

The Dare

By Daniel Mathews



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A crisp autumn breeze whistles through the trees, sending swirls of colorful leaves skittering beneath a flickering streetlight. Two small figures emerge into the dim light, clutching sacks of candy in white pillowcases. “Hold up Brian.” Tommy says breathlessly, leaning on the lamppost for support. His breath forms a small cloud in front of his freckle-strewn face as he gulps in the cool air. The light emanating from the overhead light glistens off the aluminum chain mail draped across his slender shoulders and a black sheath swinging from his side.

“Your dad warned you.” Brian admonishes his friend. Tommy flashes a dirty look at his younger companion.

“Dude, I can handle it. I just need to catch my breath. We’ve been at this for two hours now. This chain mail weighs like 20 pounds!” Tommy protests. Brian puts his candy bag down, struggling to remove his bulky brown paws.

“Here, let me help.” Tommy offers, tugging at Brian's paws.

“I’m roasting in this outfit.” Brian says plaintively, using his liberated fingers to remove the werewolf mask from his head.

“Duh, I told you so.” Tommy retorts with a crooked grin.

“I thought you liked it. I wore it for you.” Brian says crestfallen, wiping his curly locks of blond hair out of his face. Tommy’s eyes widen a bit as his face flushes.

“I really like it! You know I’m a sucker for werewolves. I just knew you’d cook in that outfit with all those layers of clothes your mom made you put on underneath it.” Tommy says apologetically.

Brian's azure eyes brighten as the boys exchange a moment of silence. "We still have nearly two miles to go." Tommy sighs, as he looks at the glow of the downtown district off in the distance. "I'm not sure we'll get there before the contest ends," he asserts, shaking his head.

"There is a short cut." Brian offers hesitantly. Tommy raises an eyebrow, "What shortcut?" He asks skeptically.

Brian kicks at the curbstone nervously, "Well, we could take Northstun Lane that cuts through the swamp, but there are no houses there."

Tommy shrugs, "Dude, we got enough candy already. We need to get into that costume contest! What's that look for?" He asks curiously.

The boy wipes off glistening beads of sweat from his brow, before giving the swamp a sheepish look. "Well, your family isn't from around here, but my grandfather's family moved here in the early 1930s. So they told me all about Northstun Manor." Brian says sheepishly.

"What's Northstun Manor?" Tommy asks curiously, following Brian's eyes toward the swamp.

Brian's dimples emerge briefly, "It's a long story. Let me show you the road." He says, pulling the werewolf mask back over his head. Once Tommy helps him with his paws, the two boys proceed to Haddonfield Lane and pause in front of a small break between the evergreens. Brian points his flashlight down at the ground, revealing crumbling pavement partially obscured by weeds poking through the numerous cracks. The road leads to a rusting iron gate whose decaying cement walls offer narrow passage. "My granddad took me fishing here once and told me that I shouldn't ever come here alone. They say this is where Jimmy Watkins disappeared last Halloween."

“Are you a chicken?” Tommy teases, sporting a churlish grin. “Besides, I’ll protect you,” he offers.

Brian looks up at his friend, betraying a broad smile through the gaping maw of his werewolf mask. “I don’t believe in those old ghost stories anyways. The swamp is dangerous though. A few summers ago, a kid got himself lost in the swamp. He had fallen into a sinkhole. They didn’t find his body for weeks.” He says a little mournfully.

“And now his ghost comes out of the swamp, to drag boys down to the depths to be with him forever.” Tommy teases, as he waggles his fingers in a ghost-like manner at Brian.

Brian whacks Tommy with his bag of candy. “You know that wouldn’t make a bad ghost story. There have always been stories about ghosts and werewolves in the swamp, but I thought that was just to keep us kids from going there.”

Tommy laughs. “Are you kidding me? That’s the best way to get kids to check something out! What do you say? Shall we go? We have a contest to win!” Tommy says, with a sweeping gesture down the darkened road.

Brian giggles, as he nods his muzzle clumsily. He leads Tommy around the dilapidated cement gate then back on to the road. While there are no streetlights, the distant glow from the stores downtown and a sliver of the moon poking through swift moving flat white stratus overhead offers pallid illumination. The boys walk silently down the middle of the road that’s immersed in the looming shadows of adjacent trees. Tommy breaks the silence first. “So are you going to tell me about Northstun Manor? Or are you just going to leave me hanging?” He asks.

“Well my dad says it never existed, that my granddad just tells that story to scare us kids. But, I’ve heard others talk about it. I even looked it up in the school library today and found evidence that the place really did exist!” Brian says.

Tommy sighs in frustration. “What dude? You’re just messing with me now.” He protests. The shrill cry of an unseen owl causes both boys to jump, followed swiftly by nervous giggles.

“Alright, I’m getting to it.” Brian laughs. “Ok, so check this out. My grandparents moved here during the Great Depression. The town was already hurting pretty bad, so homes were cheap. Anyways, this guy named Robert Northstun moved into town with his family about a year after my grandparents. He bought the property out in the middle of the swamp, and then built this big mansion out on Wolf’s Hill. He told everyone in the town that he was researching an old manuscript he found back east. He was throwing money around as if it’s going out of style, mainly in the form of old gold coins.” Brian says, pausing to take a deep breath. A chorus of crickets punctuates the boy’s momentary silence.

“So he became everyone’s best friend.” Tommy interjects before Brian can continue.

Brian nods, “Yeah, something like that. My grandfather said that Mr. Northstun preferred to keep to himself. However, people would approach Mr. Northstun for help anyways. He said everything seemed good for the first couple of years. While the county fell on real hard times, the town started doing really well.” He says.

“Let me guess, there was a catch like making a deal with Leland Gaunt?” Tommy asks, before reaching into his candy bag, procuring a treat.

“You know it!” Brian exclaims. “Well, I guess things seemed on the up-and-up at first, but then some fishermen claimed that they saw Mr. Northstun and some of the town elders were performing weird rituals out in the swamp, summoning unspeakable monsters and evil spirits!” Brian says with a lurid grin. Tommy smiles approvingly at his companion. “But everyone wrote off the fishermen as drunks.” Brian says.

Tommy nods, “Ah that would be horror movie cliché number three.” He says with a toothy grin.

