

The Night Shift

A Prequel to 'The Jumper'

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“Get up, dude! Your lazy ass can’t just sit around here all day,” Quinn said to the slumbering Craig Dixon as he slapped his feet forcefully off of the coffee table.

“What?”

“Seriously? You seriously didn’t even know you fell asleep sitting on the couch again?” The tone of Quinn’s voice was a mixture of sarcasm and irritation.

“Look man, I’m sorry. I guess I just dozed off for a few minutes. It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal? Look at the TV screen, dude. Your character has been running in place against that same wall for the past thirty minutes!”

Craig was slightly embarrassed, as he had just started to play a game online with some buddies and had apparently drifted fast asleep with his in-game character nestled safely away from the line of fire.

“Craig, we’ve been roommates for what? Five years now? I love you like a brother, but I’ve floated you as long as I can. You lost your job, and that sucks, but you promised you’d start looking for another job so that you can resume paying for your half of the rent. I’m sorry man, but if you can’t contribute, as much as I love you, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Please don’t make me do that.”

Craig and Quinn had been in a band together for nearly eight years. Quinn was nineteen when he posted an ad at a local music shop in downtown Chicago. Craig was only sixteen when he responded to it. At first, Quinn ignored the response because he was older and looking for a serious band to pursue his dream of stardom, but Craig was persistent, and

there weren't any other promising prospects responding to the ad. He agreed to listen to a demo that Craig had made and instantly fell in love with his playing. He was amazed that a sixteen year old had such serious licks. It took only one jam session together before Craig was accepted into the band, but as a duo, they wouldn't have much luck.

Over time, they were able to complete a full line-up and began taking gigs by the time Craig was a senior in high school. They even had quite a following at one time. However, troubles with securing a full-time bass player had kept them from the spotlight in recent months, and Quinn could feel it all slipping away.

Craig losing his job hadn't helped either because now they didn't have the money they needed to record a demo in a real professional studio. Without that demo, it would be hard to get a new bass player, and without a new bass player, their music career would be stagnant.

"I'm sorry, Quinn. I know. Everything you're saying is right. It's just... it's just so hard out there, man. I don't wanna clean dishes or wait on tables, you know?"

"Craig, you're unemployed, and the job market is utter bullshit out there. If it takes flipping burgers to get a job, then I should think you'd better take it." Quinn knew he was doling out the tough love, but as Craig was beginning to fall into sloth, he couldn't think of another way to get through to him.

"Flipping burgers? Dude, fuck that!"

“Well? You need to do something! I’m sorry, but you can’t just sit around here and play Nintendo all day like you’re a teenager again.”

“It’s Xbox,” Craig corrected.

“I don’t give a shit if it’s a full-HD Speak n’ Spell, Craig! The point is, you’ve been dozing around the apartment far more than you’ve been looking for a job and that ends right now.”

Craig set the controller down on the table where his feet had been previously elevated and leaned forward. His thin, long dirty-blond hair fell into face as he rubbed his eyes and tried to let the reality of the situation sink in.

“I know, man, but it’s not like there’s been a wealth of jobs out there for a guy without a college degree.” Craig’s statement was not an unfair assessment of the job market, but he was also attempting to use it as a stall tactic.

“This coming from a guy who just lost his job delivering pizzas? Well, Craig, you’re right. I’m sorry. I only hope that we can find something half as regal for a man of your high standards.”

“Fuck you, Quinn.” The two men silently stared at each other for a few moments before they both finally caved and started to laugh.

“Don’t make me laugh, you asshole, I’m serious,” Quinn said. “I hate to come down on you, but I can’t afford to pay all the bills. I want this band to succeed, and I thought that you did too.”

“I do! How can you even think for a second that I don’t?”

“Then why won’t you just get another job? It doesn’t have to be at The Drake or anything, man. Just something to bring in some cash until you can find something better.”

“Trust me, dude. There aren’t even any good shitty jobs out there. I have been looking. I just haven’t found anything worth pursuing yet.”

“What about that night custodian job at the kid’s center, or whatever it was?”

“A fucking janitor, dude?” Craig responded as if slightly offended.

“Why not a fucking janitor? It’s a job, right?”

“Only by the elementary definition of one.”

“Come on, Craig. It can’t be that bad. Didn’t you say it paid pretty well for a simple clean-up job?”

Craig was beginning to regret telling Quinn as much about the job as he had. A couple of weeks prior, Craig had found a listing in the paper for a night custodian position at the Emily Glavine Community Youth Center. He called and spoke to the head of Human Resources, Janice Pinkerton, and she made it sound as though it was the crowned jewel of custodial employment.

