



## The Smiley House

He strained over the wheel, trying desperately to pierce the wall of darkness that clung to his windshield. He couldn't see the road but he knew it was there, somewhere. Damn-it, why can't I see? It's got to be close.

The car rocked down into a pothole and he began slamming his feet against the brake pedal, desperately trying to slow its speed.

Work you sons-of-a-bitches! Please work! But they didn't work, probably never would. He felt a knot of panic work its way up from his stomach.

Then a yellow curve sign lurched out of the void without warning. He threw his weight hard against the steering wheel. The car slid into the curve, tires screaming, as the hardened pavement ripped the rubber viciously from them.

The tires were going to hold!

Then their grip broke and the car flew off the road, over the shoulder and into space. The fall seemed to take forever or a moment, who could guess? But at some point the fall ended and he was on the smiley road. A mist seemed to hem in the edges of the world, keeping the new scene close, yet not to close. The leafless trees smiled. He knew the car had to be floating on the mist. He could see the road, but no road could be this smooth. And there was never any sound.

No sounds, none. You think I don't notice?

The road split before him. He turned the wheel to the left and felt the car drift slowly, smoothly onto its new course. The mist opened up hesitantly before him while it closed inexorably behind him.

Finally, he came to another intersection and turned left, knowing he had never taken this turn before even though the trees, the road and the mist always looked the same. He felt a small welling of hope.

Maybe I won't have to go there this time. Maybe this road goes somewhere different, somewhere better. Then the mist cleared slightly and he saw it before him: The House. It was waiting; waiting and smiling. He started to feel nauseous.

I don't want to go to the smiley house. He began to cry as his car passed the picket fence. The car stopped, then it was gone. He was standing on the sidewalk facing the porch that embraced the open front door of The House like the hungry maw of some gross, nocturnal beast. "Come inside Billy," it whispered.

Childhood demons laughed on the edges of his vision. Always too fast to really see, but slow enough to make him try, they laughed and laughed their half-imagined presence triggering involuntary visions; dark visions, of hairy-legged spiders crawling over his naked flesh, his muscles unable to respond to his commands for movement.

He slid unwittingly into the demons' grasp, the vision taking on the aspect of reality. The creatures on his body gripped his attention as if in a vise, his eyes riveted on their languid motion as they continued to move over him. Some were on his chest now while others had begun moving up his legs.

They had crawled on him before, the horrid things. Even as a child, they had crawled on him. Crawling, crawling, crawling and him caught in the freeze of paralysis. It was always the same. They would just crawl and crawl while he lay there watching them, helpless. They wouldn't go away until he promised to go into - The House. They knew he'd promise. They always won.

But he was older now. And he had become much stronger. Through the years, he had faced many of his fears and now he faced this one, faced it with the grim determination that he would not give in. He would not promise. No, he would not give in this time. Things had changed.

Yet even as his resolve hardened, the little beasts continued, one group moving purposefully across his torso towards his head, another up his legs. He could feel them on his neck, crawling across his cheeks. A surge of panic rushed up from the pit of his stomach. They had never done this before. Why are they acting this way, what are they doing? Yet even as he framed the question in his mind, he knew the answer.

No! Oh God, no! He screamed without a sound as one of the filthy things crawled inside his nose. He felt another enter his other nostril, several on his lips, others moving towards his ears.

He felt them inside him crawling along with their hairy legs, scratching his tender inner tissues as they slunk along.

Repulsion welled up in him until he felt like gagging until finally gag he did; his jaw muscles, suddenly released from the paralysis, working just long enough to open his mouth. Five or six of the larger spiders crawled over his lips into his mouth and on towards his throat.

The horror rolled over him wave after nauseating wave. He begged and prayed to God for death, quick and merciful, but God wouldn't answer.

Suddenly he felt a movement near his buttocks. NO, you can't! His mind flailed about in utter terror. STOP! I PROMISE! JUST STOP! STOP NOW!

He was standing on the sidewalk facing the porch. No monsters, no spiders, just him and the House. He looked at it. He knew it had won and he hated it. Hated it for what it had done to him and himself for letting it win. He saw that a pumpkin was now sitting on the porch beside the steps as if to greet him. It looked like a disembodied head sitting there. What's the pumpkin for? I don't want to know, he thought.