Brian shrugs his furry shoulders, “Anyways, I guess people didn’t start taking it seriously until the town’s kids started disappearing. Kids were always getting lost in the swamp, or running away, but they usually came back. Supposedly, nearly 12 kids had vanished between 1934 and 1936 almost always centered on October 31st.”

“Oh come on!” Tommy exclaims, “The Feds would be all over that!” He protests.

Brian counters, “The FBI was too busy chasing Al Capone and Lucky Luciano in those days. Besides, my granddad said that he got away with it because the parents of the missing kids wouldn’t admit to it! He said they’d make up any excuse to explain why their kid wasn’t around anymore. You know, like claiming they got sent to boarding school or sent to live with relatives back east.” Brian explains.

“Well you did say running away was common in those days. It was the great depression after all. This is how urban legends get started.” Tommy counters.

“The story gets weirder though.” Brian assures his friend. “My grandfather said that every Halloween night, Mr. Northstun would throw a big party for all the successful families. During the party, each father would write the name of one of his children in blood upon a piece of paper. The piece of paper was put into a bin, and at the end of the night, Mr. Northstun would pull a name at random. The chosen kid would be brought down into the swamp after some special preparations.” Before Brian can finish, Tommy interrupts him.

“Special preparations?” Tommy asks inquisitively.

Brian shrugs, “He wouldn’t say except that the kid was brought into the basement of the Manor, then down into the swamp where Mr. Northstun and twelve men wearing black hooded cloaks would

shackle the kid down on a stone altar and sacrifice him to some terrible god!” He recounts titillatingly.

“Alright, I’m calling shenanigans.” Tommy says. “Even if there’s a family or two willing to sacrifice one kid to improve the lives of the whole family, I can’t believe that almost an entire town would go along with this.” He argues.

“My grandfather said that everyone was under his... What’s that word he used? Oh, I remember. The word was thrall. So maybe it’s like that movie where Martin Sheen was going to sacrifice his son while under a voodoo curse?” Brian offers defensively.

Tommy mulls over Brian’s story for a moment, the sound of their sneakers crunching the fragmented pavements squelched by a chorus of crickets. “I suppose you’re going to tell me the sheriff was in on the whole thing too?” Tommy asks sardonically.

Brian giggles, “Yeah I know, horror movie cliché number four. Though, I don’t think they had chainsaws in those days.” He replies, as his brown fur dances in a sudden gust that catches both boys by surprise.

“Wow, what the hell!” Tommy exclaims. “It felt as though something pushed me.”

“Come off it.” Brian says, looking around nervously. “That’s not funny.” He stutters.

Tommy forces a smile, an effort to bolster his youthful bravado. He pats Brian’s furry back reassuringly, “It’s just the wind dude, look we’re almost halfway there already.” He says, pointing off into the distance.

Brian quickens his pace down the road, running adjacent to the increasingly stark landscape. Slender beams of pale white light slice through lifeless trees that jut into the darkness. The wind causes the barren limbs to groan and shudder, making the trees look like shambling giants emerging from the swamp. A mist

begins wafting above the waterlogged terrain, obscuring the boys' visibility.

“So you never told me what happened to Northstun Manor.”
Tommy says.

Brian nods, “That’s the craziest part of the story. I looked through some old articles about the town in the library. Apparently, in 1937 on Halloween night, there was a small earthquake in the area. The article claims that the earthquake shook loose a gas pipeline, causing a fire that killed two dozen people. But, it never actually mentioned anything about Northstun Manor. There was a page missing from the article. I couldn’t find it online either, so I asked my grandfather about it. He said that one kid had escaped the sacrifice and witnessed what actually happened that night. He said that some ritual went terribly wrong, unleashing powerful spirits that Mr. Northstun and the others were unable to control. Those spirits began possessing everyone at the party, causing everyone to begin slaughtering one another! After that, the earth split open and swallowed the entire house.” Brian explains excitedly.

“Dude, first of all that’s sounds like the plot of ‘Night of the Demons’ and secondly, how does your grandfather know all this crap?” Tommy asks skeptically.

“Rumors and gossip I guess.” Brian says with a shrug. “He was about our age in those days, so probably heard it in school.”

“Are you sure your grandpa isn’t Wes Craven in disguise?”
Tommy asks, grinning sheepishly. “He always has the best stories to tell.”

Both boys gulp in the chilly night air, as they share a moment of quiet contemplation. Finally, Brian turns to Tommy and says, “Well, that’s weird. The crickets stopped.”

Tommy stops for a moment, listening intently. The boy surveys the desolate landscape, peering between the rows of decaying trees and the swaying cattails in pools of fetid water off the side of the road.

“It’s probably just too cool for them now.” He responds with uncertainty. The sound of a bat fluttering overhead unnerves the boys, causing Brian to jump. “Never mind the crickets, let’s keep moving.” Tommy concludes.

The faint sound of youthful chanting seems to emanate from the thickets off the side of side of the road. At first, the sound is barely perceptible, but increases in crescendo over time. The individual voices seem to rise and fall, shifting around the boys that stand motionless in the middle of the abandoned road. “What the hell is that?” Tommy exclaims.

Brian looks around, shivering nervously. “Ring around the rosy, a pocketful of posies. Ashes to ashes, we all fall down!” The voices seem to chant gleefully. “Crap, I think we made a wrong turn into Elm Street.” Brian says with a strained laugh. Brian’s body suddenly stiffens. He looks around before shooting an accusatory stare at Tommy through his werewolf mask. “Dude, stop that! That’s not funny.” He protests, after feeling something push his body toward Tommy.

Before Tommy can respond, he feels what appears to be a small set of hands pushing his body, causing him to stumble toward Brian. When Tommy realizes that Brian is still wearing his bulky paws, a lump begins to rise into his throat. “I didn’t do anything!” A chorus of giggles fades back into the swamp, leaving only the sound of rustling of leaves and creaking tree branches. The boys stare into the darkness, their backs pressed against one another defensively. “It’s coming from the mall I bet.” Brian says adamantly, in a bid to reassure himself.

Tommy nods, “Yeah, you’re right. The wind is carrying the kids’ voices through the swamp where it echoes. No wonder why there are so many ghost stories about this place.” The boy says, his explanation gradually restoring his confidence. They only manage to walk a few feet before Brian stops again.

“Hay, check that out.” Brian says softly, pointing at a small trail that disappears through a curtain of brambles and pines. “Do you

see that?" He asks, as the flickering of flames filters through the trees from off in the distance.

