

New Fiction from Jim Speese: “The Darkness”

Sometimes these things happen. You wake from a deep sleep, whether a short afternoon nap or a long night’s slumber, and you’re disoriented. You forget things. Sometimes you shower and dress for work and only after breakfast realize it’s Saturday. Sometimes you stare unfamiliarly around the room you’ve lived in for years and wonder where you are. Sometimes it’s something simple—forgetting what was on TV last night or who called you just before sleep drowned you.

One night Jonathan Peters forgot where his light switches were.

It wasn’t totally uncalled-for. After all, the house was new to him, and it was only Jonathan’s second week in residence. It was an old farmhouse refurbished as a modern bungalow with all the conveniences and plenty of room. Full-sized windows occupied most of the walls, looking out into the yard, surrounded by woods and fields. It combined a rustic, rural feel with modern amenities. There were no neighbors, no streetlights, for miles. The nearest city, Brewer, was over ten miles away. Here, in the country, it was peaceful. Jonathan had wanted comfort and privacy when he’d bought this house, and as usual, he got what he wanted.



On this particular night he arrived home from his job as a used car salesman about six o'clock. It was not a job he'd ever wanted, but he was good at it. He had a talent to convince people they wanted more than what they needed. He was proud of his ability to talk customers into useless upgrades, and his commission reflected this ability. At only thirty, he was doing quite well. This evening brown leaves flurried about his driveway like snowflakes. He only vaguely noticed. To him, autumn was just another season, October just another month. But it hadn't always been that way. He paused a moment, the key in the door, and stared at the leaves rustling and breaking free in the wind.

He watched himself distantly, a boy rushing home before night, before the darkness came on a Halloween night. He watched himself years ago, afraid of nightfall.

Any other time, any other month, the darkness was benign. February was too cold. The darkness was frozen deep in the

Earth. June it was too warm, bristled with too much energy, the energy of boys released from school, the energy that fueled the summer. And even in September the darkness was toothless. There was a different energy at work then, the energy of the return of the school year, and yet the summer still lingered.

But in October the summer died, along with cornfields and leaves that still, mummified and brown, haunted the landscape. Only then some spirit seeped into the night, and the darkness became a thing alive. He'd always found an excuse to come home early in October, even Halloween, before he was surrounded by this darkness that came on the October wind to watch him from behind his window. And he would hide in his room with the light on, never opening his window. Never letting the darkness inside.

It wasn't just the darkness, of course. It was what the darkness hid in its evil design. Creatures? Demons? He'd never really known. He'd only known they used the October darkness as camouflage.

No one had noticed his fear, not his peers nor his parents, and of course he'd eventually outgrown it. In time he'd even forgotten what a coward he'd been. But now, his key in the door of his new house, an adult, he remembered. He grimaced a moment, ashamed of his childhood cowardice. Then he smiled. He laughed. "What an idiot I was," he said to himself. He looked at the trees, the fields, the leaves, the grass, the red sun sinking in the pink sky. "There was never anything there. There was nothing to be afraid of."

He turned the key and opened the door. He stepped into the house, shuffling through his mail, which he grabbed from the floor, and turned on the TV news. He dropped the remote control next to his chair and prepared himself a microwave pepperoni pizza in the kitchen. He sat in his chair and ate from his lap.

After dinner Jonathan just stared at the TV set. He lay back on his brand-new chair, amused but tired. He was proud of this chair, proud of this house, his home, with the big-screen TV, the best remote, with all the modern conveniences. Soon the Wi-Fi would be hooked up, and he'd never have to leave his home. He'd come a long way from a skinny kid afraid of the dark. He enjoyed the moment of self-satisfaction. He let his bones seep slowly into the contours of the chair.

This is usually how sleep conquers: You melt into a chair, and the next thing you know, it's two o'clock in the morning and the late movie is ending.

But just as Jonathan lay teetering on the edge of deep sleep, in that brief but eternal moment when you're not sure whether or not you're dreaming, the phone rang. It rang a second time before Jonathan realized it wasn't a dream, a third time before he, startled, opened his eyes.

He moved to get up, already looking forward to lying back down again, this time in his bed. It wasn't easy. There was no longer any space between him and the chair. They had sort of fused, become one symbiotic organism. Pulling himself up was like forcing lovers apart.

