



5. THE CREATURES

It happened so fast, Andrew didn't notice until Ronnie called his attention to it.

The temperature in the basement had dropped...fifty degrees? *Sixty?* The place felt like a meat locker. Each breath hung in the air in front of him, freezing so hard and fast that the moisture droplets in it grew heavy and dropped into his lap, like crystalline confetti.

It was the exact opposite of that other room he'd been in, the one with Mr. Childress' hollow head.

And the phone with that awful voice on the other end.

Andrew was too numb to even be scared.

One of the floorboards above them gave a long, sighing creak.

"What the fuck is that?" Ronnie asked hoarsely, his voice slurred from the painkillers he'd taken. He jumped off the bike he was still straddling, letting it crash to the floor.

"Shhhh!"

RUSSELL C. CONNOR

A series of sliding, slithery noises drifted down from the house above. They moved across the basement, toward the door at the top of the stairs.

“N-no way, man!” Ronnie said, teeth chattering from the cold. “The P-Professor said we’d be hidden if we stayed d-down here!”

Andrew jumped up, clutching the gun in both hands, and pressed back into the corner. From this angle, he could see most of the way up the stairs. If anything came down them, it was going to get blasted as soon as it came into his line of sight.

Ronnie took a few steps in his direction. At the same time, the knob at the top of the stairs rustled and the latch clicked. If the kid tried to come to him now, he’d have to cross the foot of the staircase, in full view. Andrew waved him back. He nodded and moved around to the far side of the room, got down on his hands and knees, and crawled into the shadows beneath the shelves.

Andrew waited, shivering and tense.

The door squealed open, and those squelchy sounds got louder as they descended. A voice preceded them, one high-pitched and burbly, with elongated S’s, the way snakes always talked in fiction.

“Yesss, yesss, *here* it issss. Thisss isss what Marglo sssensssed. Sssee the lightsss?”

Andrew aimed the pistol and held his breath, trying to steady himself enough to fire at whatever was coming.

But even with as broad a definition as he was giving the term ‘whatever,’ he still wasn’t mentally prepared for the creature that entered the basement.

He saw its pitch black tentacles first, a plethora of short, eel-ish appendages as thick as his flexed bicep that boiled over one another, propelling the thing down each step. Its body was nothing but a protoplasmic blob of dark, squishy, glistening flesh, adorned with several crablike pinchers on stalks, and a bloated head the color of a rotted plum that came up no higher than Andrew’s waist. Two beady eyes glared out from the depths of a fold in it. It might’ve been cute if it was a creature on a cartoon, but there was a repugnance inherent to it, a vileness in its very structure that he could only liken to the gut reaction people had been conditioned to feel when they saw a swastika. He was so horrified by the

OUTSIDE THE LINES

abomination he completely forgot to pull the trigger.

A second voice spoke up. Their visitor wasn't alone.

"Never mind the lights!" it demanded, rough and deep compared to the monster now on the concrete floor of the basement. "What do you sense, maggot?"

The owner of this voice was much less interesting than the first. He was a large, broad-shouldered man, the type of hulking workout drone for whom steroids were a way of life. Andrew might've been inclined to believe he was just another of the rabid, Xerox copies if not for the fact that all his parts seemed to be in the right places, he was speaking coherently, and, whereas their clothing had still been new and clean for the most part, this person was filthy and dressed in discolored rags that looked like they'd been sweatpants and a t-shirt long, long ago. He also wore the thickest pair of sunglasses Andrew had ever seen, and even with these on, he raised a hand to further shield his eyes against the lamplight. A rash of black boils stippled his face and exposed biceps, the kind of skin condition that would've sent Andrew to the nearest chemotherapy facility. Still, he was far more identifiable than his companion, and the recognizable form and gender was a strange comfort.

He stepped onto the floor in his disintegrating shoes—the Nike swoosh was barely visible on their worn sides—and stood behind the squid-thing, scanning the basement with his hand still over his eyes in a salute. Andrew tensed as those black lenses moved to him...

And kept moving without a pause.

He frowned. There was no way to miss him, he was just a few yards away, right out in the open.

A dull ache in his chest made him realize he was still holding the breath he'd taken earlier. He let it out in a visible cloud and lowered the gun, afraid the movements would snag their attention, but they remained oblivious.

