

The Cannibals of Sunset Drive

by Dan K. Carlsruh

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Summary: Ten-year-old Mike is convinced that the old monastery in his town is inhabited by a group of cannibal monks, until he meets the sole occupant of the building.

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The Cannibals of Sunset Drive

This story is dedicated to

Eve

Esther

Rachel

Abe

Sam

and Kate

and to memories of Moon Lake

and Marshmallow mountains

1

The Tower

They're watching me.

They see everything I do. They watch as I take off my pants and throw them over the chair. They see me pull my pajamas out of the drawer and put them on.

They sit in the tower and watch me with their red, glowing eyes.

Pulling the shades down over the window wouldn't help. They would still see every move I make. Cannibals can see right through things like walls and curtains.

I turn on my night-light and dive under my blanket. They must be disappointed. They can't get me as long as my light is on and I'm under the blanket.

They'll have to wait for another night when I'm not so careful. Maybe by now they realize that I'm too smart to turn off my light and sleep on top of my blanket. Maybe they're watching Kenny up on Sagebrush Avenue, or Pratt down the road instead.

Without my night-light I have little protection. One night last month a big storm swung the trees outside, and the lights suddenly went off. I threw the covers

over my head and ran out of my room, across the hall, and into Mom and Dad's room. I jumped onto the bottom of their bed and curled up in a ball under my blanket.

Dad just laughed.

"Mike?" Mom asked. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," I yelled from under my blanket.

"He looks like a turtle." Dad laughed even harder.

How could he laugh when my very life was in danger? The lights were off and my only protection was the blanket, and all he could do was laugh. Would he laugh when the cannibal bats carried me away to the tower?

Would he still be laughing when they returned my bones in a small plastic bag with a thank-you note inside?

Dear Mike's Dad:

Thank you for Mike. He was delicious!

Sincerely,

The Cannibal Monks

I survived that night, but only because I was thinking fast. Each night is a new battle between me and the cannibal monks.

I peek out from under my blanket. Through my window I can see the tower rise up from the center of the vampire-cannibal castle on the hill. It even rises above the large oak trees that surround the castle. I bet from the top of the tower they can even see some of

the kids who live in the city five miles away. But they are more interested in the kids in our neighborhood, especially the boys.

Pratt says they like young boy meat the best. They look at us as if we were juicy steaks on the grill.

The castle is almost a half mile away, but the moon shines down on it and makes it look like it's in my backyard. And it might as well be. Everyone knows that cannibals have telescopic eyes.

Dad says the tower is just a part of the monastery. He says a bell probably used to be in the tower. But none of my friends ever remember any music coming from the tower. We've only seen red, glaring eyes looking over the neighborhood. Looking for their next meal.

The castle, or monastery as Dad calls it, takes up a whole block on Sunset Drive. Sunset Drive is the highest road in the whole neighborhood. Dad says that all the snobs live on Sunset. He says that snobs like to build homes higher than anybody else so that they can look down on everybody.

Kimberly Hansen lives on Sunset Drive. She's a snob. Pratt says that Kimberly's mom and dad buy an entire toy store for Christmas and let her play in it.

The homes on Sunset Drive aren't newer than all the other homes. They were built at the same time as the rest of the houses in the neighborhood. But they are much bigger and have nicer cars.

But next to all the fancy cars and big homes is the ancient rock castle with its evil tower. A thick stone

wall surrounds the entire monastery. It's old and eerie. . . . It doesn't belong here.

Mom says the monastery was built almost a hundred years ago. But she's wrong. Pratt says it's at least a thousand years old. He says his brother told him it was built by an evil tribe of Indians. Pratt's brother should know. He's in high school.

Dad says the monastery used to own all of the land where the neighborhood is built. He says the monks from the monastery used to farm wheat, corn, and hay.

Monks are supposed to be like preachers, but they don't preach. They just live together with other monks and do a lot of praying.

But no one has ever seen the monks. That's because they are all in the tower looking down at the young boys in the neighborhood and seeing how well we are fattening up.

And they only come out at night. Everyone knows that sunlight can boil the skin off of a vampire. And cannibal monks are like cousins to vampires. They can even turn into bats and fly around. They look for boys who turn off their lights and sleep on top of their blankets.

No one has ever seen a light in the monastery. Mom says that's because they go to sleep very early. Mom doesn't know. It's because cannibals don't want their skin to boil and evaporate.

Pratt, Kenny, and I are now the prime age in the neighborhood. Pratt says that ten is the best age for boy meat. He said it's a known fact that ten-year-old boys

have the worst survival rate of any age in this neighborhood. The monks will eat an adult, or even a girl, for the fiber. But they still prefer ten-year-old boys.

In three months I'll be eleven, and will not be the cannibals' favorite meal. I may not be totally safe from them as long as I live in this neighborhood, but at least I won't be their favorite dish.

The graves in the monastery's garden remind us of the fate of other ten-year-old boys. Twelve nicely made graves are the final resting places of the delicious, tender meals. Or at least of what's left of them. And the last thing any of us wants to be is number thirteen.

It's not fair that I have a window that can be seen from the tower. Why are Dad and Mom helping these monsters? They should know better. But every time I explain to Dad, he just rolls his eyes in his head and tells me to quit watching scary movies on TV.

So they've left me to survive on my own. If I can just make it until I'm eleven. Mom's always telling me to make plans early in my life so that I can work toward them. Plans like what I want to be when I grow up.

All I really want to be when I grow up is alive.

2

The Wall

Faster! Faster!

