't told the kids everything that was going on, all that grown-up stuff, but they are both perceptive enough to have picked up on our stress.

Polly stroked my arm and tried to soothe my fears. This vacation in the woods would be good for everyone, she was sure, and I would finally clear my writer's block and get my novel finished. She reminded me that, after the success of my first novel, the second is guaranteed to be a success - my agent has told me the publisher is ready to fast track it as one of their top fall releases - so all I have to do now is get it written. Then the royalty checks will start coming in and life will get back to normal.

I couldn't bear to tell her that I haven't written anything since we'd arrived except for some half-assed journal entries. The truth would break her heart.

DOC003 closed

> open doc004

Opening...

I'm not worried about Jeannie anymore: I'm properly scared. A cool and rational part of my brain is trying to tell me that it's all in my imagination, but it's too much, too quickly. It can't all be in my head, can it?

Last night I had my childhood nightmare for the first time in almost two decades, but some of the details had changed. I thought the original recurring dream was terrifying when I was a kid, but this new version was immeasurably worse.

I was walking in the woods, listening to the dry brown pine needles crunch under my feet. Suddenly, just like a couple of days ago, I recognized the trees and the boulder and I knew where I was. Sure enough, the well was there in front of me, but it wasn't covered up. The old wooden cover had always been there in my dreams, but now the well was uncovered, an impossibly dark hole that seemed to plunge away into the center of the earth.

Then I heard the creaking of the hinges. I didn't want to look, but my gaze lifted involuntarily to look at the old wooden shack with its raw log walls and split-shingle roof. Just like in my old dreams, that non-existent door was slowly swinging open, with the hinges giving a long metallic groan and sure enough, the old man was there in the doorway.

I had forgotten just how old he looked. The top of his head was bald and shiny, but there were tufts of pure white hair just above his ears. His face was pale and slack with watery blue eyes sunk deep into shadowed sockets, and his mouth was hanging crookedly open like he'd suffered a stroke. I could see he was still wearing that filthy white undershirt, but the worst thing was who was standing in front of him.

His bloody hands were resting on Jeannie's shoulders, leaving garish red handprints on her pale-yellow sundress. She stared at me, her face as slack and unseeing as the old man's, but she slowly raised her hands. Just like his, they were dark red with a thick coating of blood right up to the elbows.

That was when I heard a noise from below me. I turned my eyes downward, into the well, and there was Shiloh. The well was full to the brim with dark water, and Shiloh was floating face-up on the surface. His eyes met mine and he tried to call out to me, but instead he just choked, coughing up a mouthful of blood onto his chin.

I woke up then, sitting violently upright with the blanket twisted into knots in both my hands, and letting out a panicked grunt that might have been a scream if I hadn't been so short of breath. The sun was streaming in the window, the trees casting dancing golden patterns onto the threadbare burgundy rug. I gasped for air, and then let out a long, shuddering breath, feeling the dream loosen its grip on me, letting the real world take hold.

Sounds crept in softly from elsewhere in the house. I could hear music playing on the radio, and the clink of plates and cutlery - breakfast sounds. My stomach evidently heard them, because it let out a hungry burble. The lingering fear from the dream was fading away like mist in the morning sun, helped along by the smell of waffles creeping in from the kitchen. Even so, I sat down to breakfast feeling a little shaken. Waking from a nightmare is never a good way to start the day, but I said good morning, snagged a waffle from the pile in the center of the table, and topped it with some butter and syrup. Wanting to chase away the leftover feelings from the dream, I tried to start a conversation.

I asked Jeannie if she had anything fun planned for the day, but she gave no response, or even acknowledgment of the question. She simply stared at the table and munched on a piece of waffle. At least she was eating something, I guess. Shiloh, always eager to please, answered for her, telling me they were going to hunt tadpoles. I explained that this late in the summer the tadpoles had probably all grown up into frogs, and he frowned slightly, like he'd been caught in a lie and he was trying to think of a better story.

Before I could ask what was going on, Jeannie suddenly snatched another waffle, muttered that she was going out, and started toward the door. I weakly called out something like "hey", and she turned and gave me a look I will never forget. It was the first time in days that she had made eye contact with me and her expression was pure hatred. It lasted only a moment, shocking me into silence, and then she was out the door and gone.

