

THE BOOGEYMAN

'I came to you because I want to tell my story,' the man on Dr Harper's couch was saying. The man was Lester Billings from Waterbury, Connecticut. According to the history taken from Nurse Vickers, he was twenty-eight, employed by an industrial firm in New York, divorced, and the father of three children. All deceased.

'I can't go to a priest because I'm not a Catholic. I can't go to a lawyer because I haven't done anything to consult a lawyer about. All I did was kill my kids. One at a time. Killed them all.'

Dr Harper turned on the tape recorder.

Billings lay straight as a yardstick on the couch, not giving it an inch of himself. His feet protruded stiffly over the end. Picture of a man enduring necessary humiliation. His hands were folded corpselike on his chest. His face was carefully set.. He looked at the plain white composition ceiling as if seeing scenes and pictures played out there.

'Do you mean you actually killed them, or -'

'No.' Impatient flick of the hand. 'But I was responsible. Denny in 1967. Shirl in 1971. And Andy this year. I want to tell you about it.'

Dr Harper said nothing. He thought that Billings looked haggard and old. His hair was thinning, his complexion sallow. His eyes held all the miserable secrets of whisky.

'They were murdered, see? Only no one believes that. If they would, things would be all right.'

'Why is that?'

'Because

Billings broke off and darted up on his elbows, staring across the room. 'What's that?' he barked. His eyes had narrowed to black slots.

'What's what?'

'That door.'

'The closet,' Dr Harper said. 'Where I hang my coat and leave my overshoes.'

'Open it. I want to see.'

Dr Harper got up wordlessly, crossed the room, and opened the closet. Inside, a tan raincoat hung on one of four or five hangers. Beneath that was a pair of shiny goloshes. The *New York Times* had been carefully tucked into one of them. That was all.

'All right?' Dr Harper said.

'All right.' Billings removed the props of his elbows and returned to his previous position.

'You were saying,' Dr Harper said as he went back to his chair, 'that if the murder of your three children could be proved, all your troubles would be over. Why is that?'

'I'd go to jail,' Billings said immediately. 'For life. And you can see into all the rooms in a jail. All the rooms.' He smiled at nothing.

'How were your children murdered?'

'Don't try to jerk it out of me!'

Billings twitched around and stared balefully at Harper.

'I'll tell you, don't worry. I'm not one of your freaks strutting around and pretending to be Napoleon or explaining that I got hooked on heroin because my mother didn't love me. I know you won't believe me. I don't care. It doesn't matter. Just to tell will be enough.'

'All right.' Dr Harper got out his pipe.

'I married Rita in 1965 - I was twenty-one and she was eighteen. She was pregnant. That was Denny.' His lips twisted in a rubbery, frightening grin that was gone in a wink. 'I had to leave college and get a job, but I didn't mind. I loved both of them. We were very happy.

'Rita got pregnant just a little while after Denny was born, and Shirl came along in December of 1966. Andy came in the summer of 1969, and Denny was already dead by then. Andy was an accident. That's what Rita said. She said sometimes that birth-control stuff doesn't work. I think that it was more than an accident. Children tie a man down, you know. Women like that, especially when the man is brighter than they. Don't you find that's true?'

Harper grunted non-committally.

'It doesn't matter, though. I loved him anyway.' He said it almost vengefully, as if he had loved the child to spite his wife.

'Who killed the children?' Harper asked.

'The boogeyman,' Lester Billings answered immediately. 'The boogeyman killed them all. Just came out of the closet and killed them.' He twisted around and grinned. 'You think I'm crazy, all right. It's written all over you. But I don't care. All I want to do is tell you and then get lost.'

'I'm listening,' Harper said.

'It started when Denny was almost two and Shirl was just an infant. He started crying when Rita put him to bed. We had a two-bedroom place, see. Shirl slept in a crib in our room. At first I thought he was crying because he didn't have a bottle to take to bed any more. Rita said don't make an issue of it, let it go, let him have it and he'll drop it on his own. But that's the way kids start off bad. You get permissive with them, spoil them. Then they break your heart. Get some girl knocked up, you know, or start shooting dope. Or they get to be sissies. Can you imagine waking up some morning and finding your kid - your *son* - is a sissy?'

'After a while, though, when he didn't stop, I started putting him to bed myself. And if he didn't stop crying I'd give him a whack. Then Rita said he was saying "light" over and over again. Well, I didn't know. Kids that little, how can you tell what they're saying. Only a mother can tell.