The position promised better than average pay, a flexible schedule, and only required about twenty hours a week, including weekends off. It sounded too good to be true, so he assumed that it probably was.

The lady had called back and left messages several times, almost to the point of sounding desperate, but still Craig ignored the opportunity. He had actually all but forgotten about it until Quinn brought it back up.

“I don’t know, man. That whole thing sounds really sketchy to me,” Craig protested.

“What, like it’s a secret meth lab when no one is there and they need a discreet janitor to tend to their spills? Come on, dude.”

“Alright, alright already! I’ll fucking call her!” Craig was annoyed now. Not at Quinn in particular, but more about the realization that a job meant that he’d lose his valuable Xbox time that he had grown to love.

“That’s my boy! They grow up so quick, don’t they?” Quinn said with his voice raised to a higher octave in an attempt to sound feminine. Craig quickly pulled a sock off of his foot and rolled it into ball before throwing it and scoring a direct hit right in Quinn’s mouth.

“That’s fucking disgusting, dude! I sure hope you’re as good at mopping as you are throwing around your nasty ass socks.”

Quinn picked up his drum sticks from the coffee table and played an imaginary tune on his air drums as he glided by Craig on the couch and into his room. He shut the door behind him revealing an old bumper sticker that read “Grass, gas, or ass. Nobody rides for free” taped up diagonally across the door. Craig smiled and remembered the night that he had peeled it from the van of a slimy neighbor they’d nicknamed “The Child Molester.”

The man was easily into his 40s at the time and had lived next door to where the band used to hold their practices. Quinn and Craig used to make fun of him relentlessly to his face, but he never picked up on it. They would tell him how cool his 1980s van without

windows was and that the only thing that would make it cooler would be some lightning bolts and volcanoes painted on each side. The guy was a complete creep and would generally say incredibly sexist and/or misogynistic things about women. He talked a big game, but they couldn't imagine a girl touching his junk even on accident.

The last night at the house before they packed up and moved to a new practice space, Craig snuck over to the neighbor's house and stole the bumper sticker from the van before giving it to Quinn as a birthday present later that year. Quinn often told people that it was that birthday gift that cemented their friendship for a lifetime.

After being convinced by Quinn to follow up on the potential job opportunity, Craig had finally returned Janice Pinkerton's phone calls and expressed an interest in the night custodian position. She informed him that the position was in fact still open and that she was grateful that he had called her back.

Following a rather pedestrian phone screening, she offered Craig the position, which he reluctantly accepted. She informed him that she would need him to start right away and that he would be provided with a uniform that would easily go on over his street clothes, so there would be no need to dress up for his shift. He had been more concerned as to the fate of his treasured long hair, which Ms. Pinkerton put to rest by saying that he could keep it, but she'd prefer he kept it pulled back into a ponytail while he was on the clock. Craig was more than happy about that arrangement.

When the first day of his new job arrived, Craig was ten minutes late for the start of his shift. Under most ordinary circumstances, he would've been told to simply turn back around and go home at most any other job, but Ms. Pinkerton shrugged it off by giving him a warning that sounded far more apologetic than disciplinary, and proceeded to give him the grand tour of the building.

"Now Craig, this job is fairly easy, but is no less important, so we need you to do your best in order to get the job done before your shift ends at 10:00pm. Do you think that's going to be a problem, sweetie?"

"God damn, she is hot," he thought to himself. "Uh, no sweat at all, Janice."

"Fabulous! Then I guess that covers pretty much everyth—Oh! That reminds me. There is just one rule I need to make sure you understand before I turn you loose for the evening. The second floor of the building is off limits at night, so you need to make sure that you stick to your job responsibilities and stay down here. Do you understand?"

"That's kinda weird. Why is it off limits?" Craig asked, apparently oblivious to the fact that successful employees shouldn't speak to their superiors in the same manner that they speak to their drummers.

"Oh, I know. It must seem quite silly, but I assure you, it's for your own safety. You see, we're doing some reconstruction work up there and the contractors found some black moss, so you know... safety first."

Craig was picking up on the strange tone in her voice. “But if there’s black moss up there, why would it only be dangerous at night?”

Ms. Pinkerton thought that Craig might have been dim-witted enough for her to slip that by him, but unfortunately she’d been caught. “Look Craig, just don’t go up there at night. Ok? Can you do that for me?”

“You’re the boss.”

Ms. Pinkerton concluded the tour by showing Craig where the supply closet was and explaining the protocol for a shift change with the day custodian. Strangely, she had mentioned that the day custodian had not been showing up for work recently and that they would likely be replacing him very soon.