"I sure do. I think maybe someone's having a party." Tommy surmises.

"I bet it's the big kids!" Brian says with a grin. "There probably out there drinking and doing all kinds of stuff!" He asserts.

Tommy smiles, "You want to sneak a look and see what they're doing?" He asks though he already knew the answer before Brian could even nod his head in agreement. Quickly, the two small figures begin deftly navigating between the thorny brambles and trees with only the occasional snap of a twig, which causes both boys to wince. "Shhh!" Tommy chides his companion. "They're going to hear us coming." He says.

The boys crouch behind some tall, swaying weeds, flanking around the small clearing, which is dimly illuminated by the flicker of unseen flames. "I don't hear anything." Brian says, prompting Tommy to place a finger over his lips to silence him. Tommy pushes forward, peering at the center of the clearing then shrugging his shoulders. "Come on, let's get a closer look." He urges Brian.

The boys emerge into the clearing, captivated by towering slabs of stone encircling the clearing. "It looks like Stonehenge!" Tommy gasps, looking up in wonder at the granite triliths, running his fingers along the fractured surface of the stone's mossy surface.

Brian breaks off a piece of stone, holding it in the palm of his hand. He begins singing softly. "No more days to Halloween...Halloween. No more days to Halloween...Silver Shamrock."

"You're the one wearing the mask." Tommy warns. "I'm not going to carry you home when spiders and stuff start coming out of your mouth." He adds with a smirk.

Brian drops the stone, quickly taking off his mask and taking in a deep breath. His face is bright red, with rivulets of sweat streaming down his chin. “Dude, you’re getting heat exhaustion. Let’s take this crap off you.” Tommy offers, helping Brian remove his furry chest piece, followed by his sweat-laden layers of clothing.

“Gross! What am I supposed to do with these now?” Brian complains, his bare chest glistening in the flickering torchlight.

“Here, let’s try this.” Tommy says, taking his bag of candy and dumping it into Brian’s bag. He then takes Brian’s damp clothing and puts it into his now empty pillowcase. “There, problem solved.” He says triumphantly, causing Brian to smile gratefully.

Brian’s smile dissolves when he spots a slab of stone in the dead center of the ring of triliths. “That’s the sacrificial altar. I told you the story of Northstun Manor is true!” He exclaims. After glancing around, they creep tentatively toward the altar, their countenances a blend of apprehension and excitement. Brian silently points out the rust colored stains covering the horizontal slab and the crumbling platform the altar rests upon. “That’s blood I bet!” Brian gasps, his imagination running wild.

“Even if that’s blood, it looks really old.” Tommy says, as he inspects the black, rusted wrist restraints that are firmly affixed to a ring embedded deeply into the stone.

“Someone lit those torches though.” Brian says with concern.

Tommy looks around, finally spotting several empty beer cans lying on the ground beside the altar. “There’s your answer.” He says, pointing at the trash. “You were right. The big boys were partying here. I bet we just missed them.” Tommy pats the top of the altar, “Climb up here, let’s get a picture before we go.” He says.

Brian spreads himself out upon the altar, placing his slender wrists through the restraints to make for a good photo. “Make it quick!

I'm getting a bad feeling about this." Brian says, feeling the hairs of his neck suddenly standing on end.

"Don't worry dude." Tommy assures his friend. "If they come to sacrifice you, I'll put my phone into movie mode and capture the whole thing, in every detail." He promises provocatively.

"Well, it better at least be in High-Def." Brian retorts with a churlish grin before Tommy snaps a few more shots. "We should totally film a movie out here with your dad's camcorder." He says, prompting a nod of approval at the idea.

Brian rests his head on the cool stone for a moment, and for an instant, he sees a ghostly hooded figure standing over him with a gleaming, curved blade raised high in the air, ready to strike. Brian lets out a startled gasp and jolts up.

"What's the problem?" Tommy asks concern.

Brian looks around. "I thought I saw something standing beside me!" Brian exclaims as he scrambles down from the altar.

"Maybe he saw one of the twelve plus one." A young voice responds, causing the two friends to jump in fright. A small figure emerges from behind one of the triliths, dressed as a skeleton. The fabric is as black as the night painted with glowing white bones and a plastic skull mask, which is lifted upward revealing a younger boy with black hair and gray eyes that seem to glow in the torchlight. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you guys." He says though his mischievous grin betrays otherwise. "I forgot my candy bag." He says, pointing at the small white sack leaning against a trilith.

"Were you at the party here?" Tommy asks curiously.

The child hesitates, "Well...I came with my brothers."

Brian asks, "Well, where did everyone go?"

Again, the boy hesitates before pointing deeper into the swamp. “They went up to the old Manor.” He replies. Tommy and Brian follow the child’s finger, and for the first time notice the peaked roof of the Manor looming just above the treetops in the distance.

“That wasn’t there a minute ago.” Brian says under his breath. Tommy just shakes his head, looking confused.

“Have you ever seen the old place?” The boy says invitingly.

“I thought the place burnt down years ago.” Brian asks.

“They just tell everyone that so kids won’t come back here to explore.” The boy replies matter-of-factly.

Tommy glances at his phone again, “We’re going to the costume contest at the Dunwich Mall.” He replies to Brian’s relief.

The youngster glances up at the Manor, his lips curling into a smile. “My brothers said it’s not for little kids, but I’ve seen it plenty of times. Of course, I’m not a fraidy-cat!” He says brashly. An increasingly agitated Brian and Tommy exchange looks. As if sensing their crumbling will, the boy adds, “Dunwich is only a few minutes away. You’ll be finished before you know it. Come on, I dare you!” He challenges.

Brian puffs up his chest, glaring down at the impertinent lad, before glancing sidelong at his companion. Tommy knows from his friend’s body language that Brian will not be easily dissuaded from meeting this challenge. Besides, after hearing the tale of Northstun Manor, both feel compelled to quench their own curiosity about the place.

“Alright, but we need to wrap this up in fifteen to twenty minutes. What’s your name anyways?” Tommy asks.

The boy bites his lower lip, “My name is...James. What’s yours?” He asks.

“I’m Tommy. And this is my best friend Brian.” Tommy says, introducing his companion, who is pulling the burrs from his werewolf costume before slipping the chest piece over his head and storing the mask and paws in the candy bag. Brian takes out his flashlight, but Tommy suggests he saves the batteries until they truly need it.

