

Episode 16: The Man in the Grinning Mask

Bobby

Bobby had to stop running. He wheezed. Steven was the runner, not him. Bobby wasn't into sports and was overweight, so he always got picked last in gym, and usually he didn't care about being out of shape, except now maybe he was going to die. The Man was chasing him. The Man in the Grinning Mask. He was real.

As Bobby struggled to catch his breath, he looked in front of him, down the hallway, long and sparkling. Familiar, too. At the beginning of the fifth grade, Mr. Burton had invited the class to talk about places they'd been, or stayed, during their summer vacations, but it was all a lead-up to Mr. Burton talking about where *he* went for his vacation, France, about which he'd prepared a long slideshow.

The coolest things about the slideshow were the pics from the Palace of Versailles, and the coolest thing about the Palace of Versailles was the Hall of Mirrors. During the summer, Bobby had read a book that talked about infinity and orders of infinity—something way too nerdy to share with the class—and the Hall of Mirrors made him think of it, the glass of the mirrors, the windows, the chandeliers, glass like diamonds reflecting infinities within infinities.

The burn in his lungs started to subside, and Bobby walked forward. He didn't hear anything behind him. He looked everywhere. No one else appeared

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to be in the hall. The glass reflected no one else.

This hallway wasn't the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Fifth grade was a long time ago—he was thirteen now and would start eighth grade in August—but he remembered the look of Versailles from books on castles he kept for images to use in the adventures he made up to play with Steven and Chris.

Something metallic scraped the marble floor behind him. Something sharp. With his heart in his throat, he looked back.

Nothing.

Stay calm. Stay calm.

He walked forward, his eyes everywhere, watchful for movements in the mirrors.

Unlike the one at Versailles, this hall had nothing but mirrors on both sides, each rising from the greyish floor in panels that formed an inverted U. The French Hall of Mirrors, of course, had windows on one side, which explained the light. Here the light had no explanation.

White and gold dominated the slim areas not covered with glass in the Versailles Hall of Mirrors, but here Bobby saw what seemed to be a deep red velvet, the same red as—

His cape. He's real. You have to keep running.

Bobby walked. He was faster, but he was still walking. Something moved in a mirror to his right. For a second, the movement reflected everywhere, in front of him, behind him, on both sides, infinities. Then it was gone.

He was gone.

The chandeliers were like the ones in France. They hung as triplets of elegant clusters of glass droplets supporting circles of candles, lit but not enough to explain the illumination. The paintings on the ceiling, however, were nothing like the ones at Versailles. They were not, in fact, paintings but more glass—jigsaws of stained glass formed into detailed pictures.

Instead of images of nobility and mythology, Bobby saw naked bodies, most of them human, in piles. Some of them twisted together, fingers and tongues and penises in vaginas and anuses and mouths. Every extremity entered every orifice or crevasse. Faces conveyed hunger, delight, and relish.

Other bodies, many in piles, did not express pleasure. The dismemberment

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of many made the continuity of corpses difficult to track. Here a woman's thigh, there a piece of a man's chest. Skin and muscle peeled away from bone. Some still living hung from walls with garlands of viscera.

Bobby tried not to look. Eyes front, steady pace, walking, not trying to run, which would only exhaust him again—

Movement in infinite reflections. Black, with a flash of red, then gone. A corner lay ahead, so a mirror stood in front of him, not very far away. He saw the movement in front of him. A reflection from behind, or maybe The Man had gotten ahead—

He kept moving, looking to his sides, looking behind him, looking ahead.

Was this Dimension X? How did he get here?

Dimension X wasn't supposed to be real, but The Man in the Grinning Mask wasn't supposed to be real, either. Bobby had made them both up, hadn't he? He used them for the fantasy game he and his friends played around the neighborhood. The Man in the Grinning Mask had been a villain for a kind of endgame. They were getting too old for make-believe.

To explain the concept of The Man to Steven, he'd had to explain spacetime as a unified idea, and he'd had to explain how there could really be more than three dimensions. Then he'd said their universe, their reality, was kind of like a cardboard box piled up with a bunch of other cardboard boxes.

They could go to Dimension X, a place where they'd been playing for years, because it was a box next to theirs, and a hole, a rift in spacetime, connected the two. The hole was in the area where Steven's street, Acton Way, dead-ended in an overgrown strip of land by Sweetwater Creek before another Acton Way began.

Bobby got close to the place where the hallway turned. Versailles had one Hall of Mirrors. Wherever he was now, there were many halls, and they were more like a mirror maze.

