

RIP

#1: “Touch”

By Daniel Sherrier

TEASER

Rip Cooper never forgot the haunted house in which he spent his early childhood, though no one else seemed to notice its condition. Did he imagine it? No, he remembered the day all too well, and every memory earns its place.

The Cooper family lived in a tiny home, a quaint box with two tight floors and a creepy basement. The front lawn was always kept trim, though there was too little lawn to qualify that as a feat of any proportion. The real selling point was the in-ground pool in the backyard. A lovely pool, indeed. Its square footage nearly rivaled that of the house itself. The quaint box’s age spanned decades, thereby qualifying as ancient to its five-year-old resident.

The kitchen had a decent stretch of smooth, tiled floor—creaky, like the rest of the place, but excellent for rolling around toy cars. Rip gave one a hard push, and it raced away.

“Ripley, don’t leave any of those toys lying around when you’re finished, please,” his mother called out from the living room.

The die-cast metal car careened across the kitchen floor and through a crack under a door, the most horrible door in the whole wide world—the door to that creepy basement. He shouldn’t have pushed so hard.

Rip scooped up his other cars and dumped them in their box. Just one more to claim, but it had escaped his view. He inched toward that looming door, stopping as soon as his arm was within reach. Leaning forward, he stuck his fingers in the crack and pulled the door out, hoping that would reveal the wayward toy and he could grab it and close the door just as quickly.

It didn’t. All he saw was a deep, dark gulf. And somewhere down there in that foreboding abyss was his car.

His crawling skin suggested he stop right there, and a newly unsettled stomach seconded the motion.

His mother wanted him to pick up his toys, all his toys. She always warned that people could trip on them. Therefore, he had no choice. He needed to enter the basement.

He trembled as he crept down the wooden staircase into the chilly depths. Each step laughed at him with a *creak*.

The light from the kitchen shined a perfect path to the stray car. There it was, overturned near the shelves. He just had to follow the light, grab the car, and leave. Why did it have to be so far away?

His foot touched down on the smooth, rock-hard ground. He quivered as his courage faltered, and he began turning back to the kitchen...No! He had to get his toy. His mother said so. And you always do what your mother tells you, especially when she says please.

He took a few more steps toward the car, trying his best to resist the shiver sent from his brain straight down his spine.

Then he made the mistake of looking up.

Gleaming jack o' lanterns lined the shelves up and down the wall—and that was just in the parts he could see. They weren't there a moment ago, were they? He forgot all about a moment ago, because big ugly pumpkins now grinned at him, each one carrying a small piece of hellfire inside.

Rip screamed. He spun around to escape—so quickly that his legs tangled his feet, causing him to trip and crash to the floor.

He buried his face in his hands. He should have covered his ears.

“My, aren't we a brave little one?”

A man was in his basement, and it wasn't his father; wasn't any relative. The voice was unfamiliar, new. It didn't belong.

Rip sprang to his feet and froze. The jack o' lanterns had vanished, and in the middle of the lighted path appeared a gaunt old man with wizened skin, disheveled silver hair, and no smile. Nice people smiled.

Rip had never seen him—not a moment ago, not a month ago, not ever. Sure,

those hideous pumpkins were gone, but a strange man in raggedy clothing now stood in his basement. At least he could run away from pumpkins...they couldn't reach out and grab him...

The old man's jaw dropped. "You can see me, and hear me." His voice was gravelly, but the chuckle that escaped his throat was worse. "I see. You're one of the Seven, aren't you, boy?" He stepped toward young Rip.

The boy instinctively shielded his eyes, muttering, "No, no, no..."

The old man began, "Do you know how long—" and Rip heard nothing else.

He opened his eyes and peered around. The man had disappeared.

But the jack o' lanterns were back. This time, they cackled at him.

Crying piteously, Rip booked it up the stairs to the safe haven of brightness above. He slammed the door behind him with enough force to rattle the kitchen window.

What Rip hadn't realized, and didn't dare contemplate just then, was that the old man hadn't gone anywhere. He was still there, lurking in the shadows of the basement, just as he had for years.

"Just a little boy. A little coward," the old man said, letting out a wheezing laugh. "Good."

He strolled over to the abandoned toy car. He knelt and held his hand over it. The die-cast metal, untouched, began to vibrate.

"I'll have nothing to fear from a coward."