James grins, beckoning the boys to follow him with a sweep of his slender, bony arm. The three boys head deeper into the swamp, quickly consumed by shadows, as the flicker of the torchlight quickly fades in the distance. The boys cross a rickety wooden footbridge that creaks and groans in protest at their intrusion.

“Damn, I can hardly see.” Brian complains, straining his eyes to see more than a few feet in front of him.

“Your eyes will adjust to the light. Just stay right behind me.” James assures the boys.

Despite the scant illumination, the pale moonlight affords, gradually the boys’ eyes adjust to the darkness. However, this offers little comfort as the serpentine path winds around stagnant, reed-strewn pools of water and dense clumps of thorny thickets, between which ancient, lifeless oaks stretch toward the moon as if in worship to the decay that surrounds them. Through the corner of their eyes, Tommy and Brian spot the shimmering image of a small figure bereft of clothing standing in the middle of the swamp, beckoning them toward the sickly green water. Although indistinct and soft, they hear a voice coming from the apparition. “Come play with us. We’ll be brothers...forever.”

“Holy crap!” Brian gasps, as he clutches Tommy’s shoulder. “Dude, did you see that?” He asks, looking dumbfounded.

Tommy nods, “Some kind of trick or illusion.” He hypothesizes. “Did you see that James?” The boy asks.

James shrugs his bony shoulders, “Sorry, I was concentrating on the path.” The boy stops and looks out in the direction that the

apparition was standing, but notices only a column of fog sinking into the murky depths. “Chill guys. It’s just the stupid fog and the moonlight messing with you.”

Brian whispers into Tommy’s ear, “Maybe it’s the bigger kids messing with us.” He suggests. Tommy nods in agreement but motions that they should proceed.

Outside the lonely hoot of an owl, the only sound comes from the sounding of crunching sand and the occasional snap of a dead twig. A light wind blows patches of mist across the path, creating strange and gruesome shapes that seem to beckon the boys deeper into the inescapable maw of the swamp. Finally, a nearby howl of a wolf causes all three boys to jump simultaneously.

Clutching his heart, James admits, “Damn, that scared me!”

Brian and Tommy nod their heads affirmatively, looking in the direction of thick group of brambles that the sound seems to have originated. “I think there’s a wolf in those bushes.” Brian warns softly. His fears appear further validated when the snap of a tree branch reaches their ears.

“He more scared of us than we are of him.” Tommy assures his companions.

The distinct sound of footfalls accompanied by cracking and rustling fill the air, then stop suddenly. For an instant, a slender beam of moonlight illuminates a pair of yellow canine eyes that seem to hover in the darkness about six feet off the ground. Tommy lets an exacerbated gasp escape his lips. “It’s a werewolf!” He says softly. Both Tommy and Brian’s hearts are beating rapidly, in excitement and terror.

“Don’t be stupid.” James taunts. “There’s no such thing as werewolves. It’s just one of my brothers trying to psyche us out.” He says dismissively. He puts down his candy bag and picks up a stone, tossing it in the direction of the noise. After some additional

rustling, silence falls across the swamp. “Come on, let’s go.” He concludes.

Brian and Tommy follow close behind James, with glimpses of Northstun Manor looming ever closer, just above the treetops. The boys’ imaginations begin to run wild, as every glint of light becomes a pair of malevolent eyes watching their progression and every gnarled, bare tree becomes an abomination threatening to capture them. In the distance, the occasional screams or ethereal youthful pleading test the boys’ courage, but they silently rationalize the noise as the wind whistling through the trees.

Two small skulls float to the surface of an algae-laden pool of water, staring up at Brian for a few seconds before sinking again. “Oh my god, did you see those skulls!” Brian says, pointing down at the water.

Tommy shrugs, as he shakes his head. “No, I didn’t see anything.”

Once again, James dismisses the Brian’s fear. “Dude, this is the swamp. Raccoons and stuff get stuck in the swamp, just like people do.” He says, without stopping.

For a moment, Brian accepts this explanation. However, as he turns to follow the others, a ghostly face of a child appears in the reeds, its mouth open in a silent, perpetual scream before sinking back into the water. Brian quickly backpedals, tripping over something and landing on his back. He feels something wrapped around his foot, pulling him toward the brackish water. “He’s got me!” Brian cries out.

Tommy dashes back to help Brian up. “Who’s got you?” He asks in concern.

Brian grabs his flashlight with his trembling hand and illuminates the reeds but neither boy sees anything amiss. “I saw a ghost right there, I swear. He tried to drag me into the water!” Brian says as his face turns a pasty white. Only then, he notices a brown vine tangled around his ankle, causing him considerable

embarrassment. Tommy kneels down, liberating Brian's foot from the vine.

Another howl from the wolf does little to soothe Brian's already frayed nerves. "Sorry guys. It's just my imagination running wild." He confesses shamefully.

The three boys tread the well-worn path for several uneventful minutes before encountering an abandoned ramshackle shack at the edge of a steep ridge. "This was the groundkeeper's place for Northstun Manor." James explains. Brian and Tommy peer at the rotting structure with fascination, stepping on the porch with an ominous creak. Brian shines his flashlight into the window, only to have the flashlight suddenly go dead.

"Crap!" Brian says, whacking the flashlight with the palm of his hand to no avail.

Tommy pushes the door open, using his cellphone to illuminate the stained wallpaper, and the broken glass glittering on the floor. There is a grimy, stained mattress on the ground with dark, rust colored stains running down the right-hand wall. Tommy's cellphone suddenly goes dead, but he avoids telling Brian to avoid frightening his friend further. "Alright, let's wrap this up James." Tommy says tensely.

As the boys turn away, Tommy catches the ghastly visage of a figure clutching a butcher knife through the door's windowpane, as blood oozes down the wall. However, any sign of the specter vanishes when he turns around. As the boys walk away, Tommy hears a chuckle inside his head. Since neither Brian nor James show any reaction, Tommy is left to dismiss it as a product of his own imagination.

The boys cross another weather-beaten footbridge, before ascending a slippery, moss-covered set of stairs built into the side of the hill. The well-worn steps seem to crumble with each footstep. A portion of the rusting wrought iron fence hangs

perilously in midair, creaking in the wind that increases as the boys approach the top.