After giving him his final instructions, she returned to her office to shut down her computer for the evening. Within a few minutes, Craig heard the front door latch close one final time, signaling that he was completely alone.

Doing the work of a night custodian wasn’t so bad, Craig thought to himself. It was a little on the boring side, but he had proactively brought along his MP3 player and was listening to the new Foo Fighters album. With its hard rockin’ guitar riffs and loud pounding drums, it was right up his alley and motivated him to work harder than he envisioned himself working. He had emptied all the trash cans, dust all the furniture, and changed out the toiletries in the bathrooms, all in record time.

The only task left to complete before the end of his shift was to mop the floors, but at his best guess, that

was about another hour of work ahead of him, and it was only 7:40pm. If his time table were accurate, that would leave him with an entire hour of nothing to do but sit around, which he wasn't all too excited about.

He thought about his conversation earlier with Ms. Pinkerton and how she'd lied to him about not being allowed on the second floor due to black moss. He wondered why she'd lie to him about something so stupid. Surely there had to be a secret up there that she was trying to hide from him, but he couldn't even imagine what it could be. He had to know.

Craig carefully positioned the mop bucket against a wall in the cafeteria so that it wouldn't fall and vowed to return later to finish the job by 10:00pm. His curiosity had gotten the better of him, and he was going to flirt with danger by breaking Ms. Pinkerton's only rule.

He took out his ear buds and stood at the bottom of the staircase looking up to the nearly pitch black landing of the second floor. He assumed that there had to be a light switch at the top of the stairs and watched his footing as he ascended the narrow stairs of the old building.

When he reached the landing, Craig slid his hand along the wall spastically in an effort to find a light switch, but could not find one. The house lights only shone down on the main floor, leaving the upstairs to be lit exclusively by what seeped in from the outside. It had rained off and on all day, blanketing the sky with an opaque sea of gray. He put his back against the wall and continued to slide down it with his arm extended, feeling around for some type of light

source. His eyes widened as he felt what appeared to be the fingers of another human being. The sensation startled him and caused him to swing his other arm around to meet the first. He expected to grab a hold of something, but instead all he felt was the calloused fingers of his other hand. There was nothing there. Nothing at all.

Craig felt silly for giving himself such a fright and laughed a little before continuing on. His eyes had adjusted somewhat to the darkness of the area and he was now able to pick out larger shapes such as furniture and doorways. His eyes were drawn to an area that appeared to be an expansive hallway. There was absolutely no light penetrating the darkness of the corridor, yet he felt inexplicably compelled to stare at it. It was so dark that if he had to describe the color, the only word that would come to his mind was 'thick.'

As he stared into the dark, he saw the outline of something resembling a humanoid shape. He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, so he blinked frantically and shook his head from side-to-side a couple of times to clear his vision. Much to his surprise, the humanoid shape was still there and had moved closer. He was frightened and bewildered beyond comprehension. He had already witnessed what he thought had been the darkest shade of black he'd ever seen, but yet his eyes were now focused on an object that was even darker than that. This isn't even fucking possible!!

The figure began to move closer and closer to Craig, which forced him to retreat a step backward in

tandem with each movement of the figure. He had finally reached the end of real estate and backed up against a large casement window that created a loud smack, sent echoing throughout the entire floor. He was too frightened to feel the pain and turned to face the window.

The moon had finally begun to shine through the thick cloud cover outside, but still failed to provide any light source to the inside of the building. Craig quickly spun 180-degrees to look behind him, but found only darkness and no humanoid figure. He was both relieved and terrified. He wondered if he had imagined the entire thing.

Suddenly, Craig remembered that he had tucked his Zippo into his pants pocket in case of the luxury of a smoke break during his shift. He fished it out of his pocket and attempted to light it in an effort to see his surroundings more clearly. He flicked the lighter, but it didn't take. He flicked it again, still nothing. He remembered how Quinn had showed him a trick once where if you bit down on the opening of the lighter where the flame jutted out from, it would sometimes clear any unseen obstruction and allow the lighter to work again. He thought it was worth a shot.

He bit down on the cold metal and tasted years of accumulated grime. He immediately spit at least a dozen times in succession and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coveralls. He took a moment to pause and exhale deeply through his mouth before trying the lighter again. He flicked the Zippo and a tall plume of fire shot out from the lighter, revealing the pale stern face of a teenage boy, just inches away from

him, whose pitch-black eyes reflected the light of the fire back at Craig.