"Come inside Billy", they whispered and he knew there were many in the House besides the House itself.

Why do they always whisper? Who are they? I don't want to know.

As he approached the porch, he saw his mother, her hair caught in a red bandanna. She was sweeping the porch with a homemade cornhusk broom. She paused from her sweeping as he neared; turning to face him, then stared at him for a long moment. Her hand raised and she shook her finger at him in a slow reproachful manner as only a mother can do.

How did she get here? And why was she here? She turned back to her sweeping.

Billy continued on to the porch. Once there he turned slowly to his right, so slow it seemed to take several minutes. He saw his father in the garden. His father was looking at him without moving, without talking. Just looking or maybe staring. His face held that 'disappointed look', the one reserved just for him ever since that time the sheep were killed.

"It's all your fault for not making sure they were all in with the gate locked, boy. Now the wolves have got to 'em and there ain't enough left of 'em to even save some meat."

"But, father, I know I shut the gate and locked it I know I did!"

"Hush boy, I don't want to hear anymore of your back-talk. Now go to your room."

And he gave me that look then turned away and went back to hoe his garden of dead mice.

Swinging his head back and forth between his parents Billy cried, "Mother, father HELP ME!" They refused even to look at him again.

"Why won't you help?" "Please, help me!"

"YOU PROMISED BILLY, NOW GO INSIDE. GO INSIDE, BILLY," they said. Then the both turned tuned their backs to him and they pointed at the door.

"I don't want to go inside!" He began to cry. Why do I have to go inside? Why? I HATE being inside, I hate it. Oh, God how I hate it.

He watched his hand move towards the doorknob as if a thing of it's own mind, detached, unreal; saw (felt?) his hand reach the knob and start to turn it and things began to shift in an odd way...

He shifted uncomfortably, felt a sharp stab of pain in his left shoulder. His mouth was so dry. His lips pursed, with his tongue instinctively moving to moisten them. It came away gritty with dirt. Billy struggled to bring his eyes into focus until his vision cleared enough to find himself on the porch facing the yard. I'm outside but... Damn, how long was I inside? He moved a hand over his shoulder, remembering pain and winced when he hit the spot, pulling a splinter of old wood out that the House had given him. As his mind cleared, he became aware of a sticky sensation on his right arm. Turning he came face to face with the pumpkin head. It was a head now, with only the skin of a pumpkin. A pumpkin head, with one eyeball hanging out of the socket and a mush of brains and blood oozing down its' side. Only it's not a pumpkin, not a pumpkin at all. Oh, damn you, IT'S...

Billy jerked involuntarily, felt the bed give to the sudden movement of his body. He struggled into the waking world casting his eyes wildly about the room. No, just a dream, the room assured him, the bed pressing its softness against his

skin. A nightmare of a dream, but just a dream, nonetheless. As his mind began to pull itself together, he realized he was shaking and completely drenched with sweat. He felt himself returning to reality, and as if triggered by the sensation, a wave of nausea followed anchored in the bottom of his gut. The command to sit up and swing his legs over the side of the bed left him in a slow roll over its side as muscles responded in haphazard, drunken fashion. He hit the floor with a thud. He couldn't get up, it just wasn't going to happen, so he began rolling and crawling across the floor towards the hall. Normally the bathroom, several quick steps and a turn away, was convenient to the bedroom but now it seemed to be the journey from hell. He barely reached the stool before the vomiting started. He had been here before, though reaching the bathroom had never been this difficult. He clung to the confidence of knowing he'd feel better shortly.

Only this time was different. He had never been this sick before. The bout of vomiting that usually lasted an hour or two lasted the better part of the day this time, ending in several racking hours of dry heaves and a flurry of body aches. By late afternoon, he finally found respite from his sickness leaving him weak and half-conscious. He lay still waiting for deadened nerves to begin to re-awaken. The onset of a deep-seated chill drifted up to Billy through the myriad symphony of aches that had hence claimed all sensory inputs his mind would accept.

"Blankets and bed. Yeah blankets... and bed", he croaked to himself. He just wanted to go back to bed.