Finally, the three boys are standing in the shadow of Northstun Manor. It's beyond whatever image Brian's grandfather could evoke in his stories. Like fear itself, the Manor's presence is simultaneously dreadful and exhilarating. Architecturally, Northstun Manor's gothic peaked spires are reminiscent of structures found in New England. While the building is clearly intact, the dingy, gray clapboards show signs of significant deterioration. A fierce wind rattles a loose shutter from a second floor window, from which Tommy swears he saw movement. "It looks like they're already up there." Tommy announces to the others.

Before anyone can back out, James races ahead toward the stairs leading up to the front door. Brian stops in front of a small playground at the foot of the house, his attention drawn to a small flickering candle in a sandbox. "What the hell?" He quickly notices crimson stains that saturate not just the sand, but the rusty slide and the swing set too. As he steps closer, his heart racing, he notices a bloody pentagram drawn by a small finger upon a large lump in the sand. It's only then that Brian notices the small pair of bare legs protruding grotesquely from sand. Any sign of the blood is gone by the time the scream leaves his mouth.

"What's your deal?" Tommy asks, sounding annoyed at first. When he notices Brian trembling, he places a firm hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I keep seeing things that aren't really there." Brian confides.

"You're not the only one." Tommy admits. "I think James' brothers are just screwing with us, but everything has a logical explanation. We're almost done with this, so let's not let this little punk show us up on the dare. We'll take a quick look around, then head to the contest." Tommy says encouragingly. Brian nods reluctantly, following Tommy up the stairs where James is waiting patiently.

“This is going to be so cool.” James whispers, as he pushes the creaking door open slowly. The boys file through the entrance one by one, with only the sound of glass crushing beneath their sneakers. Quickly, the three boys are standing in the foyer of Northstun Manor, staring at the rotting staircase leading upstairs. The filthy, peeling wallpaper is hanging off the walls where crumbling plaster has revealed the underlying skeletal lathe board, and dangling electrical wires. The only scant illumination comes from a couple tarnished brass lamps hanging beside each doorway. The smell of mildew and decay assail the boys’ noses.

The sound of creaking floorboards coming from above unnerves Tommy and Brian. “That’s one of my brothers probably,” James says cheerfully. The loose shutter upstairs begins banging against the house loudly, causing Brian to jump. “OK, let’s look around.” James encourages his companions.

For an instant, the foyer teems with life and ambiance. A butler wearing a black suit with silver vest opens the front door, ushering in a family. The husband and wife are donning their finest attire, while a brother and sister are in bright, colorful costumes. A singer crooning a soft melody floats through the air as people help themselves to appetizers from silver trays. The scene dissolves back to the dingy foyer, leaving Brian and Tommy to exchange astonished looks.

“Come on guys, what are you doing?” James calls from the adjoining corridor. The pair walks down the hall into the darkened kitchen. As Tommy peers at the dusty cupboard, the entire structure crumbles into a pile of rotting wood, dishes and mason jars.

“Christ! I didn’t touch it!” Tommy swears to the other boys, his hands visibly shaking. Before anyone can respond, a cast-iron pot flies off the stove and lands on the floor with a loud clatter, causing all three to leap to the center of the room with their backs to one another. Brian notices a bloody streak across the floor that leads to a rusty cage sitting by the kitchen table.

“It’s time to play Brian.” A voice sings into Brian’s ear, causing him to back toward the kitchen door to escape. As he turns to make his escape, he instead discovers a brightly lit kitchen with a small boy assisting the chef by loading trays with treats for the guests. The chef removes the cover off the pot and holds it down for Brian to peer into, only to discover human brains. When he looks up, the smiling countenance of the chef has morphed into a skull with glowing red eyes and the young assistant’s body is now lying lifelessly on the kitchen table. Brian screams and stumbles into Tommy, which disrupts the vision.

“This can’t be real. It’s got to be a trick, right?” Brian stammers in disbelief.

“What are you talking about? It’s just a stupid pot. It was probably sitting right at the edge of the stove.” Tommy says dismissively.

“Oh, never mind. It’s nothing.” Brian stammers, his shoulders slumping low.

James motions them back to the foyer, “Let’s find my brothers, it’s getting late.” He says.

Brian and Tommy exchange silent looks of relief as they tag closely behind their younger companion. “Do you hear crying?” Tommy asks as the group ascends the creaky stairs. Brian and James nod in agreement, but are unable to ascertain the direction. Heavy footfalls originating above them result in a small cascade of dust falling from the ceiling.

“How many brothers do you have James?” Brian asks.

An unearthly, guttural moan fills the air before James can render a response. “They’re really ramping up now. Let’s have some real fun.” James says gleefully. As the boys begin exploring the second floor, a chorus of voices begins sinister chanting that resonates through the house, disorienting the boys.

Tommy shakes his head and looks up, discovering two men speaking quietly at the top of the stairs. One of the men is dressed in a tuxedo, with a gold pocket watch with the initials R.N. dangling from a belt loop by a silver chain. He is clutching a thick tome, bound in a pale, leathery looking cover that smells like death. “We’re set to begin shortly, I’ve trust you made your choice.” The silver haired gentleman asks with a smile.

Without betraying any outward sign of emotion, the other man responds, “As it turns out, we didn’t need to choose. Pete volunteered.”

Robert grins looking pleased. “Excellent, then you know what must be done. I’m sure he’ll be richly rewarded.” Robert concludes with a polite bow, before disappearing behind a door. Tommy feels compelled to follow the young man into the restroom, where he stares into the mirror blankly for a moment before pulling out a blank piece of paper from his tuxedo. He takes a knife from the vanity and makes a small cut on the palm of his hand. He dips a quill into the pooling blood, using it to write the name of his son Peter on the card. “May the Masters will grant you life and youth eternal Peter.” He says, before sealing the card in an unmarked vanilla envelope and dropping it into a brass urn with the others.

Tommy returns to his senses after hearing Brian’s voice calling his name. He steps forward but slips on a pool of blood beneath his feet. He picks up his hands and stares at the blood, heightening the boys panic. All signs of the blood vanish when Brian and James appear at the door.

“Why did you go off by yourself?” Brian demands with a look of fright.

Tommy says, “I saw these two guys talking. I think one of them was Robert Northstun!” He says with a mixture of excitement and dread.

Brian looks skeptical, “You told me that it’s all just urban legend.”

“I know!” Tommy says defensively, adding, “He had this big book too, he took it upstairs. I think it might be that manuscript you mentioned.” The sound of something large scurrying behind the walls interrupts the boys’ conversation, causing them to back away from the wall.