"It'sss...a protection field," the gelatinous creature finally answered, its pinchers clicking excitedly. There was no mouth; Andrew couldn't even tell where its gurgling voice came from. "Ringsss the room, it doesss! Yesss, powerful artcraftsss here, Marglo knowsss, Marglo ssseess!"

"Protecting *what?*" Sunglasses growled. "If you have brought me away

RUSSELL C. CONNOR

from the hunt for the mortals for a trifle, I will make sure the Fires of Magdemnon are stoked to their fullest before I toss your wormy hide in.” Again he glanced right over Andrew, and suddenly he understood.

Manners hadn’t said they would be *hidden*; he’d said they would be *invisible*, and apparently they were. The only problem was, it hadn’t stopped these beings from detecting whatever Manners had done to the room itself.

The squid—Marglo—shied away from the man and made a series of tweeting, whistling noises. Sunglasses raised a foot and stomped it in the side, causing the thing to bleet in what was either terror or ecstasy. “I told you, speak English, maggot, it’s all this body understands!”

“Marglo doessn’t know itsss function, Massster!”

“Then figure it out!”

The cold was bitter, numbing and burning his skin all at the same time. Each breath hurt. Andrew raised a hand to the side cautiously, directly in front of them, and waved to get Ronnie’s attention. He could see the kid across the room on the floor around the writhing bulge of Marglo’s tentacles, watching them with his lip curled up in disgust. His gaze flicked up, and Andrew pantomimed as best he could that these things couldn’t see them. He wasn’t sure if ‘invisible’ also meant ‘unable to be heard,’ but he wasn’t going to risk opening his mouth to find out. Ronnie seemed to get the gist anyway.

Marglo was on the move, heading into the middle of the room, away from Andrew. The case of medical supplies was still scattered across the floor next to the overturned bicycle, and the creature squatted on its tentacled-haunches over it. “Massster, look here!”

Sunglasses came to him and examined the case’s contents for a long moment. Then he looked up at the nearest lantern, as though reconsidering their significance. “Can you bring this field down?”

“Yesss, of coursse, Marglo can do it!”

“Then be quick about it!” He cast a suspicious look over his shoulder. “I suspect we are not alone.”

Marglo began emitting a high-pitched humming sound as he (or she) turned in a circle in the middle of the room. His master stood aside, taking in the rest of the basement from behind his thick lenses.

OUTSIDE THE LINES

Again, Andrew contemplated shooting them. Would they even hear the shots or see the muzzle flash, or did this cloak Manners put around them extend that far? Even if not, he could still probably be fast enough to gun them both down before they could get a bead on his location.

And what if bullets don't even do the job? Or what if you kill them and something worse comes looking for them?

He took his finger off the trigger as Marglo's buzzing reached higher ranges. On the other hand, if they just waited until this squid undid Manner's spell or field or whatever, they would be completely revealed.

Escape was the most viable option. To either find another place to hide or stay on the run until Manners could find them again.

He beckoned to Ronnie. The kid crawled out from the shadows. He stood, but a dizzy look crossed his face, and Andrew cursed his stupidity for letting him take the medication. He wobbled on his feet, and threw out a hand to grab the mounted shelf next to him to keep from falling. The violent motion caused the assembly to shift over a few inches, rattling everything on it. Ronnie closed his eyes and grimaced.

Sunglasses spun to face that side of the room, his back now to Andrew. "You're *here*, aren't you, little humans?" he asked aloud, over Marglo's noises. Taunting undercut each word. He took measured steps forward, arms up at the elbows, cocked and waiting for further confirmation of his quarry. "I don't know how you managed this, but we have seen through your magics. Come to me. Trofonag wants His keys, and He's getting impatient."

That word. Trofonag. Andrew thought he could scrub his skin with a wire brush and acid soap and he would never get the feel of those three syllables off him.

Ronnie stood against the wall, watching as Sunglasses closed in and narrowed his avenue of escape. Andrew signaled him to edge around the still-humming Marglo before he was trapped.

"You only try my patience, sin cow." Sunglasses flashed an arm out, sweeping junk off the nearest shelf. Ronnie jumped away, narrowly avoiding getting hit by a glass jar full of nuts and bolts that shattered against the wall where he'd been standing. Sunglasses pressed on, arms held out wide now in a bear hug, grasping at the air like a blind man, driving the kid

RUSSELL C. CONNOR

back into the corner.

There was no way to help him. He would be caught in a matter of seconds.

So let him. He's nothing to you. You have Joey to think about.