'Rita wanted to put in a nightlight. One of those wall-

plug things with Mickey Mouse or Huckleberry Hound or something on it. I wouldn't let her. If a kid doesn't get over being afraid of the dark when he's little, he never gets over it.

'Anyway, he died the summer after Shirl was born. I put him to bed that night and he started to cry right off. I heard what he said that time. He pointed right at the closet when he said it. "Boogeyman," the kid says. "Boogeyman, Daddy."

'I turned off the light and went into our room and asked Rita why she wanted to teach the kid a word like that. I was tempted to slap her around a little, but I didn't. She said she never taught him to say that. I called her a goddamn liar.

'That was a bad summer for me, see. The only job I could get was loading Pepsi-Cola trucks in a warehouse, and I was tired all the time. Shirl would wake up and cry every night and Rita would pick her up and sniffle. I tell you, sometimes I felt like throwing them both out a window. Christ, kids drive you crazy sometimes. You could kill them.

'Well, the kid woke me at three in the morning, right on schedule. I went to the bathroom, only a quarter awake, you know, and Rita asked me if I'd check on Denny. I told her to do it herself and went back to bed. I was almost asleep when she started to scream.

'I got up and went in. The kid was dead on his back. Just as white as flour except for where the blood had. . . had sunk. Back of the legs, the head, the a-the buttocks. His eyes were open. That was the worst, you know. Wide open and glassy, like the eyes you see on a moosehead some guy put over his mantel. Like pictures you see of those gook kids over in Nam. But an American kid shouldn't look like that. Dead on his back. Wearing diapers and rubber pants because he'd been wetting himself again the last couple of weeks. Awful, I loved that kid.'

Billings shook his head slowly, then offered the rubbery, frightening grin again. 'Rita was screaming her head off.

She tried to pick Denny up and rock him, but I wouldn't let her. The cops don't like you to touch any of the evidence. I know that -'

'Did you know it was the boogeyman then?' Harper asked quietly.

'Oh, no. Not then. But I did see one thing. It didn't mean anything to me then, but my mind stored it away.'

'What was that?'

'The closet door was open. Not much. Just a crack. But I knew I left it shut, see. There's dry-cleaning bags in there. 3 A kid messes around with one of those and bango. Asphyxiation. You know that?'

'Yes. What happened then?'

Billings shrugged. 'We planted him.' He looked morbidly at his hands, which had thrown dirt on three tiny coffins.

'Was there an inquest?'

'Sure.' Billings's eyes flashed with sardonic brilliance.

'So me back-country fuckhead with a stethoscope and a black bag full of Junior Mints and a sheepskin from some cow college. Crib death, he called it! You ever hear such a pile of yellow manure? The kid was three years old!'

'Crib death is most common during the first year,' Harper said carefully, 'but that diagnosis has gone on death certificates for children up to age five for want of a better -'

Bulshit! Billings spat out violently.

Harper relit his pipe.

We moved Shirl into Denny's old room a month after the funeral. Rita fought it tooth and nail, but I had the last word. It hurt me, of course it did. Jesus, I loved having the kid in with us. But you can't get overprotective. You make a kid a cripple that way. When I was a kid my mom used to take me to the beach and then scream herself hoarse. "Don't go out so far! Don't go there! It's got an undertow! You only ate an hour ago! Don't go over your head!" Even to watch out for sharks, before God. So what happens? I can't even go near the water now. It's the truth. I get the cramps if I go near a beach. Rita got me to take her and the kids to Savin Rock once when Denny was alive. I got sick as a dog. I know, see? You can't overprotect kids. And you can't coddle yourself either. Life goes on. Shirl went right into Denny's crib. We sent the old mattress to the dump, though. I didn't want my girl to get any germs.

'So a year goes by. And one night when I'm putting Shirl into her crib she starts to yowl and scream and cry. "Boogeyman, Daddy, boogeyman, boogeyman!"

'That threw a jump into me. It was just like Denny. And I started to remember about that closet door, open just a crack when we found him. I wanted to take her into our room for the night.'

'Did you?'

'No.' Billings regarded his hands and his face twitched. 'How could I go to Rita and admit I was wrong? I *had* to be strong. She was always such a jellyfish. . . look how easy she went to bed with me when we weren't married.'

Harper said, 'On the other hand, look how easily *you* went to bed with *her*.'

Billings froze in the act of rearranging his hands and slowly turned his head to look at Harper. 'Are you trying to be a wise guy?'

'No, indeed,' Harper said.