I'll have to crawl, he thought. Ok, let's go. The commands to crawl forward issued from his brain out on to the body's transmission lines, the nerves, heading for the muscles. His muscles were supposed to respond; sending a continuous update of their actions and progress back but they didn't. Instead, the world had become a shimmering crystalline illusion that played itself fancifully across his mind, a loose connection to the real world in which Billy thought he saw himself move out of the bathroom and into the hallway. Is that music? Sure, music and I know the song, right? Yeah, Pink Floyd. Somebody is playing Pink Floyd.

"I...I have become *uncomfortably* numb," he sang to himself without making a sound as he imagined himself crawling back to his bed, dragging himself in, then pulling up blankets in desperation of a little warmth.

His last thought as he fell into a dreamless, exhausted sleep

was, "Wish I had more blankets, bigger blankets. Need to get some soon, tomorrow, yeah tomorrow."

Billy woke, disoriented, unsure of where he was or how he had got there. The bed felt hard underneath him, his surroundings unfamiliar. Anxiety mixed with his confusion as he tried to understand what was happening. It was only a moment, though it hung suspended from time, large and threatening. Then recognition began to filter through, he was not in his room. Blankets wrapped around him were towels; he was in a bathroom, his bathroom. He remembered then, the dream and being sick - very, very sick. Yet he knew where he was and that grounded him back into reality. He was awake and he was home.

Washed up, with a warm cup of coffee, a thick robe wrapped around him with his feet propped up in his favorite fake leather easy chair, Billy felt much better. The worn remote brought the TV to life and flicked through several channels without pause until channel 4 sprang to life hawking the local morning news. The comfort of routine pacified Billy, numbing the bad dreams into the past like whitewash on a rotting fence. The drone of Mike Meyer, relating the tidbits of boredom Elmhurst Heights called news, lolled in the background like ocean waves on the beach.

Relaxed and content, gradually Billy's attention shifted, delving into the sound of the TV to bring out the words caught within.

"We have the response form the Mayor's office regarding the citizens' petition for new playground equipment in the park at Spring Hill." There was a pause, then "Channel 4 news has just received a report of a murder in Elmhurst Heights. I repeat Channel 4 news has just received a report of a murder last night in Elmhurst Heights. Due to the graphic nature of this incident, parents are strongly cautioned that this material may not be suitable for children. I repeat..."

A quiver of shock ran through Billy. A murder? In Elmhurst Heights? Was this some kind of sick joke? There was virtually no crime of any kind here, let alone a murder!

"About an hour ago police found Marcia Louis dead in her home at 1616 Lincoln Street. Based on eyewitness reports, Channel 4 has learned that the murder of Ms. Louis was a brutal slaying. Police have confirmed the eyewitness reports that Ms. Louis' body, when found, had been decapitated. No further information is known at this time. The Elmhurst Heights Chief of Police was unavailable for comment but has promised a statement from

the department before the end of the day.”

The remote twitched and the set flicked off.

The Lazy J was like thousands of other bars in “Small Town”, USA. Liquor, greasy food, a pool table, worn stools – a place to hangout, a place to not be alone. Billy swung in around 10:30am, “Hey, Mack” he said to the bartender whose real name was Willard Watkins, “is the beer cold?”

Mack was taller than Billy. Taller and broader, a rough looking man, the kind that you instinctively gave plenty of room to. He glared at Billy, “beer’s always cold, I make sure of it myself. You got a problem with the beer we can step out back and discuss it man-to-man, ok?” Then he winked, pulled a frosted mug out from under the counter and loaded it from the tap marked “Miller Lite”.

Billy grinned, grateful to Mack for playing out their little two-man act. Unlike other days, when it was bait for fresh meat – uh patrons, who would be drawn into a longer act featuring a climatic confrontation, today it brought assurance and sense of safety to Billy. He was glad he had come here. It was a good place, his place. He sipped his beer.

Conversation mixed with the droning of ESPN commentary, which would drown out completely as the population of the J increased later. Now it was sedate, fitting moments to savor the coolness of the beer as it slid down his throat. Billy’s mind wandered languidly, eyes staring unfocused through the half-filled Pilsner in his hand.

