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Prologue

Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table. W. H. Auden

Evil... Profound immorality and wickedness... The absence of all “good”. It cannot be controlled. It can only be accepted. It is vile and hideous, but it must exist, as a juxtaposition to “good” or we wouldn’t be able to define “good”. It’s hard to believe that evil could exist in a quiet little town like Downey.

The sun had set over Downey; small-town USA. A sleepy Rockwell-esque town, as businesses closed for the day and residents were buttoned up in the warm confines of their homes for the evening. It was cold, but the wind was calm and the sky was clear, with no snow expected for the next few days. The lack of a breeze made

it bearable to be outside if one chose to do so. A crescent-moon cast minute shadows in the previous evening's dusting of snow, making the little town look like something from the inside of a snow-globe or the front of a Christmas card. A stark contrast to the Evil that had taken up residence with out anyone's knowledge.

At the edge of town, the Cerber US Diner on Donkey Hill Road bustled with regular weekday patrons who were finishing a late supper. The diner reflected the moonlight, highlighting its polished aluminum skin with contrasting red stripes that gave it the appearance of a diner from the nineteen-fifties. Donkey Hill Road was a narrow unpaved road off a residential side street. You could drive by it a hundred times and if you did not know it was there you might not even notice it. Twenty-foot pine trees lined both sides of the road, bordering a forest of trees, standing tall and straight like soldiers guarding a red carpet. From the street, it looked like the beginning of someone's driveway. It dead-ended just beyond where the diner and its unpaved parking lot sat nestled into a cut-out of dense vegetation, about one hundred feet from where the road began.

Advertisements for the diner said "Our Diner is Small, but our Portions are Large," and both were very true. The little diner on Donkey Hill Road had been an institution in Downey for almost ten years. As a matter-of-fact, that very evening was the eve of the ten- year

anniversary of the diner first opening its doors to the public. There was little fanfare though, albeit a small announcement in the local newspaper, and a sign on the diner entrance advertising a free sundae with a paid meal for all diners the next day.

The entrance to the diner was elevated, approachable from a half-dozen concrete steps. A swinging glass door was perched at the top of the steps, which opened into a small hallway. An illuminated sign in the form of an arrow hung from the ceiling and directed patrons to the restrooms. To the right was a small wooden counter about three foot long, made of unfinished plywood, and looked like a project never finished. A cash register, a credit card machine, a small metal plate that held souvenir refrigerator magnets, and a bowl filled with mints all sat on the counter, leaving just enough space for customers to make payment for their meals before they exited. Behind the counter was a single stainless-steel swinging door with a sign above that said "Kitchen", and a simple analog school type clock on the wall above the door that clicked audibly as the second hand swept past the Roman Numerals on the clock's white face.

The door to the kitchen had an oval porthole window that was meant to help avoid accidents. The walls were dark and covered with cheap motel art. To the left of the kitchen door hung a small sign that read, *"Pay*

Before You Leave." Booths line both sides of the diner. Six booths in all. Above each of the three tables on the outside wall of the diner was a four-foot-wide window overlooking the parking lot. Ketchup and mustard bottles, salt and pepper shakers, and sugar packets sat pushed against the window, on both sides of a mechanism that looked like a miniature jukebox, that allowed customers to have a choice in the music that played throughout the diner. The benches were wooden and hard, and between the benches sat oval tables covered in fifties style speckled Formica. The floor was covered with a black-and-white checker patterned linoleum that showed the wear from ten years of diner traffic; peeling in places and completely gone in others.

A few minutes before 9:00 pm, a wind gust blew from the north that rattled the windows of the diner, startling the patrons, and causing everyone in the diner to turn toward the windows in unison. A northerly wind gust was not uncommon, but this one was unusually strong and shook the entire diner. There was silence in the diner except for the tick, tick, tick of the clock. The music had stopped playing. As diners gazed through the large windows, they noticed that despite the weather forecast for that evening, snow had begun to fall. At first it fell lightly, but steadily gained intensity and as the wind increased it blew the snow sideways making it look as though the snow was coming from the wooded

surroundings instead of the sky. The windows rattled and the diner shook. It was not an earthquake kind of shake. It was a more violent up-and-down shake rather than a swaying side-to-side earthquake kind of shake. A low-pitched rumbling sound began coming from somewhere; the origin of which was impossible to identify as it appeared to be coming from all around. Most patrons had escaped quickly through the entrance, but a few remained and were preparing to exit. Employees scrambled out the rear from the kitchen.

As the big hand on the clock pointed straight north, tick, tick, tick. and at the exact moment the second hand clicked onto the twelve, there was a tremendous explosion. Without warning, and in an instant, a fire ball, starting in the kitchen area radiated outward in a shock wave of hot burning gasses. The door to the kitchen, and the wall between the kitchen and the seating area provided little resistance to the force of the explosion, and both were sent into the booth area. The shock wave extended throughout the diner blowing out all of the windows, causing glass to shower down onto the parking lot, sparkling like twinkling stars lit by the rays of the moon. The fireball ignited combustible items in the diner as it passed over them and the diner quickly became a jumble of twisted metal filled with fire and thick putrid black smoke.

Patrons, who had not been killed by the initial explosion were able to escape to the parking lot through burning and twisted debris. Those who were lucky enough to get out alive stood in shock as they watched from the parking lot. In the distance, a homeless man stood and watched curiously as the diner burned. Watching the burning embers float into the sky and disappear as they burned out. There were no other witnesses. It was not snowing and the winds were calm, but nobody realized it had either stopped snowing, or never had snowed in the first place. The wind driven snow was only visible when looking from inside the diner, but the shock of the events would need to fade from memory before anyone began to question whether it had snowed. Black smoke rolled from the top of the entrance door and looked like an upside-down water-fall rising into the sky. Bright orange flames shot out from the glassless window frames. People screamed and a man was seen running back into the diner, presumably to save a trapped loved one as he yelled her name. The fire was so intense that the people outside had to step back to escape the searing heat as they stood and watched in horror.

At one point the man who had re-entered the diner was seen in the doorway momentarily facing outward and the crowd of people began to cheer, happy for his escape. But their jubilation quickly turned to shock as he

was pulled back inside. Another explosion rocked the diner, knocking everyone outside to the ground and raining more broken glass and debris onto them.

The fire's roar sounded like a lion as it sucked oxygen into itself and mixed with the crackling and popping of burning wood and breaking glass, as well as dinosaur-like sounds created by screeching metal against metal. Another explosion. People outside on the ground covered their heads. Then, within seconds it was quiet. Those on the ground slowly uncovered their heads to see that the fire was now burning softly and quietly as the charred remains of the diner slowly began to sink into the earth. Those witnesses would later say that it looked like the ground just swallowed everything. And sure enough, in a few seconds, there was nothing in front of them but an empty gravel parking lot.

Evil took what it wanted and was gone.