He'd told Steven that now all realities were in danger because The Man in the Grinning Mask, an entity who wore a black suit, a red cape, and a gold mask with a hideous grin that stretched ear to ear, was creating more rifts. He carried a long sword, and he stabbed the pile of boxes, again and again, puncturing the borders of spacetime. Time and space wouldn't work right

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anymore. They'd collapse.

They had to kill The Man, or The Man would kill them all.

Bobby turned the corner, and behind him, *close* behind him, he heard the squeal of metal against glass. Walking, he looked to his side—

—and saw the Grinning Mask. It looked like a comedy mask, horrific in happiness.

Bobby ran, knowing his heft would make his heart, lungs, and legs give out again soon, but when he looked to his side, he saw himself framed in a reflection with The Man he'd described to Steven, tall and thin, gold mask, black suit, red cape flowing out behind him, sword raised. The Man wore a black top hat Bobby had never seen before.

And he'd seen this Man so many times. He never told Steven that he was adding someone from his nightmares to their game. Someone from years of nightmares. Someone he might not have made up after all. Someone who had come to him. *For him.*

Someone whose sword slashed at his back. He felt the whoosh of air, but no cut.

He tried to run faster. He wished he were Steven. He wished he were good at sports. He wished he weren't such a fat slob and—

The mirrors were gone. The hallway was gone. He stumbled to a halt, mud and dead leaves at his feet. He looked behind him.

Trees. No Man. No Grinning Mask. No Hall of Mirrors.

Huge trees surrounded him, trees bigger than any he'd ever seen. He followed one's height upward into crooked, gnarled, leafless branches that intersected with other trees' dead-looking limbs, forming a canopy of shapes that looked a little like a mosaic of stained glass. The sky above, mostly occluded, was purple. Bobby couldn't be sure, but he thought the specks in it were black stars.

Heather

“You were right,” Janet said. “It really is close.”

Heather looked at Janet with a sideways grin. “You see? That’s why it’s so fucking creepy.” Even on a bright, sunny day like this one, it was creepy, and that made it... thrilling.

“Did you meet anybody? From, like, the press I mean.” Janet looked starry-eyed when she said, “the press.” She was the only person Heather knew who could get excited by local newspeople.

“No,” Heather said. “They were mostly done with the story by the time I got here from my mom’s.” She and Janet stood at the curb on Acton Way, looking down the slope of the Marks house’s driveway. “I did meet a cop, though.”

“What was he like?”

“Young,” Heather said, looking at the house instead of Janet. “And cute. The cops still come around here, you know.”

“How young was he?”

Heather blushed and laughed. “You know, I *did* ask. Twenty-four.”

Janet looked scandalized. “That’s not young!”

“You get a different perspective in college,” Heather said. Heather was nineteen. Janet was a young seventeen, about to start her senior year in high school. They’d been friends forever, since Heather’s parents had still been married and had played bridge with Janet’s parents, and the age difference had never mattered that much.

“I guess so,” Janet said. “We’re here for psychokiller stuff, right? We totally failed the Bechdel Test.”

“We would have failed anyway,” Heather said. “The psychos were boys.” She started walking down the driveway.

Janet followed her. “Do you think we can get inside?”

The “KEEP OUT by Order of County Sheriff” sign on the front door was clearly visible. “I wouldn’t want my DNA in there. Like I said, cops still come around, and they’re still looking for those boys, Gordon and Steven Marks, so they’d follow up on any new... leads.” As she spoke, Heather led them into

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the yard, toward the left side of the house.

“Where are we going?” Janet asked. She had short brown hair, fair skin, big green eyes, and pink lips. She wore an orange-and-white-striped shirt that didn’t cover her belly button and high-cut denim shorts that hugged her narrow hips. She was cute, turning into a pretty young woman but not a beauty.

“We might get a peek. I think one of the basement rooms has windows,” Heather said. She knew the crucial room had windows because she had read about it on the internet, but she hadn’t come to check because she’d preferred to wait for company.

They got to the backyard gate, and Heather opened it. She was already through when Janet said, “Are you sure we’re not trespassing?”

“We’re trespassing,” Heather said, “but the police only put signs on the house itself, and the owners aren’t here to mind.” She figured Janet would let the rationalization pass.

Janet followed her through the gate. “By ‘the owners’ you mean the parents, right? I never heard what happened to them.”

They walked through overgrown grass past the house’s side, which, as the slope continued downward, revealed a basement with partial windows. Heather knew where she was going, though, and kept going while she said, “Calvin Marks went into a kind of fugue state or something when he found out what his sons had done. Jessica Marks apparently... just... took off. Disappeared. Not unlike her boys.”