It was true, but it did nothing to assuage his guilt. Andrew started up the stairs, taking each step slow and silent. He could see through the narrowing crack between stairs and ceiling as he worked his way up that Ronnie was watching him over Sunglasses' shoulder, his face caught between a silent plead and a scowl.

God, he couldn't do it.

Andrew fired his pistol down into the basement.

That Jappy pig was leaving him. To serve and protect. What a crock. Ronnie gave him the blackest look he could muster over the broad shoulder of the man closing in on him.

Andrew paused on the last stair before he would move out of view entirely. Their eyes locked. He hesitated before pointing his pistol down at them and shooting a round.

If he intended to hit this linebacker, he was *way* off target; the concrete floor chipped a good two feet behind the behemoth in the sunglasses. The man spun, forgetting all about whoever he might have trapped in front of him, and bolted for the stairs. Andrew ran—Ronnie heard the sound of his footsteps overhead—and then the man with the ultra-dark sunglasses was in hot pursuit, leaving him alone in the basement with the thing called Marglo.

The gunshot and subsequent departure of his master hadn't phased the slimy creature. Its eyes remained closed, those irritatingly high-pitched tones still drifting from what passed for its face. Ronnie was freezing cold and only getting woozier from the pain meds, but he had to move. He circled to the far side of the room, wanting to sneak by and go after Andrew. He got as far as the door leading to the closet beneath the stairs when the humming cut out. There was a *whoosh* in the room, an invisible rush of wind, and Ronnie got the idea of something suddenly deflating, like a popped balloon. The sensation was gossamer, only detectable on

OUTSIDE THE LINES

the outermost layer of his skin, but the room began to heat up immediately afterward.

Marglo's eyes opened.

And focused on Ronnie.

"*There* you are," Marglo purred, with a newfound slyness its previous subservient tone had lacked. It squelched around on its tentacle legs to cut him off, dangling claws clacking in anticipation.

"Yeah, here I am." Ronnie puffed out his chest and stood on his toes to look as intimidating as possible. His height advantage gave him a good two or three feet over the creature, but it carried its mass wide and low enough that their weights were probably the same. Even so, he didn't anticipate a problem if he showed some dominance; this thing had turned bootlicking into an art form. "And if you thought your pansy-ass 'master' was bad Squidward, just wait and see what I'm gonna do to ya."

Marglo's eyes narrowed. "Do not threaten Marglo, human."

"Oh yeah, you gonna squirt ink on me?" He moved forward, whapping the knuckles of one hand into the palm of the other.

That bulbous lump that formed its head rippled. Its gelatinous flesh peeled back, taking those beady eyes with it. Its whole body was changing and unfolding, expanding and rearing up, like Play-Dough flattened out into a sheet for wider surface area, revealing a dark black, impossibly big gullet lined with razor-sharp incisors in a spiral pattern. That pit was big enough to swallow him without even chewing.

"*Goddamn* it," Ronnie moaned.

The giant mouth came at him, the hole in the middle contracting in great, hungry swallows. Ronnie dodged away, backing into the corner of the basement again. Marglo followed. When he reached the shelves, Ronnie scooped up everything he could lay his hands on—in this case, a metal child's fire truck, something that looked like a Thighmaster, and a heavy wrench—and chucked them all at the creature, one after the other. The wide fan of its bruised lips caught each one in midair and sucked them down with a slurp.

Before he could find a better weapon, Marglo darted forward and wrapped tentacles around his left leg in a vice grip. It yanked, pulling his foot out from under him. Ronnie grabbed the shelf to stay upright and

RUSSELL C. CONNOR

ended up bringing the whole thing down with him. The world spun and blurred. He landed on his back amid an avalanche of tools and junk, knocking the air from his lungs. Marglo stuffed the appendage into his mouth, shoe and all, and Ronnie's leg disappeared up to the shin. Those little needle teeth sliced through his jeans and into his flesh in a 360 degree bear trap.

Ronnie found his breath and screamed as Marglo sucked him in. He thrashed, digging at the floor, and his hand found the rubberized handle of another tool. He lifted it.

A hatchet.

Marglo was up to his knee now, the entire lower half of his leg somewhere down inside that disgusting tentacle body, and Ronnie sat up to swing the weapon, aiming for the fleshy circle of teeth above his leg. The hatchet blade sank through mottled flesh, and a black ichor spewed from the wound.