Unwelcome images from my nightmare appeared in my mind, and I pushed them away. A random thought occurred to me, and I clung to it like a drowning man to a life preserver: we should build a fire and make s'mores. With his tadpole-hunting partner gone, I suggested that Shiloh might want to come into town with me and buy marshmallows, crackers, and chocolate. I leaned in conspiratorially and said there might also be an ice cream in it for him.

That was a pleasant couple of hours. We drove to the nearest town, about a half hour away, and bought our sugary ingredients from the small independent grocer. Shiloh rode in the cart and I pushed him around, goofing around and making him laugh. We put the groceries in the car and then, true to my word, we finished up on a park bench with a view of the lake, eating ice cream sundaes from polystyrene containers and watching the sunlight sparkle on the water. It was so pleasant that I barely noticed how a smear of strawberry syrup on Shiloh's chin looked for a moment like a drop of congealed blood.

Full of ice cream and in good spirits, we drove home singing along to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones on the radio, then Shiloh helped me gather wood and build a fire. I remembered how my grandfather used to build fires in this same circle of rocks and built it just the way he had taught me. It caught first try and we soon had a roaring fire. Thanks grandpa, wherever you are. Jeannie appeared just as Polly served up bowls of spaghetti, and I was pleased to see that she was eating it. There was no obvious enjoyment there, but at least she was getting some nourishment. Meanwhile, Shiloh was happily telling his mother every detail of our trip to town. By the time we had finished our spaghetti and were ready to start roasting marshmallows for the s'mores, the sun had gone down and the woods were dark.

Shiloh and I had set aside some prime-quality marshmallow sticks while gathering the firewood and we distributed one to everybody. We then began the task of toasting our little puffy sugar blobs and the conversation died away as we gazed into the embers.

A few minutes later, as Polly was helping Shiloh carefully layer the chocolate and marshmallows on a cracker, I looked over to see how Jeannie was doing. What I saw unnerved me in a way I can't easily explain.

Her marshmallow was burning, but she was making no effort to remove it from the fire. As I watched, the blackened lump burst into a bright yellow flame, but she didn't blow it out. Instead she just sat and watched it burn, and in the flickering red light I could have sworn she was smiling. That was when I saw a dark shape behind her, and then... well, I can't truthfully say what was there. All I can say for certain is what I thought at the time, as unbelievable as it may seem.

Jeannie was sitting in a wooden deckchair with her back to the house, and the dying fire was casting her shadow hugely on the whitewashed clapboard. What confused me is that it wasn't her shadow. I know how nuts this must seem, and I can barely believe I'm writing it, but the enormous shadow on the wall of the house wasn't Jeannie's. It was indistinct around the edges, but I got the impression of broad, powerful shoulders and - as insane as I know this will sound - some kind of spines or horns radiating from its oversized head. Even as I sat there, staring in disbelief, it seemed to grow even taller, and I got the strangest impression that it was peering into an upstairs window.

At that moment, Shiloh exclaimed something, but his voice was muffled by a mouthful of melted sugar and cracker crumbs. I twisted my head to look and saw that he was laughing and trying not to spit out his s'more, with Polly laughing along with him. They had obviously not seen what I had seen. When I looked back to Jeannie, both she and the shadow were gone. Only her marshmallow cooking stick remained, tossed into the fire and beginning to smolder.

That was two hours ago. I've been sitting here alone, trying to write down my thoughts. Even now they seem ridiculous, and by tomorrow I'll probably dismiss all of it as an overactive imagination, no doubt triggered by the recurrence of my old nightmare. I'm sure nobody will even read this - in the morning I'll no doubt delete it in embarrassment.

DOC004 closed
> open doc005
Opening...

There's something in the cabin. There's something living in there, and it's got ahold of Jeannie somehow, and I have to save her before something horrible happens. The giant shadow wasn't an illusion, wasn't a trick of the light, nothing like that. It was the truth being revealed to me somehow. She's possessed or something, being ridden by something evil, and I have to get rid of it.

I tried to talk to Polly about it but she stared at me like I'm nuts. I didn't even get to tell her about the blood on the dress before she interrupted me and touched my forehead like I'm some kind of goddamned child, asked if I felt okay, and I said no, of course I wasn't okay.