They passed the corner, the fence within a fence, a pool area, which they entered so that Heather could lead them to the full window of the basement’s back room, the room where the murders had happened.

“You seem to know a lot,” Janet said. “You seem to know where you’re going. What got you so interested, I mean, other than spending half the summer with your dad right nearby in Rolling Vistas?”

Using her hands to shield the sides of her face from sunlight, Heather brought her face as close as she could to a windowpane. The effort yielded a view of the room, fake wood panels on the walls, cheap green carpet... and nothing. Not the folding lawn chair the girl had been raped and murdered on,

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not an outline of where the boy's body had been found mutilated—

Except maybe that dark spot *was* a bloodstain. It might have been a shadow.

Janet stood on her right, shielding her eyes like Heather did, peering inside. “What am I supposed to see?”

Heather turned away from the window, sighed, and said, “It's been too long. They probably got whatever evidence they needed, took the good stuff away, and basically cleaned up.”

She exited the pool area and wandered further into the backyard, where it leveled off as it neared the creek. Janet followed. Heather stared at the creek as she said, “You asked me why I'm so interested. It's because this kid I used to babysit, Bobby Lightfoot, disappeared a few months before the murders in this house, and people generally assume that Gordon Marks killed him. But I don't know.”

Janet looked at the creek, too. “What don't you know?”

Across the creek, contained by the Marks' fence, a dense area of trees and brush looked like a sample of the woods at the end of Acton Way. Bobby had talked about it. He, Steven Marks, and the boy killed in the basement—Chris Ledbetter—had played back there. It was a place for their fantasy adventures. They had a lot of fantasy adventures.

The girl the Marks boys murdered in the basement was Chris's older sister, Annie. She'd been a little younger than Janet.

“I don't know who all Gordon and Steven killed, but Bobby... I have a feeling,” Heather said.

Janet kept staring at the creek. Did she hear it? Hear that it was too narrow to be so loud? Its babbles were whispers. Heather thought she heard her own name, but she wouldn't have sworn to anything.

Janet said, “What kind of feeling?”

“It's stupid,” Heather said, turning toward Janet.

Janet faced her, and Heather became aware of how exposed they were, standing in the backyard of the abandoned murder house, where anyone could see them. Janet said, “I doubt it's stupid. Stupid isn't particularly you.”

“First of all,” Heather said, leading with the rational argument, “Bobby and Steven were, like, best friends. I don't think Steven would have. I don't know

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about Gordon, but at least for Steven, Bobby would have been on the safe list.” Bobby Lightfoot, but not Chris Ledbetter. *Marginally* rational. “Second of all,” Heather said, and she paused before continuing: “and this is the weird part.”

“It’s all pretty weird,” Janet said.

“Bobby had a kind of... boogeyman,” Heather said. “When I was babysitting, and his parents stayed out late, he would get up at night, upset, and he told me about him. He called him The Man in the Grinning Mask.”

“Grinning... Mask?”

“It’s gold. It reminds me of a comedy mask, from the classic comedy and tragedy pair? You can’t see anything behind it, no eyes, no mouth, even though the mouth on the mask is spread wide, stretching from ear to ear in a way that’s kind of unnatural.” The image wavered in Heather’s mind. “He’s tall and skinny, and he wears a black suit with a long red cape. He carries a sword. Sometimes it has blood on it.”

“You sound like you’ve seen him,” Janet said. Her face had gotten paler, as if *she* had seen a ghost.

“I have,” Heather said. “After Bobby told me about him, I dreamed about him, too. Only, my dreams add a black top hat. A magician’s hat. He reaches down toward his feet and pulls rabbits out of nowhere. He stuffs the rabbits in his hat, and they disappear. A magic trick, but backward. For some reason, it scares the hell out of me. *He* scares the hell out of me.”

“He sounds scary.” Silence. They looked at each other until Janet continued, “You think Bobby got stuffed in the hat, don’t you?”

Heather shook her head. “Not literally, but... *something* happened to make him disappear. Something nobody understands. Not yet.” Another silence. “I told you it was stupid.”

Janet looked back toward the window into the room where the Marks boys had slaughtered the Ledbetter kids. “Standing right here, a lot of freaky shit sounds easier to believe.”

Gordon

They'd cleaned up, changed clothes, and left the house long before their parents got home and before anyone thought of looking for Annie or Chris. Gordon's idea had been to go to the Mortimers, who would know what to do. He would bring Steven, who had surprised him by beating Annie to death with a baseball bat once Gordon was done with her. Maybe watching Chris die had broken him.

They really were brothers now.