The creature shrieked and spit him back out. His leg was bleeding, he was missing the lower third of his jeans, and his foot was covered in yellowish bile, but other than that, he was intact. Ronnie scrambled to his knees and hacked at the tangled knot of tentacles like he was Paul Bunyan. Rubbery flesh split. More of its putrid blood flowed. Sometime during the assault Marglo transformed back into his previous form, and Ronnie buried the hatchet right between its beady eyes.

It made a pitiful mewling noise and sank to the concrete in a bleeding heap.

He got up, ignoring the way his brain sloshed inside his skull. He was streaked with gore, but he wiped at only the worst chunks of it and ran for the basement stairs.

Andrew fled the basement and heard the 'roid freak pounding up the steps behind him.

The cold ended at the threshold, just as the heat had in the other house. He didn't stop to marvel this time. Beyond the basement doorway was a lightless corridor leading to his right. He charged down it, and passed a branching hallway on the left before he even knew it was there.

OUTSIDE THE LINES

Not only was he navigating unfamiliar terrain again, but he was doing it in the dark. No time to turn around and explore though; when he looked back, he saw Sunglasses hurtle through the basement door. The big guy honed in on him like a guided missile. Before taking flight, Andrew saw him remove the huge sunglasses and caught a glint of something stark red beneath, glittering deep in his eyesockets.

The hallway ended, and Andrew careened into a larger room filled with the low shadows of furniture. Here he *did* stop to goggle. This had to be a living room, but there were no windows in here, no doors, no other way out. The construction felt forced, unnatural, designed specifically to halt his progress, but that wasn't the source of his amazement.

Along the walls of this room were glowing handprints. They were small, the slender digits those of a child, placed at random angles in a haphazard line about waist high. A soft, white radiance poured out of each one, bright enough to cast a gloomy pall across the entire room, like the Batman nightlight in Joey's room.

But there was nothing comforting about this illumination. It made him feel disgusted and diseased.

From all around came the laughter of children.

He thought of the voice on the phone, the one that sang those awful lyrics. These high-pitched giggles turned his muscles to stone. They came from everywhere at once, from *inside* his skull like a metal plate picking up radio stations, a blend of a hundred, a thousand, an infinite number of merry childish peals invading his thoughts, throwing him out of his own head, and worst of all, even in that miasma of laughter, he thought he could hear one that sounded like Joey...

He was hit hard from behind. The laughter cut off, and Andrew realized he'd been distracted just long enough for his pursuer to catch up. A shoulder slammed into his lower back with the force of a linebacker moving to not only sack the quarterback, but break bones. He flew forward. His ankle hit the edge of a recliner and zipped out from under him. He fell, arms pinwheeling with the pistol, and landed face down on a glass coffee table in the middle of the room. The surface shattered under the weight of his stomach, dropping him to the floor through the metal frame with his feet still in the air.

RUSSELL C. CONNOR

Andrew twisted around onto his back, shards of glass cutting his arms and chest. Sunglasses no longer wore his namesake; those pitch-black lenses had been covering two ovals of fiery red that burned in his face like hot coals. The man came for him, hands outstretched and kneading the air.

“Stop! Get back!” Andrew raised the gun. When the guy didn’t slow, he squeezed off a round. In the combined light of the muzzle flash and the wan glow from the handprints, he saw the bullet strike home high on the chest. Blood flowed, but it did little to faze his target.

The man reached him and grabbed his wrist. He held the gun away while he pummeled at Andrew with his free hand.

“It’s...OUR...time!” he screamed, each word in rhythm with his blows. His eyes burned so hard they generated actual heat. “We will take your world and you...will...LET US!”

Andrew was caught in the table and couldn’t get into a position to fight back. The pistol fell out of his grip. One of the guy’s punches struck the lump in his temple, knocking him woozy.

His free hand landed on a piece of glass still stuck to the frame. He snatched it up and jabbed it into his opponent’s throat. It sank deep.

The flesh around the wound sizzled momentarily, and then crimson spurted over Andrew. The creature with the red-eyes let go and stumbled back, clutching the glittering triangle jutting from his neck.

Andrew climbed out of the table frame. The room was back to its original construction, with a big picture window, a front door, and no radioactive fingerpaint. He watched his adversary collapse against a nearby ottoman and grow still, the fire in his skull dimming as smoke dribbled out.