With a frown, he managed. He staggered to the TV and realized he left the remote somewhere else. He glanced down at the box. There were no buttons—he couldn't change the channel or volume without the damn remote—but there was a power switch. He reached down and turned off the TV. There was a brief, eerie silence before the phone rang again. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone, realizing as he did so that he'd left it in the car. His house phone was ringing. One thing about the peaceful rural area he'd moved to was that he rarely had cell service, so there had been no need to bring his cell phone in. This was one reason he looked forward to the Wi-Fi being connected later this week. He wondered who had his new house number; he hadn't given it out to anyone yet. He,

himself, didn't even know what it was. In fact, now that he thought of it, when had he even gotten a landline number? Hell, he hadn't even unpacked his computers yet. He looked to find the phone, wishing he knew this house a little better.

It rang again before he could locate it on the kitchen wall. He lifted the receiver only to hear a click, then a dial tone.

"Hello?" he said to no one.

He hung up the phone. He didn't mind. He didn't want to talk to anybody anyway. He just wanted to lie down. He was deathly tired.

He sighed and staggered to bed. He pulled off his shoes and socks and lay down, still in his clothes, gratefully among the cool sheets. He thought he'd just rest his eyes a bit. As the sky darkened outside his window, the October breeze blew brittle leaves against the pane. Sleep fell like those leaves rustling, softly and gently.

When distant dreams woke Jonathan again, it was dark.

Not a complete dark, not a black dark. There was a bit of moonlight filtering through the window, but not much. Just enough to soften the darkness inside, to faintly outline the curtains and furniture eerily. Next to the bed Jonathan's alarm clock glowed 11:13.

The dreams that had woken him had been strange dreams. Dark dreams. Dreams from a distant and dark childhood, he was sure, and they floated in a dark haze outside his memory, taunting him with the memory of the fear the dreams evoked in him but not the dreams themselves.

He shivered and reached for the lamp. He felt a strange, tiny relief as his hand felt its way across the shade to the switch. He clicked the switch, sighing almost gratefully.

Nothing happened.

He clicked it again. And again. The sound floated in the darkness.

But nothing happened. The darkness didn't retreat. His thoughts cursed the darkness and his childish fear. The damn bulb was burnt out.

He rolled over, trying to sleep again. But it was too late. He was now wide awake. Besides, his dreams still haunted him. He was vaguely afraid to sleep, afraid of his dreams. What a fool he was! He knew that if he could only remember, now that he was awake, what his subconscious was so afraid of, he wouldn't fear. Dreams were like that. With the light of reality shed on them, they withered; their fears faded like ghosts.

But he couldn't remember.

He rolled over again.

Outside his window, somewhere in dark fields, he heard a rustling, a whispering. The wind, he thought. The wind through the trees. October trees. The October wind. He closed his eyes.

And his dreams fed his fear. He had no choice but to reopen his eyes.

"Damn it!" he hissed to the darkness. He obviously wasn't going to sleep. His only choice was to get up, turn on the lights, find something to read, or fix himself a snack.

He began to sit up when a stray thought invaded his brain, a memory of a fear, a foolish childhood fear, a fear that had wracked him at ten years old when, in bed, his feet would slip out of the covers and hang over the edge of the mattress. And he would imagine hands, inhuman and evil, reaching up from the darkness under the bed, somehow connected to the darkness hovering outside his window, grabbing his feet with an unholy hunger and pulling him down into that darkness. He remembered

how he used to never get up in the night to pee as a child, so afraid of the darkness under his bed. His parents had never understood why he'd wet the bed so often as he grew older.

As his feet now fell to the floor, he distantly wondered if someone, something, waited for them in the darkness under the bed.

Despite himself, he stood with alacrity and almost jumped away from the bed. He smiled briefly at his fear. He was no child anymore. There was nothing to be afraid of. Besides, soon the light would drive the darkness and his silly fears away.

He shuffled swiftly across the floor, out into the living room, and to the front door. His fear must've been caused by whatever nightmares had haunted his subconscious just before he woke, he thought. That and the new house—he wasn't quite used to it in the dark. The darkness itself made the house somehow alien.

He arrived at the door and reached out for the light switch, and another stray thought, another childhood and childish fear, floated to him. He imagined the door suddenly and violently ripping open as he reached for the lights. Dead, rotting arms, inexplicably powerful, reaching in from the darkness outside, the smell of newly dug earth and rotting flesh overpowering. He imagined, just for a brief moment, those arms grabbing him and pulling him outside. Out into the darkness.

