

CC05: Walking Ninth

WIND WHISTLING

FLOORBOARDS CREAKING

TAPE IS INSERTED INTO A PLAYER, BEGINS TO PLAY

MISS TENOR: They say that Arborwood Grove is haunted. That seems to be something that most people can agree on. But there are a select few who believe differently. No matter who you talk to or where you go, you are never more than a block away from one of those people. The Zealots, they call them. The enthusiasts, the believers. The ones who know the truth. The ones who have seen the ghost of Arborwood Grove.

These people, if you bring up the topic of the ghost, will tell you, without fail, that nobody's ever seen a ghost in Arborwood Grove. Nobody's felt anything's presence.

(Imitating the Zealots)

There was that paranormal investigation show that came by a few years ago, you remember that? They didn't even find anything in the Grove. They didn't even air the episode they filmed in there. And you know how dramaticized those stupid shows are. They couldn't even fake a ghost encounter in the Grove!

(Dropping the act)

But, I digress. See, according to the Zealots, the reason nobody's ever seen a ghost in Arborwood Grove is that the house isn't haunted. The whole town is.

They say if you walk the entire length of ninth avenue, starting at the west end when the sun sets and waiting at the east until it rises, the ghost of Arborwood Grove will stand at the end of your shadow. All you have to do is turn around at the exact moment the sun appears on the horizon, and you'll see it. Just standing there, at the end of your shadow, staring at you.

It won't hurt you. You've put in all that effort just to see it, after all. No, once you've walked ninth, the ghost of Arborwood Grove will never hurt you. It'll just stand there, at the end of your shadow, staring at you. For the rest of your life.

They say that the last person who walked ninth was a man named Michael Xing, back in 1992. They say that a week after he walked, he blinded himself. Said he couldn't handle it. Always having to face the sun, or some other light source. Couldn't handle knowing, even then, that if he turned the wrong way he'd see him. A tall, broad man, with blank, empty eyes. Other than that, Xing refused to say who the man was, or what he looked like. Some say it's because the man was blurred, or obscured, or that Xing couldn't stand to look directly at him for long enough to remember anything. Some say he was just making it up.

They say he killed himself the day after he went blind. Because once he went blind, he couldn't tell where the light sources were. He never knew which way his shadow was going to be. So there was never any warning, never any way for him to prepare himself for when it would appear. The only thing visible in the darkness. The Ghost of Arborwood Grove.

Once seen, he cannot be unseen. Ever. The Zealots say that he's always there, in the corners of their vision. They say they see him in store windows, his eyes staring out from the empty faces of mannequins. Just for a second, and then he's gone. They say they see him on crowded streets, at their workplace, in their classrooms. They say they see him in the grocery store, his hair gently lifted by the cheap, too-cold air conditioning in the produce section. They say they see him when they're in the car, in the moment before the light turns green. Sometimes he's sitting in the passenger seat. Sometimes he appears in the rearview mirror. Sometimes he's standing on the crosswalk, waiting patiently to cross the road.

None of the Zealots have ever seen him in the same place twice. None of them have ever seen him in any of the places

their fellow Zealots describe. Some of them say they've seen him only once. Others claim to see him every time they look over their shoulders. None of them can say for certain what he looks like, or even if he's really a he. The only person to ever offer any real description was Michael Xing, and after that I don't think anyone wants to look too close.

But what the Zealots do see, in the half-second glimpses they get, is always the exact same thing. Cold, dead eyes, staring directly at them, with an intensity that lingers in the memory long after the ghost himself has vanished.

They say this entire town is haunted, and that some people are just more attuned to it than others. They say that the ghost is everywhere at once, existing in the shadows of those he's chosen to reveal himself to. After all, Charles Carr did build this town. They say he named it after the same plot of trees he named his house after, so that his spirit could linger here, forever, after he died.

This is the town of Arborwood. They say that it's haunted. They say that that no matter who you talk to or where you go, you are never more than a block away from our ghost. But hey. They say a lot of things.

THEME MUSIC

CREDITS: File CC, track five. Walking Ninth.

BELLS CHIME

WIND WHISLTES

CAROLINE: I think the biggest misconception of death is that once you die, things stop changing. Things are always changing, especially for me. New leaves fall into Martha's bathroom. New kids come exploring. New movies come out for Fern and Sadie, and now Robbie, to bring on Halloween. Towns grow. Storms erupt. Even when you think that this is it, this is the way that things are always going to be, you'll suddenly look up

one day and realize that things have been different for a while now. And you almost forget what they were like in the first place.