He knew he should see if Ronnie needed help, but claustrophobia swept over him. Andrew wanted out of this house, this neighborhood, this *universe*—at least into some fresh air—or he was going to hyperventilate. He left the pistol behind and ran to the door, found a lock and threw it open, then went onto the porch outside.

It was still unnatural night—a night without moon or stars or any kind of interruption in the bluish-black void above—but at least it was open space and breathing room. As he pelted onto the lawn, an arm came out

OUTSIDE THE LINES

from behind one of the wide columns that flanked the porch's entrance and clotheslined him.

Andrew went down hard enough this time to knock the wind out of him. As he gasped for air, he saw another burning-eyed man step out from his hiding spot. Except this one's skin condition was more advanced than the last one; huge, cancerous stretches across his skin appeared to be eating him from the inside out, making him look halfway dead.

And there were others closing in, crossing the lawn to surround him.

"Go and find the other," he heard the newcomer lean over him and growl. "I'll get this one to the Facilitator."

Ronnie had time to make it to the back door on the opposite side of the house just as he heard the front crash open. Heavy feet stomped inside and spread out, like the Gestapo sweeping for Jews. He limped along the outside of the house to where the fence line met a decorative row of tall, thorny bushes and pushed into the small space behind them. From there, he was able to shimmy through the dirt down to the front yard without being seen.

By now, the medication was in full swing, turning his muscles to jelly and urging him to fall into the sweet arms of sleep. He shook it off and watched from the shadows as a group of men with glowing eyes milled about the lawn, standing guard over Andrew, one of them with a foot planted on his chest to keep him down. Whatever these things were, there were more arriving all the time; ranks of filthy men dressed in ancient rags made their way up the dark streets. Various parts of their bodies looked rotted, and some of them had creatures like Marglo on leashes, like hunting dogs. Ronnie was afraid they might sniff him out as the squid had done with Manners' magic spell or whatever the hell it was, but they remained oblivious.

More of the red-eyed men came from the front of the house a few minutes later, carrying the bodies of Marglo and his master and dumping them both unceremoniously on the porch. When Ronnie saw the big guy from the basement covered in blood, he gave a silent cheer for Andrew.

The ones that had run through the house reported him missing. A

RUSSELL C. CONNOR

search party was quickly organized, and a large chunk of this Nuclear Brethren were sent to look for him.

After that, he *did* fall asleep. The sound of a revving engine startled him awake, and he opened his eyes to find a huge tire rolling toward his head on the other side of the bushes. Ronnie's lips clamped shut just before a scream could escape.

It was a school bus looming over him. He recognized the shape and color even in the perpetual twilight of this insane place. They backed it up over the curb and onto the lawn, the tires digging furrows through the lush grass. The back bumper was inches above his head.

The remaining thugs lifted Andrew under the arms and carried him, feet dragging, through the side door. The engine revved as they prepared to pull away.

Ronnie knew this was where he and Officer Andrew parted ways. Probably forever. The man was caught, and Ronnie could do nothing to change that. Besides, he would likely want Ronnie to go and tell his one-fourth Jap kid that he died bravely, saved his life, all that heroic, line-of-duty shit.

There was absolutely no need to go through with the insanity his brain was pushing him toward.

But he slithered under the bus anyway, working his way to the middle section where the wide metal struts gave support to the vehicle's heavy interior. He'd done this before, on a field trip in the fourth grade that the school had banned him from. Of course, he was a hell of a lot smaller and a hundred pounds lighter back then, but *que sera, se-motherfucking-ra*.

Ronnie squeezed into the guts of the vehicle and stretched himself across several supports just before it rolled away. He was almost unconscious now, his eyes drifting shut every few seconds. He managed to get in a snug position almost like a hammock that kept him from being pitched out when the bus bounced back over the curb.

"Fuck, fuck, what is *wrong* with me?" he muttered. Ronnie let sleep take him as the bus roared up empty Strangewood streets.

TO BE CONTINUED MARCH 30TH IN:
THE SCHOOL

AND DON'T MISS THESE OTHER HORROR TITLES FROM
RUSSELL C. CONNOR AND DARK FILAMENT BOOKS:

SECOND UNIT THE JACKAL MAN

**Want to know more about Edward Manners before the
next installment of “Outside the Lines”?**

Read Russell C. Connor’s short story collection

HOWLING DAYS

Coming in March!

AVAILABLE THROUGH AMAZON.COM AND BARNES AND NOBLE