The craziest thing was when she put her hands on my shoulders and told me I had to stop talking like that or I'd scare the kids. Me! Scare them! I actually laughed then, and she flinched away from me like I'd raised my hand at her. That was when I knew she wasn't going to listen. Maybe whatever has ahold of Jeannie is closing her mind somehow, making her blind to it? It makes sense.

The blood on the dress. I forgot to write about that. God, if anyone reads this it's going to seem ridiculous. I need to think back, put it into some kind of order.

Last night I had the nightmare again, except it was different from the night before. When the door opened, Jeannie was there with the old man again. Instead of her yellow sundress, she was wearing a pastel green flannel nightgown smeared with dark blood. Just like the previous dream, I heard a choking gasp from below me and looked down to Shiloh in the water. He was clutching the yellow sundress in to his chest. When he choked, the gob of blood splattered onto the golden fabric of the dress.

When I jerked awake this time, the dream didn't fade away. It lingered around me like smoke as I pulled on some clothing and stumbled into the kitchen. The house was empty and silent, and it took me a moment to work out that I had slept right through breakfast and it was late morning. Feeling disoriented by oversleeping and being awakened by the nightmare, I felt a weird, almost numb sense of worry, and my head seemed to be buzzing.

Then I was at the well. I don't remember deciding to go there, but I think I must have checked the yard and found nobody around the house. Did I look for the car? I must have, but I don't remember if it was there or not. As far as I can remember, I was in the kitchen and then I was in the woods. I don't think I was completely awake yet.

The sticks I had stabbed into the ground like a makeshift stockade had been partially knocked down. I stepped over them and saw that the branches I had laid across the opening of the well had fallen partially inside. I would have turned and left, but I noticed a tiny patch of yellow down in the well. If the summer sun hadn't been directly overhead I might not have seen it, but it was unmistakable: under the branches I could see yellow fabric. I lowered myself to my knees beside the well and leaned over the edge, feeling how much cooler the air was just a couple of feet into that dark opening.

Carefully, I snaked my hand between the branches and caught the yellow cloth between my fingertips. I was expecting a small scrap, but as I tugged on it I realized there was an entire piece of clothing hidden down there, tangled in the twigs, as if someone had tried to throw it down the well but had snagged it.

As I tugged it free and more of it became visible, I recognized it what it was. My heart jumped up into my throat and I could hear my blood rushing and pounding in my ears as my heart began hammering. It was a yellow sundress. Jeannie's sundress, from the dream. The rush of blood in my ears turned into a white noise hiss and the whole world went grey and translucent when I saw that it had bloodstains on it.

I'm not sure where the dress is now. I remember looking at the bloodstains - they were small, only an inch or two across, but there were a couple of them - and then I was standing in the kitchen again. With the stress of what was happening, I think I must have blacked out a little. I looked around but there was no sign of the dress. I must have lost it in the woods while walking back home.

My guts felt pinched and sour, and I realized I still hadn't eaten anything. I checked the clock and it was almost two in the afternoon, which made me feel even more disoriented. Where had three hours gone? Looking back on it now, I'm wondering if Jeannie's mysterious passenger was messing with my head, making me confused, trying to stop me working out what was going on. A defense mechanism, maybe. Some kind of psychic poison.

I didn't feel like eating anything, but rationally I knew I needed to put something in my belly or else I was going to end up feeling even more groggy. I smeared some peanut butter and jelly between two slices of bread and was halfway through eating when I heard the car approaching. Sandwich in hand, I pushed through the screen door into the front yard and, sure enough, there was my navy-blue station wagon rolling down the drive. The sun was reflecting off the windshield, but I could make out Polly in the driver's seat with someone smaller beside her.

Shiloh was first out of the car. He ran up and hugged me, his little head butting into my stomach, and I almost started to believe that things were going to be okay. He was talking excitedly about some playground his mother had taken him to, and how he climbed on the jungle gym and ridden something he called a "whirly-wheel". Then he began describing a game of tag he had played with some other kids, hopping around from one foot to the other as he described the action.

I looked through the windshield again, and my smile faded again. Polly and Jeannie were in the front seats, and I could see they were deep in conversation. Jeannie looked agitated, chopping at the air with emphatic gestures, and Polly was evidently trying to calm her judging from her body language. At that moment I wanted nothing more than to run to the car, yank the door open, and demand that they tell me what they were talking about, but I remembered that look of hatred Jeannie gave me the day before and I just couldn't do it.