FLOORBOARDS CREAK

CAROLINE: I think I'm beginning to remember just how much there is I've forgotten. It's like the fog has lifted just enough for me to see that the yellow streetlights stretch on and on, fading off into whatever's beyond. And now I can see that for every one of them I find, there will always be one more just barely out of my reach.

There's something I've been avoiding. I know I've been avoiding it, but I can't quite bring myself to...

MUSIC BEGINS

CAROLINE: *(Sighs)*

I told you, back when I first found this recorder, that I'd give you the truth. But I haven't. Oh, I've certainly told you a few things. More than you'd have known otherwise. But I realize, now, that there are quite a few things I haven't told you, too. Important things. Things that are... difficult to talk about. Emotionally, yes, and also because sometimes I just...

I just can't remember them.

But things are a little less hazy now, and I don't know how much longer this clarity will last. So it's time, I think, to tell you... something new. Something that I usually don't think about.

I... I never went out much, even when I was alive. Once I was nine, I didn't even go to school. Martha and I had tutors, but none of them seemed to last for very long. Father didn't think other people should feel at home in our house.

We used to go for walks, me and Martha and Mother. The same loop, three times around the block every day. It wasn't exactly an adventure, but it was something to do other than sit around inside.

WIND WHISTLES

CAROLINE: I loved those walks. I loved watching as houses were slowly built. Saying hello to the neighbours. Enjoying the sunshine and fresh air. The way the wooden sidewalk under my feet had just a little bit of bounce to it. I loved being somewhere that wasn't... here. Inside this house.

I'm still not certain why we never walked a different route. Once, I asked Martha if we should bring it up with Mother, but she said not to. And she was right. Walking with Mother felt... delicate, like we were getting away with something, and if we brought any attention to it, it would no longer be allowed.

I did want to see other parts of town, though. I wanted to know what it looked like further away from our house, without Martha clinging to my arm or Mother walking so briskly you'd think she was running away from something. That town - this town - It was my entire world. And one day I found myself nearly a young woman, and I still hadn't actually seen any of it.

So no, I didn't ask Mother to change our route. I just... went. When the moon was out. When the stars hung high. When anyone and everyone who might have stopped me was fast asleep. The doors and windows were locked up tight, but Father rarely checked the cellar, so I went that way. Down and out, into the cool summer night in nothing but my nightgown.

I'd never been outside at night before. I hadn't really thought about what I was going to do, so I just... started walking. At first, my feet took me along the path I'd walked nearly every day of my life. Down to the road, left around the corner.

And then I stopped. I turned around. I walked the other way.

The sidewalk was warm, rough wood against my feet. I swear, I got splinters every other step, so I went out onto the road. That was dirt and pebbles. Soft and hard. There were no streetlights back then. Barely any buildings had the oil to waste. So it was just me and the moon and the stars and the dark silence stretching to every horizon.

On that first night, I barely made it twenty steps down the road before I started running. Sprinting, as fast as I could, right down the middle of the street. Away from town, out towards our neighbours and the prairie beyond. I ran and ran until the warm night was cold in my throat. I didn't know where I was. I'd never been there before. So I turned around and walked home. And that was it. The best night of my life.

And so after that, I kept sneaking out. The second night, I went into town. There was a haze in the air, like the whole world had just finished smoking a pipe. It had been a hot day, all dust and dirt, and the night seemed even hotter. Heavier.

There was nobody out in the streets, except for me. I walked roads I'd never walked before, saw things I didn't know existed. I'd lived in this town my entire life, and I didn't know what the fire station looked like. Or the theatre. I didn't even know we had a theatre.

I tried to window-shop, but all the windows were curtained off for the night. Everything was closed. Lifeless. A ghost town.

I loved it. I was never really alone at home. The first time I hid in the dumbwaiter, before it became an adventure, I was just looking for a place to be alone.

It's almost funny. When I was alive, that was all I wanted.

MUSIC FADES OUT

RAIN AND STORM SOUNDS BEGIN

The third night, there was a storm brewing. I walked out into the prairie to watch it roll in.