'Then let me tell it my way,' Billings snapped. 'I came here to get this off my chest. To tell my story. I'm not going to talk about my sex life, if that's what you expect. Rita and I had a very normal sex life, with none of that dirty stuff. I know it gives some people a charge to talk about that, but I'm not one of them.'

'Okay,' Harper said.

'Okay,' Billings echoed with uneasy arrogance. He seemed to have lost the thread of his thought, and his eyes wandered uneasily to the closet door, which was firmly shut.

'Would you like that open?' Harper asked.

'No!' Billings said quickly. He gave a nervous little laugh. 'What do I want to look at your overshoes for?'

'The boogeyman got her, too,' Billings said. He brushed at his forehead, as if sketching memories. 'A month later. But something happened before that. I heard a noise in there one night. And then she screamed. I opened the door real quick - the hall light was on - and. . . she was sitting up in the crib crying and. . . something *moved*. Back in the shadows, by the closet. Something *slithered*.'

'Was the closet door open?'

'A little. Just a crack.' Billings licked his lips. 'Shirl was screaming about the boogeyman. And something else that sounded like "claws". Only she said "craws", you know. Little kids have trouble with that "I" sound. Rita ran upstairs and asked what the matter was. I said she got scared by the shadows of the branches moving on the ceiling.'

'Crawset?' Harper said.

'Huh?'

'Crawset . . . closet. Maybe she was trying to say "closet".'

'Maybe,' Billings said. 'Maybe that was it. But I don't think so. I think it was "claws".' His eyes began seeking the closet door again. 'Claws, long claws.' His voice had sunk to a whisper.

'Did you look in the closet?'

'Y-yes.' Billings's hands were laced tightly across his chest, laced tightly enough to show a white moon at each knuckle.

'Was there anything in there? Did you see the -'

'I didn't see anything!' Billings screamed suddenly. And the words poured out, as if a black cork had been pulled from the bottom of his soul: 'When she died I found her, see. And she was black. All black. She swallowed her own tongue and she was just as black as a nigger in a minstrel show and she was staring at me. Her eyes, they looked like those eyes you see on stuffed animals, all shiny and awful, like live marbles, and they were saying it got me, Daddy, you let it get me, you killed me, you helped it kill me . . .'

His words trailed off. One single tear very large and silent, ran down the side of his cheek.

'It was a brain convulsion, see? Kids get those sometimes. A bad signal from the brain. They had an autopsy at Hartford Receiving and they told us she choked on her tongue from the convulsion. And I had to go home alone because they kept Rita under sedation. She was out of her mind. I had to go back to that house all alone, and I know a kid don't just get convulsions because their brain frigged up. You can scare a kid into convulsions. And I had to go back to the house where *it* was.'

He whispered, 'I slept on the couch. With the light on.,

'Did anything happen?'

'I had a dream,' Billings said. 'I was in a dark room and there was something I couldn't . . . couldn't quite see, in the closet. It made a noise. . . a squishy noise. It reminded me of a comic book I read when I was a kid. *Tales from the Crypt*, you remember that? Christ! They had a guy named Graham Ingles; he could draw every god-awful thing in the world - and some out of it. Anyway, in this story this woman drowned her husband, see? Put cement blocks on his feet and dropped him into a quarry. Only he came back. 'He was all rotted and black-green and the fish had eaten away one of his eyes and there was seaweed in his hair. He came back and killed her. And when I woke up in the middle of the night, I thought that would be leaning over me. With claws. . . long claws . . .'

Dr Harper looked at the digital clock inset into his desk. Lester Billings had been speaking for nearly half an hour. He said, 'When your wife came back home, what was her attitude towards you?'

'She still loved me,' Billings said with pride. 'She still wanted to do what I told her. That's the wife's place, right? This women's lib only makes sick people. The most important thing in life is for a person to know his place. His. his.. .uh.

'Station in life?'

'That's it!' Billings snapped his fingers. 'That's it exactly. And a wife should follow her husband. Oh, she was sort of colourless the first four or five months after - dragged around the house, didn't sing, didn't watch the TV, didn't laugh. I knew she'd get over it. When they're that little, you don't get so attached to them. After a while you have to go to the bureau drawer and look at a picture to even remember exactly what they looked like.