“Come on guys!” James urges, leading them to the master bedrooms on the opposite end of the house. The sound of crying is coming from behind one of the doors. James places a finger against his lips as he opens the door slowly. The boys peer into the darkness, catching the faint glimpse of a small figure in a yellow raincoat, weeping in the corner of the bedroom.

“Is that one of your brothers?” Brian turns to ask James, but the younger boy has vanished.

“Hello? Are you alright?” Tommy asks the boy, who appears to be dressed as a fisherman for Halloween. After noticing the butcher knife sitting by the boy's feet, Tommy stops dead in his tracks. “Are you hurt?” He asks softly.

The boy shakes his head negatively. “I showed the kids this new game at the playground. We had a lot of fun, but it goes by too fast.” He sobs.

Brian lets out a gasp when he realizes what the boy means, and clutches Tommy’s shoulder. “Dude, we need to get out of here!” He urges, tugging at his friend’s white Templar mantle.

“My big brother went to bed early, so he didn’t enjoy the game as much.” The boy says before disappearing.

An apparition materializes over the blood soaked bed, letting loose a blood curdling scream. “Alex, no!” It pleads.

Brian and Tommy turn to run, only to discover a figure clad in little more than sand and blood blocking the door. “It’s just a game. We’d like you to play too. Wouldn’t we Alex?” The lifeless boy intones, sand pouring out of his mouth.

“We’ll show you all kinds of new games.” Alex promises, now standing right behind the boys, clutching the butcher knife firmly in his small hands as his eyes glowing ominously.

The boys sprint out of the room, heading back toward the staircase. However, the inner wall suddenly erupts in a shower of plaster, dust and lathe board. A skeletal ghoul lunges out from the shattered wall cackling manically. Tommy grabs Brian’s shoulders, pulling him away from the creature.

“Get in here, quick!” James calls out from the master bedroom.

James bolts the door shut once Tommy and Brian are safely inside. “Where the hell did you go?” Tommy demands.

James shrugs innocently, “I heard a noise behind me. I was only a few feet away.”

“Nevermind that, what do we do now?” Brian exclaims, as the door begins banging. Tommy draws the sword from its sheath, positioning himself between Brian and the door.

“Holy crap, that’s your father’s sword. Dude, he’s going to kill you for taking that!” Brian points out, an irony not lost on Tommy who just shoots his friend an uneven grin.

“Find something to barricade the door!” James urges. Brian begins searching the room for something suitable to keep the creatures in the hall from breaking inside, coming across a bloody axe and weapon with a wooden stock and a round cartridge. “Sweet, I found an old school Tommy gun.” He says, picking up the weapon in wonder, running his fingers along the barrel. “I think it’s loaded!” Brian exclaims. James claims the axe while Brian admires his acquisition, seizing additional cartridges from the open safe and sticking them into his candy bag.

The bedroom door begins banging loudly, the knob turning violently back and forth as something screeches on the other side.

Tommy and James back away from the door when suddenly all noise ceases. The boys exchange worried looks, Tommy crouching low to peer beneath the door. "I don't see anything." He whispers, motioning to Brian to aim the weapon at the door as he opens it.

Tommy slowly turns the black knob then swings the door open, revealing only the dimly lit, but otherwise empty corridor. Even the adjacent children's bedroom now seems to be deserted and eerily silent. The boys avoid the gaping hole in the wall and scamper quickly to the staircase and pause. "I'm sorry James, but we're leaving. You and your brothers can come to the mall with us, but we're not staying here." He says firmly.

James looks a little crestfallen, nodding his head reluctantly. He looks up at the attic and shouts, "We're going to the mall now." However, the boy receives no reply, nor does any sound betray the boys' presence. James shrugs, saying, "Maybe they're already outside waiting for us."

Tommy nods, "Alright, lets get go then." He says, all three boys galloping down the stairs toward the front door. Tommy reaches the door first, reaching out for the knob only to discover that the front door has been boarded shut. "What the..." He tries pulling the door open, but the boards are holding the door fast. He tries prying the boards out from the wall using his fingers, to no avail. He grabs James, "This isn't funny. Tell them to let us out!" He demands angrily. Before James can respond, chanting fills the room, causing the boys' vision to fade and distort.

"We've got a serious problem Robert." The butler informs the silver haired man, who's forsaken his tuxedo for a black cloak with a hood. A silver dagger with an ivory handle hangs from the man's side, held fast by a golden cord.

"What's so important that you interrupt me?" Robert Northstun asks before noticing something amiss with the front door. He crouches down only to discover that the front door appears to be sealed, becoming part of the wall itself. He holds out the palm of his hand a few inches from the wall and mutters an incantation

under his breath. He opens his eyes, “Someone’s undoing the protective wards on the house. They’ve come to take the book.”

“What shall we do?” The butler asks, glancing out the window fearfully.

“Summon the twelve to the ritual area. Get my gun from the safe, and escort them through the basement and go the back way. I’m going to attempt to reinforce the remaining wards before we lose complete control.” He commands. As he turns to leave, the entire house shakes violently, causing the lights to flicker. The sound of shattering glass causes two women in the party to shriek in surprise. “Where’s Alex?” Robert asks before heading up the stairs. The butler points outside at the playground in front of the Manor where some children are gathering, including Alex in his yellow raincoat. Robert can see the wild looks in the children’s eyes then spots the knife. “It’s too late for them” He states coldly, “Get moving!”

“Please tell me that you guys saw that.” Brian says to the others. Tommy and James nod affirmatively as the vision dissolves back to the present. “What do we do now?” He asks, sounding increasingly desperate.

“You’ve said you been here before. Where’s the basement?” Tommy asks their younger companion.

James points to the left corridor but then looks up and asks, “Did you guys hear that?”

Brian and Tommy both shake their heads negatively. James wraps his candy bag around his wrist, still clutching the axe he found in the bedroom. I’m going to check the attic quick. Wait right here.” He orders, before clattering up the stairs.

“Wait!” Tommy exclaims. “Crap, that’s horror cliché number one. We can’t let him go by himself.” He tells Brian.