Steven had come close to meeting Adam before, when Steven and Chris had gone snooping at the Mortimers' house, right at the beginning of the other Acton Way, and Adam had chased them back to the creek in the middle. Gordon had intervened, and the younger boys had gotten away. Adam might not like seeing Steven again, but Gordon would make him understand why he was proud of the little guy.

Gordon, age fifteen, looked at Steven, age twelve, and felt a bond with him for the first time. Before, Steven had been in the way. He'd hung on when he should have disappeared. Now he was something... else.

The Mortimers might not have been happy to see either of them. Adam and Ellie had rules, the big one being NIMBY, which stood for Not In My Back Yard. Go hunting near where you sleep, and you get caught. Annie, Chris, and the others broke the NIMBY rule big time. Adam and Ellie might have thought Gordon and Steven had become... too risky.

Gordon didn't get a chance to find out what the adult pair thought of his and his brothers' recent activities because, when they entered the Mortimers' house through the back door, which led into the kitchen, they found no one in the house, only a note on the kitchen table that said, "Follow the creek."

Gordon didn't know what the note meant, but Steven had a pretty good idea, so, a minute later, they were back outside in the humidity, under the bright blue summer sky, walking toward the area between the two Acton Ways, the clearing and the place where Sweetwater Creek got so much bigger than it was behind their house.

Steven led them along by the creek side, saying something about "Dimen-

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sion X.” He was probably talking about his game with Bobby and Chris. Gordon knew they came down here for their baby-shit make-believe. The place was too muddy and thorny to interest the older kids, who preferred Cooper’s Pond in nearby Rolling Vistas for make-out sessions and... whatever, but Steven and his faggy friends liked it.

Steven didn’t have friends anymore.

The funniest thing happened. They walked along, the sky faded from blue to white, and strange noises—buzzing insects, cawing birds, hints of voices, all with unfamiliar fierceness—surrounded them. Then everything went black.

Vision returned, and they still stood by the creek, but it looked different. Deeper, maybe. And it was red, reflecting the sky, which was also red, and in it were streaks of pink and purple, and bruises, bruises that might have been shaping up into circles.

The noises had intensified, adding layers of screeching, and shrieking, and—voices Gordon could understand. Steven looked confused. Gordon wasn’t.

Steven said, “Where...?”

“We skipped ahead,” Gordon said. “We’re in the same place, but further along.”

“How...?”

Gordon didn’t know how, but he kept them moving, and they blacked out again, and again, finding themselves under a pink sky, or a purple, or a white, or back under a red, the line of the creek jumbled, but they always moved along the same trajectory, following the creek. The more they skipped, the more Gordon understood.

This place was helping them search, not just for Adam and Ellie, but for others. This place wasn’t called Dimension X. It was called The Middle Reaches, and it was a hunting ground.

Janet

In the waning summer evening sunlight, Janet drove through the narrow two-lane roads of Rolling Vistas, having left Heather to a night of new releases and popcorn with her dad. Mr. Park had always seemed more comfortable treating Heather like a friend rather than a daughter, but since Heather was so independent, the lack of parenting seemed okay.

Janet admired Heather's independence. Janet would have liked her dad to treat her like a daughter or a friend. Like something, anyway.

Janet admired a lot about Heather. Heather had gotten into Columbia University, for God's sake, and had spent most of the last year in *New York City*. Janet planned to apply to schools in New York. NYU, maybe. She'd have to write a damned good application. Her grades were not quite up to Heather's standards.

Heather—with perfect, smooth golden skin, long black hair, deep black eyes, and curves that called out to be touched—set a standard for beauty that Janet couldn't reach, either.

Rolling Vistas connected to Acton Way, which wasn't technically part of any neighborhood as far as Janet could tell, a short distance before the "Dead End" sign. She turned away from the sign, toward the Marks house, where she stopped and idled in front of the driveway's steep downward slope. Except for the KEEP OUT sign on the black front door, the big yellow house looked innocuous.

Kids murdering kids in the suburbs. It was a great topic. Heather seemed drawn to the sensational aspect, as well as her personal connection. Janet's angle was the American Tragedy. What stains did the atrocities committed by the Marks boys leave on the surrounding neighborhoods and the kids in them who were trying to grow up and live normal lives?

She'd be spending time with Heather anyway, so Heather would be her lens. Heather's reaction to the murders, her fascination—her interest in Bobby Lightfoot's disappearance—whatever steps she would take to find out more. Janet would follow her. Study her. Write about her. The long version of her essay on this American Tragedy might even be publishable.

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And the short version? A damned good application.