'She wanted another baby,' he added darkly. 'I told her it was a bad idea. Oh, not for ever, but for a while. I told her it was a time for us to get over things and begin to enjoy each other. We never had a chance to do that before. If you wanted to go to a movie, you had to hassle around for a baby-sitter. You couldn't go into town to see the Mets unless her folks would take the kids, because my mom wouldn't have anything to do with us. Denny was born too soon after we were married, see? She said Rita was just a tramp, a common little corner-walker. Corner-walker is what my mom always called them. Isn't that a sketch? She sat me down once and told me diseases you can get if you went to a cor. . . to a prostitute. How your pri. . . your penis has just a little tiny sore on it one day and the next day it's rotting right off. She wouldn't even come to the wed-ding.'

Billings drummed his chest with his fingers.

'Rita's gynaecologist sold heron this thing called an IUD - interuterine device. Foolproof, the doctor said. He just sticks it up the woman's . . . her place, and that's it. If there's anything in there, the egg can't fertilize. You don't even know it's there.' He smiled at the ceiling with dark sweetness. 'No one knows if it's there or not. And next year she's pregnant again. Some foolproof.'

'No birth-control method is perfect,' Harper said. 'The pill is only ninety-eight per cent. The IUD may be ejected by cramps, strong menstrual flow, and, in exceptional cases, by evacuation.'

'Yeah. Or you can take it out.'

'That's possible.'

'So what's next? She's knitting little things, singing in the shower, and eating pickles like crazy. Sitting on my lap and saying things about how it must have been God's will. *Piss.*'

'The baby came at the end of the year after Shirl's death?'

'That's right. A boy. She named it Andrew Lester Billings. I didn't want anything to do with it, at least at first. My motto was she screwed up, so let her take care of it. I know how that sounds but you have to remember that I'd been through a lot.

'But I warmed up to him, you know it? He was the only one of the litter that looked like me, for one thing. Denny looked like his mother, and Shirl didn't look like anybody, except maybe my Grammy Ann. But Andy was the spitting image of me.

'I'd get to playing around with him in his playpen when I got home from work. He'd grab only my finger and smile and gurgle. Nine weeks old and the kid was grinning up at his old dad. You believe that?'

'Then one night, here I am coming out of a drugstore with a mobile to hang over the kid's crib. Me! Kids don't appreciate presents until they're old enough to say thank you, that was always my motto. But there I was, buying him silly crap and all at once I realize I love him the most of all. I had another job by then, a pretty good one, selling drill bits for Cluett and Sons. I did real well, and when Andy was one, we moved to Waterbury. The old place had too many bad memories.

'And too many closets.

'That next year was the best one for us. I'd give every finger on my right hand to have it back again. Oh, the war in Vietnam was still going on, and the hippies were still running around with no clothes on, and the niggers were yelling a lot, but none of that touched us. We were on a quiet street with nice neighbours. We were happy,' he summed up simply. 'I asked Rita once if she wasn't worried. You know, bad luck comes in threes and all that. She said not for us. She said Andy was special. She said God had drawn a ring around him.'

Billings looked morbidly at the ceiling.

'Last year wasn't so good. Something about the house changed. I started keeping my boots in the hall because I didn't like to open the closet door any more. I kept thinking: Well, what if it's in there? All crouched down and ready to spring the second I open the door? And I'd started thinking I could hear squishy noises, as if something black and green and wet was moving around in there just a little.

'Rita asked me if I was working too hard, and I started to snap at her, just like the old days. I got sick to my stomach leaving them alone to go to work, but I was glad to get out. God help me, I was glad to get out. I started to think, see, that it lost us for a while when we moved. It had to hunt around, slinking through the streets at night and maybe creeping in the sewers. Smelling for us. It took a year, but it found us. It's back. It wants Andy and it wants me. I started to think, maybe if you think of a thing long enough, and believe in it, it gets real. Maybe all the monsters we were scared of when we were kids, Frankenstein and Wolfman and Mummy, maybe they were real. Real enough to kill the kids that were supposed to have fallen into gravel pits or drowned in lakes or were just never found. Maybe . .

'Are you backing away from something, Mr Billings?'

Billings was silent for a long time - two minutes clicked off the digital clock. Then he said abruptly: 'Andy died in February. Rita wasn't there. She got a call from her father. Her mother had been in a car crash the day after New Year's and wasn't expected to live. She took a bus back that night.

'Her mother didn't die, but she was on the critical list for a long time - two months. I had a very good woman who stayed with Andy days. We kept house nights. And closet doors kept coming open.'

Billings licked his lips. 'The kid was sleeping in the room with me. It's funny, too. Rita asked me once when he was two if I wanted to move him into another room. Spock or one of those other quacks claims it's bad for kids to sleep with their parents, see? Supposed to give them traumas about sex and all that. But we never did it unless the kid was asleep. And I didn't want to move him. I was afraid to, after Denny and Shirl.'