Without thinking, he dropped the lighter and ran as fast as he could away from the boy he'd just seen. In the darkness, Craig tripped over a small foot ottoman and fell down hard on his chest. He had managed to get his hands up in time to brace his fall, but with such force, it did little to shield him from the unforgiving surface of the uncarpeted floor. He was certain that at least one wrist was broken, and potentially even both.

Unlike his earlier brush with the building's construction, the pain was fully registering this time. As he lay on his stomach temporarily distracted by the excruciating pain, the vision of the boy's face quickly popped back into his mind.

The moon had now fully broken through the clouds, and its glow had begun to wash the room in its light-blue caress. With all the strength he could muster, Craig rolled himself over onto his back and was horrified at the sight of a menacing looking teenage boy standing only a few feet away. His dark hair was long and wavy, obscuring his face from Craig. He appeared to be hanging his head, staring at the ground.

Craig, now fully able to pinpoint his location on the upstairs floor, was confined to the ground, unable to use his wrists as a means of supporting his weight to help get him back to his feet. Frightened to a level far beyond his comprehension, his survival instincts began to kick in, and as quickly as he could began to propel himself backwards by digging in his elbows

and pushing. It was a slow and plodding method of movement, but it was working. Little by little, he was inching further away from the young boy's figure, which began to fill him with hope.

Much to his chagrin, after a couple more feet, the boy began to take steps forward. The boy was now playing a game of cat and mouse and surely must have known that he had Craig at a substantial disadvantage. Craig knew that he was getting closer to the staircase with each agonizing push of his elbow, but the boy was gaining on him, calmly advancing forward without ever taking his eyes off of his feet.

With one last push, Craig's elbow had reached a drop off. He'd made it to the staircase after much laboring to do so. His body ravaged with pain, he no longer had the ability to fight for his survival. His breathing was heavy and loud. He'd torn holes along the elbows on each side of his coveralls which had exposed his now bleeding skin.

The boy continued to advance until he stood at Craig's feet. This is the end. I know it now. Craig raised his head to stare at the boy and face his attacker. Slowly, the boy began to raise his head up to meet the quivering eyes of his prey. The boy sneered, raising one side of his upper lip, and then turning it into a smirk that imbued pure evil.

"Alright, alright. Just do what you're gonna do and get it over with. I'm done. I can't move another inch, so just... do it," Craig pleaded.

The boy did nothing but continue to stare.

“I said just fucking do it!!” This time Craig commanded a response.

The boy raised his head up even further and revealed the pearl black eyes that Craig had seen earlier by the light of his Zippo. He opened his mouth up wide, contorting into a shape that no human face was capable of, and let out a deafening scream that forced Craig to cover his ears with his forearms.

The boy charged at Craig with inhuman speed. For Craig, the moment had triggered an effect of slow-motion. He knew that his time left on the earth had reached its end and he was filled with sadness. There was so much left that he wanted to do. There was so much left that he wanted to be. He began to shed silent tears and closed his eyes in hopes that it would be a quick end and that there would be something waiting for him on the other side of life.

Moments passed, and Craig continued to lie still, staring at the back of his eyelids. He knew he was alive because his heart was pounding and felt as though it was mere seconds away from punching a hole through his chest. He lowered his arms from his ears and heard nothing. With just a moment of hesitation, he slowly opened his eyes to reveal only empty space in front of him. It caused him great pain, but he forced himself to a seated position on the floor.

Standing in the middle of the room, bathing in the moonlight from outside, was the boy who had tormented him only moments prior. The boy turned his head to look at Craig for a second or two, and then ran towards the giant casement window before leaping through it and shattering the glass.

Craig was petrified. He closed his eyes and buried his head between his knees, just wanting it all to be over. He thought that he should check to see if the boy had somehow survived, but when he raised his head, the window in the room was perfectly intact. There was no broken glass and everything appeared to be as untouched as when he'd first entered the room.

Craig made it back up to feet and lumbered towards the window to look outside, but there was nothing on the ground below. It was an empty alley that likely hadn't served any other purpose that evening than to provide the local bums with a restroom.

Craig had had enough for one evening and promptly left the building. He'd left in such haste that he'd forgotten to put away the mop bucket that was still leaning against a wall in the cafeteria, though he didn't care much about being fired at this stage. As far as he was concerned, flipping burgers sounded like a welcome alternative to employment at the Emily Glavine Community Youth Center.

In the morning, he would call Ms. Pinkerton and politely resign from his position. The job market may have been challenging, but it was an opponent he would much rather deal with than the supernatural.