

THE WORLDS NEXT DOOR

by C.E. White

CHAPTER ONE

Twelve-year-old Janie Rutland sat in the window seat of her attic bedroom, staring out of her round porthole window. Her eyes were glazed and unfocused, fixed on a point just past the sagging roof of the Old House next door, seemingly at the one tiny star in view. She was not, however, star-gazing. She was actually hoping to see the lights come on in the abandoned Old House again. They didn't always appear, but often enough that she watched for them almost every night.

The problem with the lights was that no one else ever seemed to see them. Janie never even *really* saw them, because every time she looked directly at the house, they would disappear. She only ever saw them out of the corner of her eye, which did make her a little worried she could be imagining it. She was about to give up and go to bed when that maddeningly indefinite gleam appeared once again—a faint glow coming from somewhere inside the Old House.

It's happening again! she thought and began her countdown.

“Ten...” she said aloud and looked at the second hand on her watch.

She had trained herself not to look at the house right away. It was a test to see if the lights really did go off at the exact moment she looked. Sometimes she started it at fifteen or thirty or even one-hundred, just to be sure. It didn't make any sense, but it happened every time.

She counted as the second hand ticked: three, two, one, zero....

She flashed her eyes to the house, never blinking. The lights flicked out as if on command. A strange humming warble filled the air—almost not a noise at all.

It happened like this every time—lights that shone when you didn't look and disappeared when you did, replaced by that odd buzzing vibration in the air, more feeling than sound.

She sighed audibly, though there was no one to hear. She filled the next empty line in the notebook she used to record her sightings.

September 9th, 9:15 PM: Lights came on. Did a countdown of ten before I looked. As usual, lights went off as soon as I did. As usual, buzzy noise started at the same time.

Janie moved from the window seat to her bed, knowing the lights would not appear again tonight.

She wasn't exactly afraid of the Old House, even with its mysterious lights and fluttering curtains. She felt they had a lot in common, and she had a phrase for this—*bigger on the inside*. She had discovered this phrase over the summer in what was now her favorite show: *Doctor Who*. The Doctor's T.A.R.D.I.S. was literally bigger on the inside, and it never failed to shock those who discovered it.

She thought *bigger on the inside* could be applied perfectly to both herself and the Old House—that if anyone cared to look, they would be surprised by hidden mysteries, unsuspected depths, and endless potential. But people mostly seemed unable to see beyond unremarkable and somewhat disheveled exteriors. Janie always felt disheveled no matter how hard she tried to do something to her unmanageable hair.

She knew it was odd to feel you have more in common with a house than with any other person and had been pleased to feel a similar connection to the human, if fictional, Hermione Granger, who she felt vindicated her frizzy hair and general mousy appearance. However, Janie became disenchanted when, in three short Hogwarts' years, the movies downgraded Hermione's hair from frizzy to slightly-too-curly to perfectly normal.

Apparently, frizzy hair is only acceptable in books, where no one can actually see it, she thought, and mentally severed her connection with the character.

Janie lay in her bed thinking about all of this, staring at the ceiling, and feeling that she would never fall asleep—until she did.

The next morning began like every other school day. She stood, lost in her thoughts, at the corner of Maplehurst and Elm awaiting her school bus and disinterestedly traced figure eights in the dust with the toe of one red high-top sneaker.

The bus braked and creaked as it pulled to the curb, jarring her back to reality. It exhaled a hot breath of exhaust and she coughed. She became aware of her older brother calling, "Zany Janie," loudly. "Tell us your ghost stories."

He thought she was ridiculous, going on about things you could only see out of the corners of your eyes, and he liked to get a good laugh out of it when he could.

Janie frowned and glared at him. "I'm not crazy."

The doors of the bus opened. The "Zany Janies" and tales of her supposed hallucinations were floating onto the bus like balloons released into an uncertain atmosphere. You could never tell where they might go. Then she saw Gregory's face light up—the little boy who managed to snag one as it floated past. She groaned, inwardly.

Why does he always have to hear?

She walked, head down, towards her regular seat, painfully aware of the sticky floor and the ripping sound her sneakers made with each step. She didn't have to look up to know Gregory was watching. While she wished the world at large would notice her at least a little more, she wished Gregory would forget she existed altogether. He'd been picking on her since the first grade.