Somewhere during the second Miller Lite, he began to pay attention around him. Not much of a sports fan, ESPN couldn’t hold him for more than a mildly curious moment. More people were here now, voices of a several men near him easy to hear. He listened.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either but I was there, saw it with my own eyes, ya know. God, I don’t believe it. I mean listen guys; I’ve seen a lot of serious accidents. People messed up real bad, breaks, cuts, women, kids but this was... there just isn’t anyway to describe it. I hope I never have to see anything like it ever again.”

“How long you been drivin’ the ambulance Lou?”

“Twelve years last July.”

"This was the worst one huh?"

There was a pause. Chair legs clawed on the floor, then Billy felt a light brush against his shoulder. He turned slightly and saw Al Milken at the bar beside him. He nodded as Al's eyes caught his. They knew each other, limited to polite greetings. Sometimes Billy would strike-up conversations here, a chance to make new friends or deepen casual friendships, but not today. He turned back to face the bar.

The conversation seemed suspended now, waiting, needing to delve back to the main subject or dribble into meaningless small talk. It waited on Lou. A deep drought from his freshly filled glass, courtesy of Al's pitcher, seemed to ease Lou's tension, loosen his tongue. Another deep drink and he spoke.

"It was me and Pete took the call at the Louis house." Lou paused, his gaze held to the glass in his hand. "Man, it was unreal. See we got there, grabbed the kit and headed in but we didn't need the kit." His head dropped. No one moved. He remained with his head down, as if fighting some personal battle. Finally, Lou raised his head, red wet eyes touching each of them in turn, as he spoke. "We walked in, blood was smeared all over the place" pause for a jagged lingering breath, "and her head, man, just her head was there. Jesus, I never saw anything like it. All smashed up." Now that he was started it seemed as if had need to empty the story quickly, expunging it from his being, "Her brains were mush with one eyeball hanging out of the socket. Somebody did her like," a shiver cocked his head slightly left, "like, hell I didn't know anybody could do that! It ain't human, man, it's just... Jesus, give me another drink."

Billy was transfixed; Lou's voice and the memory of his dream mixed themselves back and forth in his mind, melding seamlessly. He jerked to his feet and bumped his way out of the J, impervious to Mack's queries tailing behind him. The door swung closed as he moved onto the street.

He crossed the street. There wasn't any traffic. A fortunate thing, because Billy wasn't looking. He was trapped in his own mind, replaying his dream and the conversation overheard in the J.

What the hell is going on? I'm burned out, stressed, that's all; that's all it is. But even as he attempted to reassure himself he knew it was a lie. While Lou was speaking, Billy had felt the pull, heard the silent laughter from his dreams

surge up within him, voices hissing to him. "It was you Billy boy, wasn't it? Yes it was, we know, we were there, watching you play. Did a real number on that old lady, didn't you?" they chided.

And Billy did know. He hadn't known, but he did now. It was him. Somehow he had become a monster, had slipped out in the dark of night and bludgeoned an old woman to death. Decapitating her like stripping a pumpkin from its vine. God what was he going to do?

Billy came to the awareness that he was standing still. He was at his house; the body having taken over with rote behavior when bereft of the mind's attention, finding its own way home. He stared at the front of his house for a moment then went inside.

In his easy chair, Billy sat for a long time facing the blank TV screen, mentally wandering through what he had seen, heard and what he felt. At last he set aside his demons, put his fears to rest, convincing himself that he was just stressed, reacting to nightmares, lack of sleep, and the horror of a murder in his quiet little hometown. A good night's rest and things would clear themselves in the morning. He began the automated preparations for bed.

Sleep came easily, softly. It crept over him without conscious recognition. With it came dreams.

Car keys jingled, dangling loosely from his index finger a burnt red fob folded back onto his palm. These aren't my keys, he thought. I must have found them somewhere but I can't remember. It struck him as odd. But the keys were quickly forgotten, as he became aware of a silky, thick whisper dancing around his head. Direction seemed not to exist, the sound easily eluding the confines of position. Suddenly he realized the voice, no the voices, were becoming clearer.

"Such a good job, a good boy, Billy. Proud we are, proud of our little boy," they said trailing off into giggly laughter. Then they surged back clearer and stronger than before. "Time to take a little ride, don't you think? Your work has only begun, Billy Boy. We have much more, much bigger work waiting for you."

Billy held still, unable to grasp reality, resisting the urge to move inflicted upon him by the voices. What the hell was going on? Silence had returned; silence and stillness, held against their will.