Shiloh tugged at my hand and asked me to play a board game with him. With no idea of what else to do, I obliged, walking inside with him and opening the games cabinet. He challenged me to a game of Connect Four, and with my thoughts elsewhere he thoroughly whipped me. That didn't bother Shiloh of course: he was thrilled to have beaten me for once. I helped him reset the board and gave him a rematch, but I couldn't concentrate. The swish-clack! of the pieces dropping into the plastic frame was setting my teeth on edge, and I was so distracted that Shiloh won again, much to his delight.

Polly entered the house, and I saw she was alone. I asked Shiloh to pack the game away because I needed to talk to his mother, and then I asked Polly if we could talk. She looked tired and resigned, as if she'd expected this.

In the privacy of our bedroom, I began telling her about my fears. I tried to start gently - I didn't want to jump straight into the weird stuff and make her think I was nuts - but she wasn't listening. She said Jeannie is fine, that she's just acting how girls of that age always do, and I shouldn't worry. I got frustrated then, told her no, this isn't normal. She's changed too much, too quickly, and I'm starting to feel scared of her.

That was when she placed her hand on my forehead, checking for a fever, and just like that I was full of rage. I wanted to slap her hand away, yell at her to stop patronizing me, maybe do something even worse, anything to make her listen, and I felt my hands clench involuntarily into fists.

She inadvertently defused my anger by asking about the novel. Her voice was all love and concern, and it sapped all of the fury out of me, filling the cavity with shame. Her words must have seemed completely reasonable to her: leave the parenting to her, try to ignore these distractions, stop worrying, and just get my book finished. I still hadn't told her that after almost a week at the cabin I hadn't written a single word of my novel. In that instant my worry about Jeannie was temporarily forgotten, and instead I was worried about all those other things: our desperate finances, the letters from the bank, having to make the heart-breaking decision to sell the house and one of the cars.

It only lasted a moment. What good is a fresh paycheck if my daughter is under the influence of something evil? I'd go bankrupt a dozen times over to keep my family safe. I couldn't tell Polly that, though. She still believes in my talent, honestly thinks I'm going to produce a classic second novel and end all our troubles. She didn't see that shadow on the house, or the bloodstained dress in the well.

I have to prove it to her somehow. I can't save Jeannie if I'm fighting against Polly. We have to be unified or God only knows what might happen.

DOC005 closed

> open doc005

Opening...

All these years! All these years and I never understood! So many nights I woke up screaming because I failed to grasp what the old man was telling me. It wasn't a nightmare. It was a message, a warning, a sign. Everything is so clear now! The old man isn't what is controlling and corrupting my wonderful daughter. No! He's something else. A guard maybe? A previous victim? Whatever he is, he wants to keep Jeannie and Shiloh safe, and he was trying to show me how!

Of course, my idiot child brain was frightened and interpreted his message as a nightmare. He was warning me about a terrible danger! I must have sensed the danger he was warning me about but completely misinterpreted the specifics. Stay away, he was telling me. There is something terrible in this shack, something that will try to destroy you and everyone you love.

I always believed that his hands were bloody from hurting somebody, but now I think he was defending himself, warding off some kind of attack, and his hands were shredded and bloody from the continued assault.

He came to me in a dream last night. It started like the old dream, with me standing by the well and the door opening, but this time he wasn't simply staring out with vacant eyes. He looked at me, beckoned to me, and I realized he wanted to show me something. I was still afraid, but I think I was already beginning to understand and piece everything together, so I went to him.

The things he showed me were terrible but necessary. I saw Jeannie, wearing a pastel green t-shirt and an orange skirt, opening the doors of the storm cellar underneath the abandoned cabin, revealing an impossible blackness within. I saw her down in that cellar, walking between wooden shelves, running her small hands over chains, hooks, knives, and other metal implements of death and torture, still gleaming despite the dust and the darkness. I understood that the old man was showing me things that had already happened, just in the past week since we arrived.

What he showed me next made me feel sick, but in my dream I couldn't close my eyes or look away. I was forced to watch as Jeannie killed a succession of small animals, starting with a sparrow. She held the tiny bird's body in one hand while she smashed its head with a hammer. There was a shift, a moment of darkness, and I could tell that it was seeing another day. Jeannie, now in a salmon pink pinafore, was dismembering a squirrel with a knife. She pulled its torso wide open, as if seeking some secret hidden within.