Brian grimaces, but wraps his own candy bag around the wrist that's still holding the stock of the Thompson Sub-machinegun. "Don't let him out of sight!" Brian urges as the two boys pursue James up the stairs and toward the attic. As they round the corner and enter the attic, the chanting becomes increasingly feverous and guttural. The air becomes thick and warm, drenching the boys in sweat. The sound of slithering beneath the dusty floorboards doesn't escape their notice, but neither dares stop lest they risk losing sight of James.

James disappears into one of the rooms, followed closely by Tommy and Brian. A vision of Robert Northstun assails the boys as they enter the room. The tall silver-haired man has his arms outstretched before a lectern, reading from the thick book that Tommy saw earlier. There's a pentagram drawn at the foot of the lectern, with a small body lying in its center. "C-VULGTLAGLN CTHULU. CTHARANAK 'BTHNK CGOF'NN. CSTELL'BSNA R'LUH-EEH" He says with a commanding voice. The lifeless body begins shuddering as the ghostly wisp begins forming above the corpse. Ghostly tentacles seem to rise out of darkness spreading beneath the pentagram, snatching the apparition and dragging it down into the darkness. Another violent quake shakes the house, followed by an ethereal moan that rattles the windows. "He's coming! IA! CTHULHU LW'NAFH! The ritual must be completed, or all will be for naught!" He says, leaving the lectern and disappearing through the door.

"Did he say Cthulhu?" Tommy asks, staring at the dusty tome still open on the lectern before them.

Brian's eyes are wide, nodding his head. "Tommy, I think that's the Necronomicon." He says, pointing at the book.

"Where's Bruce Campbell when you need him?" Tommy asks, staring in disbelief. He reaches out toward the book, but Brian grabs his arm. "Dude, don't touch it. You might make things worse!" He warns.

James once again has slipped out of the room, now standing in front of the other attic door. He opens the door just in time for Brian and Tommy to see a hulking figure with horns rip a body asunder, leaving its intestines uncoiling on the floor. To their horror, the boys realize it's the naked body of the butler. The man reaches out with his right hand and smiles at the boys. "Don't worry. You'll all get to take turns." He assures them, before gurgling grotesquely.

Tommy slams the door shut and grabs James by the collar of his costume. "You don't have brothers, do you?" He demands.

James begins crying, "You don't understand. I..."

"It doesn't matter. We're all leaving, now!" Tommy tells the child forcefully. James tries to protest, but Tommy simply grabs the boy's wrist and pulls him along. As the boys attempt to flee, tentacles crash through the floorboards, grabbing Tommy's foot and dragging him toward the hole. James dashes ahead of Tommy and sends his axe crashing down on the tentacle, severing it cleanly, causing the creature to shriek.

Brian helps Tommy back to his feet, "Come on we got to keep moving!" He urges the others. They charge down the stairs, stumbling into the vision of a man wearing a torn and bloodied tuxedo standing on a chair with a rope around his neck, then stepping off. The sound of shattering glass breaks the vision quickly, allowing the boys to continue their flight. As they reach the foyer stairs, another skeleton bursts through the floor. Brian aims his weapon and squeezes the trigger, sending a torrent of lead flying toward the creature as the boy's entire body reverberates from the recoil of the weapon. One of the slugs strikes the skull of the creature, causing it to crumble into dust.

"Yeah!" Brian cries out triumphantly, pumping his left fist in the air as they rush down the left hand corridor.

The door to the study swings open, revealing a husband and wife dancing slowly to the music, while two boys bob for apples under

the watchful supervision of an older girl dressed as Alice. As the album begins to play faster, the wife becomes possessed and begins strangling her husband while Alice stares down malevolently at the boys with a wicked grin before the door suddenly slams shut, followed by screaming. Just before reaching the staircase leading to the basement, Tommy spots a card lying on floor bearing Peter's name.

As the boys reach the bottom of the staircase, Alex calls out from behind them. "You're going so soon? There are so many games we can play together." He offers. Without waiting for him to appear, the boys head into the basement where the corridors are dark, damp and claustrophobic. The corridors branch off into several directions, each leading to small chambers or adjoining corridors.

A cackling ghoul appears in front of Tommy, wielding a knife. Before Tommy can react, the weapon swishes past his head, harmlessly striking his protective chain mail. Brian instinctively charges the creature, causing it to vanish before he lands on the stone floor with a thud. The boys look up at the visage of a Minotaur that's clutching a young prisoner by the shoulders. The boy points up at four hooks dangling from the ceiling and smiles. "Hi! I'm Peter. And this is Abdiel. We're all going to have so much fun preparing together!" He assures the boys. After an exchange of looks, Tommy grabs James as they sprint out of the room.

The boys dash through the twisted maze of corridors and chambers, unable to block out the phantasmal symphony of crying, pleading and laughing emanating from all around them. Mercifully, the boys discover a black iron door along the basement wall with moonlight streaming through a barred window, revealing the path to freedom. Apprehensively, Tommy pushes open the door, allowing a rush of fresh, cool air to wash across their overheated bodies. "We made it!" Tommy says with a sigh of relief.

The ground trembles beneath their feet, as a strange orange glow appears over the trees ahead. "Come on, we need to keep moving."

Tommy says. As the boys begin to climb the iron fence, Alex and his friends suddenly appear in the playground.

“Yay! I told you they’d come play with us!” Alex brags to the other ghostly apparitions.

“What do we do now?” Tommy asks.

“Wait! Mr. Northstun said there’s a back way, look down there.” Brian says, pointing down a path leading toward the swamp.

“Alright, let’s go!” Tommy says as the three children bound down the hill with restless spirits emerging from the ground and giving pursuit. They arrive at a large cemetery bordered by a large iron and stone fence that’s too high to climb. The boys attempt to walk the perimeter around the cemetery, only to discover a sheer 20 foot drop on either side with no obvious way down.

“There’s an easier way down at the back of the cemetery...I think.” James chimes in, pointing into the heart of the graveyard.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding.” Brian whines as he peers through the cemetery gate.

“We’ve got no choice.” Tommy says assertively, as he pulls open the gate and ushers his companions inside.

The boys try several routes, discovering that the interior gates are so rusty and ensnared by vines that they’re impossible to open. Fortunately, Tommy spots a large hole in one of the crypts, leading deeper into the cemetery. He kicks in the rotting wooden boards covering the entrance, allowing them to pass freely into the interior of the cemetery. A slight wind is rustling the trees, with the faint sound of crying and children playing originating from different portions of the graveyard.