She sat and raised her head to say hi to her best friend Angel, but stopped, mouth agape. Angel wasn't there. The wide-eyed stare of Reggie Rankin greeted her instead. Her shoulders sagged. She was one of Gregory's favorite targets, and Reggie was the other—the new kid.

Double the awkward for me; double the fun for Gregory, she thought.

Angel always just ignored him, and it seemed so easy when she did it. In vast contrast to Janie, Angel was funny and pretty and popular. Being near her put you in a sort of safe zone. It was like turning a fire extinguisher on Gregory. He still sizzled a little but went out quick enough.

Reggie, on the other hand, was gasoline.

Janie thought he couldn't have done worse at fitting in at a new school if he'd been trying. On the first day of school, he had introduced himself as "Reginald Rankin, Junior," crisply enunciating every syllable. Nobody was going to call him Reginald; not in Alabama. She hadn't heard him say much of anything since then. He wore neckties and black dress pants every day. She knew he was rich because he lived in Angel's neighborhood, Berry Heights, only his house was about twice the size of hers.

She pretended not to notice him sitting there at all once she'd recovered from her initial jolt. He no longer looked at her but stared blankly at the back of the seat in front of them.

She riveted her eyes on the scenery outside the window.

Reggie cleared his throat. "Your friend is sick."

Janie squirmed, and the vinyl seat squeaked beneath her. "Mmm hmmm." She hoped if she did not open her mouth, no one would notice she had responded, and she didn't really care to respond anyway. It wasn't a very good conversation starter.

Then she heard Gregory. Everyone heard him. He had a voice like a megaphone.

"So, Zany Janie's been seeing things again?"

Her lips tightened.

If I ignore him, maybe he'll ignore me, she thought, though she was well aware that ignoring bad things rarely makes them go away. After all, plenty of people have been hit by buses while ignoring them altogether.

"...I used to think that house was haunted when I was like five. Maybe *Reginald* will save her from the ghosts."

I was wrong, she thought. *Someone is still calling him "Reginald." Good for him.*

The taunts kept coming with no Angel to abate them, and, finally, Janie had enough.

I've been relying entirely too much on Angel for this.

She had tuned Gregory out, and did not know what he was saying just now, but she did know she interrupted him in the middle of a sentence when she turned to Reggie and said, quite loudly, but not very smoothly, "So, Reggie, what's it like in...umm...where...ever you're from?"

She didn't know how else to shut Gregory up. It always worked for Angel...but it seemed so natural for her. Janie's attempt just seemed to draw more attention. She couldn't think of anything else to say to Reggie. You can't very well open a conversation about wearing neckties or being rich, at least, not if it's to be a public spectacle.

Gregory stopped talking in clear anticipation of new material. His eager expression made her think she should have kept quiet, but it was too late now. She continued to look at a startled

Reggie, waiting enthusiastically for everything he could ever tell her about...wherever he was from. She didn't blink, and the glare from the window made her eyes water.

"Ummm..." he started.

Everyone was watching now.

Janie felt a pang of guilt for putting him on the spot.

Nobody ever talks to him; and up until now, that's included me.

After a very uncomfortable pause during which Gregory displayed uncharacteristic patience, Reggie said, "Well...umm...Washington? That's the state, you know, not DC...well...it...it's a lot cooler there than it is here."

Janie's expression did not change, but she closed her eyes in a long blink and struggled to restrain a sigh.

Gregory laughed like Reggie had just delivered the punchline to a hilarious joke. "It's cooler there, is it? Fascinating. Genius boyfriend you got there, Frizzy..."

Oh, and now he's in on the hair, too. Wonderful.

Thankfully, they were pulling up to the school. She made her way to the front of the bus before they came to a complete stop and shoved past someone to be the first one off. The driver reprimanded her for getting out of her seat, but she was already dashing down the stairs.

"Sorry!" she yelled back, intending it both for the driver and the kid she had bumped.

She walked as quickly as she could, trying not to look like she was running away. She heard shuffling steps behind her, growing louder, and glanced back—Reggie.