Another misty flicker passed in front of my vision, and it was a different day again. My daughter was wearing her yellow sundress this time, and I thought I knew what I was about to see, but it was worse than I could have predicted. Where did she find a puppy? Did she steal it from a one of our neighbors? Had she crept into someone else's home and stolen their beloved pet?

The dog was too young and innocent to be frightened. It was a terrier, I think, brown with a black patch over one eye, and it tried to lick Jeannie's face and she placed it on a filthy table. It sniffed eagerly around the grime-encrusted wooden surface, paying no attention to Jeannie as she reached up to a high shelf and fetched a rusty hacksaw.

By the time the little creature realized it was in danger, it was far too late. Its tiny heart managed to shoot out a single jet of arterial blood, which splashed the front of Jeannie's yellow dress and trickled down onto the floor. Even though it was dead, she didn't stop. She continued her grotesque work on that small corpse for what felt like a very long time. If it hadn't been a dream, I would have vomited.

The old man had one more scene to show me. I was back outside the cabin, and Jeannie was carefully lowering the cellar doors back into place. She was wearing her blue and white swimming costume, and for a moment I thought it was a different day again, but then I saw the yellow bundle she held in her arms, and realized she'd had her swimming costume on under her dress.

The thing she was holding was a small, misshapen thing, wrapped up in incongruously cheerful yellow fabric and stained with patches of red. She walked to the well and, using one hand, pushed down on the branches I had laid over the top. Once there was a large enough opening, she dropped her bundle inside. Very faintly, I heard the plop-plop-plop of several small objects landing in the water far below.

Everything became clear. The dress had snagged on a twig, and the gruesome contents wrapped up inside it had fallen out.

I woke up, but for the first time in almost a week, I was calm. I didn't sit up or scream. I understood. Something that dwells in that old cabin had taken hold of my daughter and was making her do terrible things. The escalation was not lost on me: a sparrow, then a squirrel, and finally a puppy. It is working its way up the scale, compelling Jeannie to kill bigger and bigger animals, and I knew what was at the end of that scale.

Shiloh. That is the thing's ultimate goal, I'm sure of it. It wants to force Jeannie to murder her little brother. It makes a horrific kind of sense. Whatever control it has over her isn't absolute, I think. It's testing her, starting out small to see how far it can push her. If it tried to make her kill Shiloh as soon as it took hold of her, she would have fought against it, maybe even broken free of it completely.

It's been trying to keep me away. Those strange gaps in my memory started when I first came across the well, and I started feeling sick and confused. It's trying to stop me from interfering with its plans, but thanks to the old man's help I finally understand what's going on. Even so, I had to be sure. There was only one way to know that the repulsive visions I had been shown were real, and not just some demented variation on that old nightmare.

I crept out of bed, feeling properly alert for the first time in days. Sneaking out of the bedroom, I listened for any sounds that would tell me where the Polly and the kids were. Silence. I tiptoed downstairs and peeked out the window. As I suspected, the car was gone.

There was no telling when they would be back, so I wasted no time. Only one thing could prove that my dream was real, and I hoped and prayed that Polly hadn't taken the car to the launderette to wash our clothes. The door of the children's shared bedroom opened with a loud creak, making me flinch, but I saw the room was empty and relaxed again.

The wicker laundry hamper was beside the door, and its hinged lid was open. With a rush of relief, I saw that it was half filled with clothes. I reached inside and started rummaging through the shirts, socks, and underwear, looking for one specific thing. It was right at the bottom, as if someone with a guilty conscience had hidden it down there.

It was a small one-piece swimming costume, dark blue with white trim. I turned it over in my hands, and there it was, exactly what I had been looking for. The proof I needed. The room seemed to spin around me and I heard a high-pitched whine in my ears like tinnitus - I was fainting, I realized. Just in time, I reached out and braced myself against the wall, sinking weakly to my knees.

My vision was being blurred by tears, but I could still see it. There was a dark brown stain on the white trim. Dried blood, just a small spot, but unmistakable. The vision was real. Jeannie really had killed that puppy and dropped its remains down the well, wrapped in her yellow sundress.

A soft, sharp noise broke me out of my reverie. I looked toward it, and there was Jeannie, standing at the top of the stairs. She hadn't gone in the car with Polly after all. She was staring at me, her mouth open in surprise, and then she looked down at the swimsuit I was clutching in both of my trembling hands. Her eyes widened, and she looked back up at me, meeting my gaze. There was no hatred there now, just surprise and shame.