The sky at night is a sky brought to life. The clouds swirl with anticipation, lit from behind by the moon and the stars and the occasional flash of lightning. It's all energy. Growing, expanding, absorbing. The clouds filled up until they overflowed, and then burst apart and spilled the storm down on me. It enveloped me completely. The wind, the rain, the crackling in the air. It was a freezing chaos, whipping at my nightgown, plastering my hair to my neck. Every individual raindrop was a windswept pinprick melting into my skin.

THUNDER FADES AWAY, RAIN CONTINUES

My mother almost caught me that morning, running up to my bedroom soaking wet. She must have noticed the muddy footprints on the stairs. By the time I'd changed and come back down, they'd been cleaned up.

And things were different after that. Each day was spent anticipating the sunset. Each night was spent in a starlit dream, wandering the world. One small figure in a white nightgown, haunting the midnight streets of Arborwood. A ghost long before she was dead.

Well. Not that long.

RAIN ENDS

MUSIC BEGINS

Summer days are hot. End-of-summer days are much hotter. The air is dry and dusty, and the taste of lightning hides behind every gust of wind.

I don't remember where I walked that night. I followed the lightning down whatever street it took me. I think I went in circles. I must have walked past town hall half a dozen times.

I did always get stuck on ninth avenue. Odd.

In any case, I... I want to say that I felt like there was something different that night. Like I knew something was wrong. But I made a promise to you, Miss Tenor. I promised that I was going to tell the truth. And I am going to stand by that promise, even if you aren't around to hear it. So no. I didn't feel anything in the air other than the lightning I was chasing around town. So when it finally led me back home, I was completely unprepared for what came next. For the monster waiting for me in the cellar.

MUSIC ENDS

I didn't notice anything at first. I- I didn't notice that the walls were... different. That it was... dark. Darker than the night outside. Darker than it should've been. And when I did notice, it was too late. By then, everything was... Well, it was...

It was hot. Hotter than the summer night air. Thicker, and heavier, and more solid. And there was smoke. Dry as the dusty roads, dark as the sky above. Swirling and writhing. Alive. Absorbing the storm until the storm overflowed and spilled out onto me. Into me.

And, finally, the darkness was gone. Replaced by a burning light that just... cut right through me. I don't think anyone ever really describes how bright fire can be. It burns, yes. Hot and choking. But the light is just... It's not steady. It shifts, it throws illumination one second and shadow the next. It's fluid, and everything it engulfs becomes a part of that fluidity. There one second, gone the next.

MUSIC BEGINS

I couldn't find the stairs. Couldn't find the hatch doors. Or- or maybe I did. Maybe I found the exit that should have taken me out into the open world. Maybe I clawed at those thin wooden doors until my nails were as shredded as my sanity.

Maybe I screamed.

I don't remember. When I think of that moment, I don't think of the heat, or the smoke, or the pain. All I can remember is light, ripping me apart from the inside out, and I don't know what it was, but I think it's what killed me.

Everything after that is a blur. Some specific details are clear, yes. The clock, the man in the beaver pelt hat. But other things...

I just don't know. I don't know how long it was before the rest of my family found my body. And I remember them finding it, but when I try to think about what happened next, it's just... fuzzy. A yellow streetlight in the fog. And even now, some of those lights are vanishing.

I could have given Fern the recorder. I probably should have given it to her. She, or Sadie, might have known what to do with it. And I know, I'm supposed to be waiting for you, Miss Tenor, but I...

I'm starting to realize that I have no way to know what's going on outside of this house. Anything could be happening out there. Something good, something bad. Something that I think might be preventing you from coming back here.

MUSIC ENDS

How long has it been? How long will it be before you return? I've done what I wanted to do, to the full extent that I am capable of doing it. I've told my story.

And still, I don't know if anyone will ever listen.

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EXIT MUSIC

CREDITS: *They Say a Lot of Things* is written by Shannon Smyth and produced by Vienna Munck. Original music by Nathanael Kumar. This episode featured Max Kittleson as Caroline, and Meaghan Cassidy as Miss Tenor. For more information on the show, as well as transcripts and full credits, visit our website and check us out on tumblr. Links are in the description. If you're enjoying the show, please rate and review us on your favourite podcast provider, and tell your friends about us so they can enjoy the show too. And before you go do that, let us know what exactly it is you're putting off right now. Thanks for listening, and until next time, happy haunting.