The boys peer around the corner, spying a weeping woman in white hovering above a grave. She gradually turns toward the boys screaming in a shrill voice, “Death shall take thee eternally in his

stead! Sacrifice them!” Her face contorts into a grotesque skull, pointing an accusatory bony finger at the boys. Brian fires his weapon at the ghost, which had little effect beyond causing ringing in everyone’s ears.

“Stop trying to shoot the ghosts dipshit.” Tommy chastises his friend. The boys scamper down another aisle between the long rows of marble tombs. The howling of a nearby wolf causes the boys to spin around fearfully.

A ghoul leaps over the fence and lunges at the boys but Tommy fends off the creature with his sword. James uses his axe to chop through some wooden boards, opening up the passage to the rear of the cemetery. As the boys weave between headstones, Tommy suddenly disappears through the ground.

“No!” Brian cries out desperately.

“Look, there's a rope leading down!” James says, pointing at a narrow break in the fence.

“I’m not leaving without Tommy!” Brian says, digging at the ground.

“There’s a basement level.” James offers.

Without hesitation, Brian says, “Show me!”

James and Brian head back through the way they came, finding the thick door that leads down into the dark, dank basement level. The dizzying stench of death and decay assault the boys’ nostrils, but they push on. The basement is silent outside the howling of the wind blowing down the narrow corridors and the dripping of water from somewhere deep inside. The rattling of chains comes from the central part of the basement, leading the boys in that direction, calling Tommy’s name. Tommy’s responses echo off the walls of stone, making him difficult to locate.

The boys reunite in the central chamber where several cages and stockades are rusting against the mossy walls. A group of men wearing dark cloaks surrounds the boys, chanting. Peter appears inside one of the cages and points, "Time to play!"

The three boys have their backs to one another, clutching their weapons trying to keep the cloaked apparitions at bay. Brian steps forward and shouts "Come get some!"

"No, don't shoot that thing in here!" Tommy warns, fearing the shots would ricochet.

Another violent shaking of the earth causes all the apparitions vanish, yielding to unearthly, resonating moan that causes clouds of dust to fill the basement. The sound rattles the boys' souls to the core, their minds filling with visions of a vast black abyss embracing them.

"Something's changed!" James says intently. "You need to leave now." He urges his friends.

"We're all leaving, together." Brian asserts grabbing James with his left hand while fervently clutching his candy bag and machine gun in his right hand while Tommy guards the rear flank like a veteran gladiator. The boys burst from the basement, making a run for the rear of the cemetery as the ground shakes again, toppling several headstones. Out of the corner of their eyes, the boys see ghostly orbs rising into the air, dancing like fireflies before disappearing to destinations unknown. The sky overhead is turning a fiery orange as another gut wrenching moan fills the air.

"No falling down holes this time!" Brian warns the others. They discover a rope dangling from a broken portion of the fence leading down to the ground. The boys shinny down a rope leading to shallow pool of stagnant water at the base of the cemetery above them.

"Watch for sinkholes. Stick close together." Tommy orders.

The boys traverse their way through the treacherous swamp, occasionally falling up to their knees in the soupy water. A torrent of water sprays high into the air as tentacles rise from the water, grabbing James by the feet and dragging him into the water. Brian opens fire, while Tommy cuts James free and picks him up out of the water.

A wall of heat sweeps across the boys as towering flames engulf the decaying trees ahead, but there's no other obvious way out of the swamp. Another ear-splitting moan fills the air, as the ground shakes several times in quick succession.

“That felt like footsteps.” Brian says, staring at the columns of smoke and flames. The snort of an animal draws the boys' attention to crack in the soft earth, from which a large Minotaur emerges.

“IA! CTHULHU WGAH'N R'LYEH!” The Minotaur shouts, outstretching its arms to the orange sky. The group of children from the playground and the basement appear around the creature, holding hands and singing “Ring around the Rosie” then disappear.

Brian stops to fire a volley at the Minotaur, using all his bodily strength to hold the weapon in place, screaming at the top of his lungs. The Minotaur's body twitches violently but in the end, the creature merely laughs at the boy. The ground shakes again, prompting the Minotaur's disappearance as something begins emerging from the swirling columns of smoke to the boys' left. It's the creature's piercing green eyes about 30' above the ground that catches their attention first, followed closely by the massive set of wings causing the smoke to billow high into the night sky. Tentacles extending from the creature's massive maw leave the boys little doubt as to its identity.

Tommy spots a narrow opening in a dense grove of trees dead ahead. “There's a way out, make a break for it!” He shouts at his friends. The creature begins walking toward the boys, each step nearly knocking them off their feet. The boys disappear into a thick

grove of pines, suddenly emerging at the ritual circle where their adventure began.

The night becomes still, save for the welcome sound of crickets. There's no sign of the massive abomination behind them, and the other spirits that have menaced them all evening have vanished without a trace. Brian and Tommy stop at the altar panting for breath, though James seems neither winded nor happy to be on his way home.

"We should get to the mall and warn the cops." Tommy says.

"Come on James, let's go." Tommy urges the boy, but James doesn't budge. Instead, he just stares at his shoes without saying a word.

"I can't come with you." He says softly, shaking his head.

"Why not?" Brian asks.

James tosses Brian his candy bag, smiling mischievously. While inspecting the bag, Brian comes across the name Jimmy Watkins written in black magic marker. The boys gasp in shock, but Jimmy vanishes before any words can be exchanged.

Brian and Tommy turn to leave, but discover a tall silver haired man wearing a dark cloak and a gold pocket watch is blocking their path. The man is smiling warmly with his hands clasped behind his back. "Good evening children. Happy Halloween to you, I trust you enjoyed my party." Before either boy can respond, he tosses each boy a glittering coin bearing the image of Alexander the Great. Once the boys catch the coins, Robert Northstun disappears, though the echo of his laughter lingers.

"Let's get out of here before something else happens." Tommy says, placing a comforting arm around Brian who looks behind him one last time, before leaning into his friend. Upon finding the old road, they resume their journey toward the mall.

“We’re almost there!” Brian says with relief, pointing at the parking lot, barely illuminated by several pale, flickering street lamps. The sound of gleeful shouting and cheering greet their ears, but as they stride deeper into the parking lot those sounds morph into screams. As they reach for the doors, they hear singing all around them.

“Ring around the rosy, a pocketful of posies. Ashes to ashes, we all fall down!”