My legs hurt and my lungs feel like they're going to burst out my side and fall to the ground.

Faster! Faster!

I look down to my feet, trying to forget the pain. My red-and-white tennis shoes make a pink blur as I pedal down Rosewood Lane. The pain in my side wants to quit, but I have to keep going. If I don't, I will have to walk the wall.

Faster! Faster!

I take a quick glance behind me to make sure that Kenny is still there. Good, he's a few feet in back. With Kenny safely behind me, I can concentrate on Pratt, who is only a few feet in front.

Pratt always wins. He's the fastest bike rider in the neighborhood. I may not beat Pratt, but at least I'll take second place, and second place is a nice place to be.

Last place is the worst. Last-place finishers have to walk the wall.

I turn up Ash Street. It's a steep hill up to Sunset. I

glance back again to Kenny. He pedals like he's racing for his life. I don't blame him. This may be the last bike ride of his life. If he loses, it's the wall.

Faster! Faster!

As the road gets steeper, I put my head down and stand on my pedals. I'll take second place if it kills me. Better to die out here than behind the wall. My head aches, my legs feel like cement. My lungs feel burned. I want to throw up.

Pratt makes it to the top first. He raises his arms in victory and turns around to see how the battle between me and Kenny is going.

I'm too tired to look behind me, but I can't hear Kenny breathing. He must have fallen back.

I make it! Second place. I haven't been in last place ever since Dad gave me my lucky coin. It's an old 1954 fifty-cent piece with Ben Franklin on the front and the Liberty Bell on the back.

I pull over to the curb, jump off my bike, and collapse on the grass. My lungs take in large gulps of air. It hurts as my chest heaves up and down.

No wall today. I can live until the next race. I reach into my pocket and pull out my coin. I rub Ben's face with my fingers, flip the coin into the air, and put it back into my pocket.

"Hey, Mike, look at Kenny," Pratt says, pointing down the hill.

I roll over and see Kenny sprawled out on the grass halfway down Ash. I had nothing to worry about. He

had given up long before the top and stopped by the fire hydrant.

"Hey, Kenny!" Pratt yells. "You better get your walking shoes on!"

Kenny groans. I'm sure he's thinking up some excuse. Kenny's always finding excuses.

I sit up and look at Pratt. He doesn't seem tired at all. He beats us in everything but never gets tired. My dad says he's a "natural."

"You think he can make it without falling?" I say, looking at Kenny.

"Hope so. If he falls in, I'm not going in after him."

"Me neither."

I shudder at the thought of Kenny falling off the wall and into the garden. It would probably be the last time we saw him—alive at least.

"We better get started," Pratt says as he rides down toward Kenny. "The sun's going down."

There's probably only an hour of sunlight left. Without the sun, Kenny has no chance on the wall. Only the sun keeps the monastery cannibals in their dark, gloomy rock castle.

Pratt once said he saw the cannibals looking out the windows, waiting for a young boy to fall into the garden. Then they would wait for the sun to go down so that they could get the trapped boy.

I stand up and walk over to my bike. My legs complain with each step. They feel heavy, like all the blood in my body has fallen down to my feet. I get onto my bike and ride down to Kenny and Pratt.

Kenny is still lying on the grass, looking pale and sick.

"You okay?" I ask.

"I don't feel too good," he moans.

"You try to get out of this, and I'll tell Jenny that you're a chicken," Pratt warns.

Kenny groans louder. He would rather have his bike stolen than have Jenny know he was a chicken. Jenny Wilson is the best thing a boy in fifth grade can look at. And a girl as nice as Jenny surely wouldn't like a chicken.

Kenny rolls over and gets up slowly. He brushes off his pants and looks at the orange sun.

"But it's almost dark!"

Pratt reaches over and pulls up Kenny's bike. "We got time if you hurry."

Kenny reluctantly gets onto his bike. "I bet they don't have to wait until the sun's all the way down before they come out."

"Course they do," I remind Kenny. "Anybody knows that if a cannibal walks out with even a ray of sunlight, his skin will boil and evaporate."

"How do you know?" Kenny protests.

"Just do."

He doesn't argue. He knows he's going to walk the wall, light or no light. Arguing about it will just take more time, more precious sunlight.

"Let's go," Pratt says as he starts off toward Sunset Drive.

I follow behind Pratt while Kenny reluctantly follows both of us.

We finally get up to the tall rock wall of the monastery. Only a small portion of the sun is still above the horizon. Kenny better hurry.

The wall makes a huge square. In the center of the square is the monastery and tower. The monastery is just one big building. Between the wall and the monastery are grass and giant oak trees.

The front part of the monastery is a courtyard with lawn, bushes, and trees. An iron gate comes in from Sunset Drive and goes into this courtyard. This is the only break in the entire wall. The gate is rusted and probably hasn't been opened for hundreds of years. There's no need for it to open, though. Cannibal-vampire monks can fly with their bat wings at night.

A stone path goes from the iron gate to a large wooden door. The door goes into the monastery.

At the back is the garden and the graves.

We get off our bikes and walk up to the wall. The setting sun makes the wall glow orange.

"Climb on," Pratt says to Kenny.

"Give me a minute," Kenny says nervously.

He looks up the wall, hoping he can make it alive. He knows somebody at school who knew somebody named George who fell off the wall into the garden, never to be seen again. George is probably number twelve, the last of the graves in the garden.

The garden on the other side of the wall is full of white daisies, oak trees, and large red roses that poke their heads above the wall.