Almost of its own accord, his hand locked the door. Then his hand slithered across the wallpaper, groping for the switch. Where was the damn thing? Would he find it before his hand rubbed against something else next to the door in darkness...? Shivering, he pulled his hand back like he'd struck a flame.

There was a noise, a scuttling, somewhere in the dark house. Somewhere in the darkness.

Roaches, he thought. Or mice. The damn things overran farmhouses, even clean ones, in the night, in the dark. His feet, naked on the cold rug, seemed to shrivel away from insects or vermin crawling all about him. His hand reached up again. Where was the light switch? It had to be here. He remembered...

And then Jonathan Peters realized he remembered *nothing* about the house. All the memories were shrouded in darkness, as if he'd never seen his own house in the light of day. As if he'd never used any light switches before, he couldn't remember ever turning on a light switch in this dark house. It seemed irrational but he couldn't remember where the light switches were. Any of them.

There was another noise outside, a scratching, a scraping far off. Or maybe not so far off. His hand abandoned the search. There was no light switch here.

Suddenly he had an urge to urinate. As if from nowhere, he felt ready to burst. The urge was vaguely comforting, since he realized that he was certain where the light switch in the bathroom was. With a new confidence he strode to the bathroom, and his hand reached out again for a light switch, this time quickly finding it. He sighed.

He tried not to think of roaches scurrying away into the cracks as he flipped the switch. And in that same split-second, he remembered horror movies from his youth that had inspired nightmares of tiny demons born of darkness who snuck out from corners and chimneys and closets at night, hissing, whispering of murder, of stealing souls, of taking people down into the darkness, but scurrying like roaches in retreat from the light, disappearing once again into their crack. Until, of course, the lights went out again.

He flipped the switch.

His stomach turned to cold oatmeal and dripped into his

bowels.

The light didn't go on.

Somehow the light didn't work. It couldn't be a coincidence. They were coming, he thought; the darkness had swallowed the light, and they were coming to get him. He tried desperately to think rationally, to calm himself. He knew the house still had power. Distantly he could hear the refrigerator humming. Somehow, he told himself, one light switch must simply control another. Somewhere in his dark and alien house, another light switch, the master switch for the bathroom, was off. And he had to find it. Or the fuse box. But how?

He was trembling as he turned from the dark bathroom, unrelieved, to the dark living room. His eyes wandered the darkness, searching for some kind of help. The humming refrigerator soothed him from a distance.

The kitchen. There must be a light in the kitchen.

Gingerly he stepped through the darkness once again, trying not to notice shadows within shadows. He moved slowly, trying to remain silent in the unreasonable fear that any noises he made could mask other noises he didn't. After a dark eternity he reached the kitchen.

He glanced in the dark.

He was cold.

He realized he was sweating.

There must be a light switch somewhere in the kitchen too, but where? If only he could see...

Suddenly, swiftly, he dove in the darkness for a drawer. He pulled it open insanelly and grabbed the flashlight from the darkness inside. The batteries, he knew, were old. But maybe they'd last just long enough for him to find a light switch.

He flicked the flashlight switch. Light gleamed from the utensil dimly into his eyes, blinding him momentarily.

Then it fell dark.

He cursed and shook the flashlight violently.

Again it glowed feebly to life, then died.

He shook it again, wildly, and then there was a noise somewhere behind the noise of the flashlight rattling, a noise somewhere near the front door. The flashlight flew from his sweaty hand and smashed into the floor, batteries flinging in all directions, as his widened but blind eyes turned to the noise.

There was no sound, only silence and the October wind.

It had been his imagination. So he told himself. There was nothing there, nothing but darkness. But it was the darkness that surrounded him, invaded him, choked him. Somehow he had to escape the darkness. He fell desperately to his knees, cursing himself for having left his cell phone in the car, searching for the batteries that had scattered like roaches, like demons, across the floor. He quickly found one but the other must've rolled under the fridge.

The fridge. The humming seemed to call him.

He reached up impulsively to pull open the refrigerator door and remembered other childhood nightmares of opening doors to find body parts, the refuse of a madman, a murderer, still hiding somewhere in the darkness, hanging in the cool air. The door opened and he was bathed by the pale light. He stood and, for a long time, he waited in the dim light, trembling.