Before I could say anything, she had vanished back down the stairs, her bare feet thumping on the bare wooden steps. I wanted to chase her, grab her, shake her little body and demand that this spirit or devil or whatever the hell it is get out of her, leave my little girl alone, but my legs refused to obey me. I just sat there on the floor like an idiot as she ran away.

I have to go after her and find some way to free her, but first I needed to write all of this down. I don't know what kind of power that entity has. I don't know how much danger I'm in. I know it can mess with my mind, confuse me, make me forget things. I know it has been driving Jeannie to commit horrible acts of violence. I'm a strong grown man and she's a little girl, but does that even matter any more? I have no idea what she's capable of now.

I'm going to find her now. If I don't come back, look in the well.

DOC006 closed

> open doc007

Opening...

DOC007

Hard to think. Hard to type. Bad thing in the shack is attacking me non-stop. I'm in the woods then I'm in the house then I'm by the stream then I'm at the well and I don't remember going any of these places. Don't remember why I went there.

When I was in the woods I remember blood on my hands. They're mostly clean now. Maybe I washed them in the stream. No idea where the blood came from or how it got on me. Mostly clean now except for dark brown crescents under my fingernails.

In the house now. Found myself sitting here with the word processor already turned on. Previous journal entry was on the screen. I saved it and turned the machine off last time I used it. Who turned it on? Maybe it was me. I don't remember coming into the house, or even sitting down.

It's sunny outside. It was night before. How long have I been wandering around looking for her? I don't feel hungry. Just nauseous. How long has it been?

Where did the blood come from? I hoped it was just that thing trying to confuse me and give me fake memories but I can see those stains under my nails.

Nail brush. I need to go use the nail brush.

DOC007 closed

> open doc008

Opening...

I have been very sick. The drugs make it hard to think clearly, but I am feeling much better. Dr. Carmichael is so happy with my progress that he let me have my word processor. I can't have it in my room - nobody said it out loud, but I know the electric cable is a suicide risk - but the head nurse Gabriella found a wheeled desk to put it on. She keeps it locked in her office, and when I need it she will roll it out into the common area so I can write under supervision.

Talking to Dr. Carmichael has helped me to understand what was really going on in grandma's old cabin. The short version is that I was under too much stress and suffered some kind of mental breakdown that caused acute paranoia.

Dr. Carmichael told me that an important part of my recovery is understanding the difference between what was really happening and what I mistakenly thought was going on, so I am going to write it all down here.

I used to be a novelist. My first book was so well-received that I over-extended myself financially, expecting that I would produce a second novel in no time. When I was unable to produce that follow-up, our finances collapsed and we were forced to sell our family home and move into the vacation cabin that I inherited from my late grandmother.

My wife and I told the children it was just an extended vacation, but they understood more than we realized. Shiloh put on a brave face, but Jeannie was more deeply affected. Isolated from her friends and her regular sporting activities, she became withdrawn and moody. I suspect she also resented me for being unable to write the book that would have saved us from bankruptcy.

I don't know for certain, since I have not spoken to Polly or the kids in months, but I am fairly sure Jeannie got her first period soon after we arrived at the cabin. This would explain why her dress and swimming costume had blood stains on them. Dr. Carmichael explained that girls can go through extreme emotions at that time, so she may have thrown her dress into the well out of shame or disgust.

She didn't kill the sparrow or the squirrel or the puppy and she was never going to kill Shiloh. I imagined it. There was no giant shadow. I imagined it. There was no old man. I imagined it. It was so real but it doesn't matter because I imagined it. I can still see the rust flaking off the hacksaw blade as she brought it down on that puppy's neck but it wasn't real and I imagined it oh god why aren't the drugs working I imagined it I imagined it no demon no spirit no ghost no old man I imagined it all I imagined it all I imagined it all.

No. Not my imagination. Lies. The doctor wants me to believe lies. The old man lied too. The visions he showed me were lies. I don't think there even was an old man. He was a lie too. A lie telling me lies. Lies about Jeannie. Making me scared of her. Making me want to hurt her.

Jeannie wasn't the one being controlled by the thing in the cabin.

I was.

DOC008 closed
No more files