“GET IN THE CAR,” erupted in his ears. Recognition flooded through him even as the car that hadn’t been there a moment ago was in front of him, waiting to take him down that road; the smiley road. It suddenly seemed he was caught in a tornado, buffeted against his will, being driven towards the car. He lashed out viciously, slashing and clawing at the force pressing him to get in the car. “Its not going to happen again, I’m not going to do it!” he screamed, demons whipping all about. Like a flash everything slid into darkness, thought and memory fading away from him until blink, he was on the road to the smiley house again.

Blink. He was at the House again. It stood silent, watching him, waiting for him to enter. His mother was no longer on the porch but his father was still in the garden, working the ground on his hands and knees. Billy couldn’t see what he was doing.

Raising his head, Billy’s father looked at him, his face filled with bitterness, anger and disgust.

“You damn dumb boy! Look what you’ve done now.”

Then Billy saw what his father was working on in the garden, where they dead mice lay in shallow graves. In the dank, freshly dug dirt sat a head.

Billy strained to look in the dim light, trying to be sure it was really a head and praying it was not. Then it moved, turning on the ground.

“Billy! Look what you’ve done to me! I’m planted in this filthy patch your father calls a garden. Look at me Billy! Look what you’ve done to your poor mother!”

And Billy did see – saw it was his mother’s head, decayed and rotten, worms crawling from her empty eye sockets.

Enough!

Billy turned to the House. He knew it was the house. That was where it all came from. The voices, the evil, the cruel images. All from the House. But this was too much. Billy had loved his father in his own way but the memory of his mother and the love they had shared was still fresh in him like the dew of a morning in spring.

They had gone to far this time.

He strode with an even, purposeful step towards the house, up the rickety steps then kicked the door open and entered.

The demons spun about him, whispering in their sly, insidious little voices. He knew they were there but he did not hear their words, moving on purposefully towards the kitchen.

“Billy, Billy, what are you doing they cried! This is our place Billy. You are ours now. Stop Billy, stop and do our bidding!”

The demons surrounding him had coalesced into a single voice, the voice of the multitude. Billy heard their words but ignored them. He knew his purpose now, knew what he had been brought here to do. His single mindedness buffered him from the persuasion of their words.

“Billy! We will do things to you, Billy. Bad things, things you can't imagine! Stop Billy, stop or you will learn just what we can really do!”

He was in the kitchen now. There were so many demons around him now that he felt the air had thickened with their visceral presence. It was becoming more difficult to move forward every moment. Soon it would be impossible. He could not let them stop him.

Billy lunged forward with a surge, banging himself into the cold steel of the iron stove. The demons whirled around him like a tornado, nipping and biting him as they finally realized what he intended to do.

A flick of a dial brought the stove's gas flame to light; a grasp and a yank brought the curtains down onto the flames.

Demonic screams ripped through the air, deafening Billy as he fell to the floor, will gone now that he had accomplished his mission. The swirl of demons around him looked like smoke, blurring his vision.

Yet lying on the floor, he could still see one thing though the haze of demonic forms - the rising orange flicker of the flames as they crawled their way up the walls of the House.

Hmm, soft - warm. The blankets over him, the soft conforming mattress and pillow cradling him, smells common and familiar. It felt so good, so - right.

Billy sat bolt upright in his bed. He was alive! Memory surged back to him. The House, he had battled it, set it afire. He had beaten it!

The sun was shining through the windows and birds were singing merrily. He was free! Free to live a normal life, no longer to be haunted by the road, the House or the demons! Billy stretched. It felt so good to be ALIVE.

He hopped out of bed, dressing quickly. Though no Holiday or birthday it was to be a day of celebration. A celebration of life, of Billy's return to the normal world, freed of the fear of darkness and the demons that had haunted him so long. He had won. He had fought the house and won. It was over!

Dressed, shaved and whistling a nameless tune, Billy opened his front door, stepping into the warmth of the mid-morning sun glowing in the cloudless blue sky.

What a wonderful day it was!

"Yes, Billy a wonderful day. Now that you have freed us from the House, we will be with you always, night and day, for the rest of your life. We have many things for you to do, Billy. Yes, many, many things for you to do!"