'But you did move him, didn't you?' Dr Harper asked.

'Yeah,' Billings said. He smiled a sick, yellow smile. 'I did.'

Silence again. Billings wrestled with it.

'I had to!' he barked finally. 'I had to! It was all right when Rita was there, but when she was gone, it started to get bolder. It started . . .' He rolled his eyes at Harper and bared his teeth in a savage grin. 'Oh, you won't believe it. I know what you think, just another goofy for your casebook, I know that, but you weren't there, you lousy smug head-peeper.

'One night every door in the house blew wide open. One morning I got up and found a trail of mud and filth across the hall between the coat closet and the front door. Was it going out? Coming in? I don't know! Before Jesus, I just don't know! Records all scratched up and covered with slime, mirrors broken . . . and the sounds . . . the sounds...

He ran a hand through his hair. 'You'd wake up at three in the morning and look into the dark and at first you'd say, "It's only the clock." But underneath it you could hear something moving in a stealthy way. But not too stealthy, because it wanted you to hear it. A slimy sliding sound like something from the kitchen drain. Or a clicking sound, like claws being dragged lightly over the staircase banister. And you'd close your eyes, knowing that hearing it was bad, but if you saw it. .

'And always you'd be afraid that the noises might stop for a little while, and then there would be a laugh right over your face and breath of air like stale cabbage on your face, and then hands on your throat.'

Billings was pallid and trembling.

'So I moved him. I knew it would go for him, see. Because he was weaker. And it did. That very first night he screamed in the middle of the night and finally, when I got up the cojones to go in, he was standing up in bed and screaming. "The boogeyman, Daddy. . . boogeyman.

wanna go wif Daddy, go wif Daddy.'" Billings's voice had become a high treble, like a child's. His eyes seemed to fill his entire face; he almost seemed to shrink on the couch.

'But I couldn't,' the childish breaking treble continued, 'I couldn't. And an hour later there was a scream. An awful gurgling scream. And I knew how much I loved him because I ran, in, I didn't even turn on the light, I ran, ran, *ran*, oh, Jesus God Mary, it had him; it was shaking him, shaking him just like a terrier shakes a piece of cloth and I could see something with awful slumped shoulders and a

scarecrow head and I could smell something like a dead mouse in a pop bottle and I heard . .

He trailed off, and then his voice clicked back into an adult range. 'I heard it when Andy's neck broke.' Billings's voice was cool and dead. 'It made a sound like ice cracking when you're skating on a country pond in winter.'

'Then what happened?'

'Oh, I ran,' Billings said in the same cool, dead voice. 'I went to an all-night diner. How's that for complete cowardice? Ran to an all-night diner and drank six cups of coffee. Then I went home. It was already dawn. I called the police even before I went upstairs. He was lying on the floor and staring at me. Accusing me. A tiny bit of blood had run out of one ear. Only a drop, really. And the closet door was open - but just a crack.'

The voice stopped. Harper looked at the digital clock. Fifty minutes had passed.

'Make an appointment with the nurse,' he said. 'In fact, several of them. Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

'I only came to tell my story,' Billings said. 'To get it off my chest. I lied to the police, see? Told them the kid must have tried to get out of his crib in the night and. . . they swallowed it. Course they did. That's just what it looked like. Accidental, like the others. But Rita knew. Rita. finally. . . knew .

He covered his eyes with his right arm and began to weep.

'Mr Billings, there is a great deal to talk about,' Dr Harper said after a pause. 'I believe we can remove some of the guilt you've been carrying, but first you have to want to get rid of it.'

'Don't you believe I *do*?' Billings cried, removing his arm from his eyes. They were red, raw, wounded.

'Not yet,' Harper said quietly. 'Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

After a long silence, Billings muttered, 'Goddamn shrink. All right. All right.'

'Make an appointment with the nurse, Mr Billings. And have a good day.'

Billings laughed emptily and walked out of the office quickly, without looking back.

The nurse's station was empty. A small sign on the desk blotter said: 'Back in a Minute.'

Billings turned and went back into the office. 'Doctor, your nurse is -,

The room was empty.

But the closet door was open. Just a crack.

'So nice,' the voice from the closet said. 'So nice.' The words sounded as if they might have come through a mouthful of rotted seaweed.

Billings stood rooted to the spot as the closet door swung open. He dimly felt warmth at his crotch as he wet himself.

'So nice,' the boogeyman said as it shambled out. It still held its Dr Harper mask in one rotted, spade-claw hand.