Finally, after another eternity, he looked out from the kitchen. The house was still dark. This meager light was not enough to hold back the darkness for long. He watched the windows and the darkness beyond, the wind waving deeper

shadows against the darkness. He imagined he could see eyes, orange and glowing, in the darkness outside, watching him silently through the window. A snout, like a pig's but not like a pig's, floated underneath them.

His own eyes retreated to the relative security of the refrigerator light and closed. He felt inexplicable tears trickle down his face. He swallowed. He turned again.

The eyes, or whatever his fear had made into eyes, were gone. He looked briefly along the part of the kitchen wall that was dimly illuminated by the meager refrigerator light for some sign of a light switch. He could see nothing.

He began to wonder insanely if there were any working light switches anywhere in this cursed house. He wondered if the architects who had redesigned the farmhouse had planned all this, designed this house so he could never find a light, never escape the seeping darkness.

Sobbing audibly, he slowly and tentatively turned once again to the dark and silent living room. The digital clock on the TV glowed, a pale-red ghost, in the blackness—2:20 a.m.

Impossible, he thought. It couldn't be. He couldn't possibly have been searching for a light switch for almost four hours.

Lord, as a child, twelve midnight had never been as bad as 3 a.m. Three a.m. was the true witching hour, when everything all around was as dead as a graveyard. And the dead would rise, vampires, zombies, asleep in the dark basement would quietly climb the stairs and sneak into dark rooms. And at 3 a.m. we had no defense. It was the time of night when we were near dead ourselves, already halfway undead. Three a.m., with dusk and dawn a decade away, was the haven of darkness.

Another noise, this time somewhere above. But there was nothing above, only the roof, the attic.

Childhood nightmares again. A dark crawl space of spiderwebs and rotting wood. It never even occurred to Jonathan that he'd been in his attic only days before, that it was empty, that his new house had been thoroughly cleaned. Indeed, his house wasn't new to him anymore. It wasn't even a house anymore, simply a nightmare of other houses, ancient and haunted. It was a trap set up by the darkness after all these years to finally smother him.

He moaned, "Oh, God."

In desperation he dove into the darkness again, leaving the refrigerator door, a light in the distance, hanging open. He needed to find some more light, a more comforting light, in the living room. And he had a plan.

He grinned in victory as he switched on the TV, awaiting pleasant human voices and light. Electronic snow fell on the screen, casting deep shadows across the room. Somehow, when he'd dropped the remote, the input had changed. His grin faded. The noise of static now hid all other noises. Shadows scampered around him. This wasn't good enough. He needed to turn it down, change the input, find some humanity. This was worse than complete darkness.

He needed the remote control.

He trembled uncontrollably when he realized that, like the light switches, it, too, was lost in a sea of darkness. And he couldn't remember where it was. Sweating profusely, his hand searched the couch, at any moment expecting to recoil from something cold and living hidden in the cushions.

It took forever.

He groped the floor, all the while expecting insects or spiders to crawl madly onto his hands, up his arms, to his sobbing face. Shadows continued to fly from the TV screen, phantoms, ghosts, demons.

He imagined watching the TV set, never aware that someone or something watched him alone from the darkness. Somewhere behind the static he heard the knocking, the scratching, the scraping somewhere outside.

The wind. The darkness. Who had called earlier and hung up, found out he was alone? Who hid in the shadows now, waiting for the right moment? Who or what? He fell to the floor, sobbing.

He wanted to turn off the TV, to stop the shadows running around him. But he was afraid of the deeper darkness and silence that would follow.

He was sure they were coming at him from every direction now. He could barely hear them behind the static, barely see their shadows flitting in the corner of his eye. They were coming for him from the darkness. The darkness itself was coming for him, just as it had all those years ago when he'd escaped it in his room, trapped it outside in the October night.

It had waited. All this time.

He crawled to the wall, weeping, trembling, sweating, the shadows dancing all about him. He reached up pathetically, scratching desperately at the plaster, madly hunting the light switch. His fingernails broke, his fingers bled. He slid down the wall and lay on the floor, sobbing.

And that's where he was found the next day, in the light of afternoon, when the police had come searching for him when he'd not shown up for or called work. The TV was on. A pool of water had formed around the defrosted refrigerator.

He sat, his clothes soaked in sweat, staring at something no one else could see, his fingers bloody and raw. And just above him, a hole had been clawed in the plaster of the wall just below the light switch he'd never reached.