He obviously knew how she felt, because he looked like a sad little puppy. His head was down, eyes woeful, yet still hoping. She didn't slow down, but he caught up to her anyway. She was sure he'd been at the back of the line getting off the bus as usual. He panted.

"I'm sorry about that."

Janie just kept walking.

"I know I just made it worse."

She still said nothing.

"I don't do well under pressure."

She slowed down but didn't stop. "It's OK. Neither do I. Obviously. And I shouldn't have expected you to rescue me. Besides, it probably didn't matter what you said. He would have found a way to make fun of it."

"Well, I guess," he said. "If we do it again tomorrow, I'll plan ahead. Just tell me what you're going to ask, and I'll study up." He grinned at her.

Janie laughed. She had never seen him smile before, and he looked almost impish—it made it seem like he didn't match his stuffy dress clothes.

"That's not why I caught up with you, though." That rigid formality settled back over his face.

Janie waited for him to go on, wishing he would get to the point.

He glanced around nervously. "It's about your friend."

"OK."

"Yeah. You know, I said she was sick?" He was stalling.

"Yes?" Janie said, starting to worry a little.

"Well, I didn't mean it as a, 'She's not on the bus, so she must be sick' kind of thing. She really is sick."

"OK, so she's sick and you know it. So, what?"

"No, no. She's not just sick. She's SICK-sick."

"OK, Reggie." Janie finally stopped and looked him in the eye. "You don't know me, but I like people to say what they mean. Get on with it."

"Angel is sick, like she-could-die sick."

She stared at him and her stomach dropped into her feet.

His face turned red. "Oh, holy...I'm sorry. I just...I knew you would want to know."

"What a horrible way to tell somebody that!" She almost shouted.

"Well, you said to say what I meant, and I did, and, obviously, I knew I shouldn't say it like that, but I wasn't doing very well the other way either, was I?"

"How do you know anyway?" she asked.

"My dad's a doctor, you know, at Ensley General, and, besides, the whole neighborhood knows. An ambulance came and everything. It just happened last night, and I don't think they've had time to call everyone."

Berry Heights—Angel's neighborhood. He might really know something.

She'd been hoping maybe Reggie was so weird he somehow thought this would be a good way to make friends.

Still, she wasn't quite sure she believed him. "I swear if you're lying...or making this up..."

"I'm not, I swear!"

And something in his eyes made Janie believe him. She started walking—almost running—up the hall.

"Where are you going?" Reggie yelled.

"To call my parents, to call the hospital, I don't know. I've got to go see her."

"They won't let you in," he called.

She stopped dead in her tracks and swiveled, hardly daring to look at him again. She knew her face must be bright red by now.

I will not cry, she thought.

"Why not?" she said.

"Well, they think it might be contagious."

“What do you mean, ‘think’?”

“They don’t exactly know what’s wrong with her. She just passed out, and she...umm...hasn’t woken up and I guess her symptoms are weird—like they don’t match anything normal. Look, I know this is nothing anyone would want to hear, and you probably really would’ve rather not heard it from someone you barely know, and especially not when that someone is me, but I was just trying to do what I would want someone to do.”

For the first time, Janie looked at him like he was an actual human person. “You sat in our seat on purpose, didn’t you? So you could tell me?”

He seemed embarrassed. “Yeah. It didn’t really go how I meant for it to, though. I didn’t mean to make your day worse.”

Janie was ashamed of the way she had treated him, and not just today. After all, she knew what it was like to be an outsider, and, for the first time, saw a hypocrisy in herself that made her uncomfortable. She had tried not to befriend him, and he had gone out of his way to do something nice.

The warning bell rang, sharp and jangling, breaking into Janie’s brooding. She had been staring at Reggie awkwardly, and he stood before her in unmistakable discomfort. But she didn’t feel capable of fixing this with a sentence, which would’ve been all she had time for unless she wanted a detention along with everything else. So, without a word, she ran to her homeroom and sat down in a daze.

She felt too many emotions. If you had asked her, she would have said she only thought she had felt this way before. Now, everything seemed desperately, petrifyingly real.

The words “SHE COULD DIE” flashed in her mind as if imprinted in neon lights, flicking on and off, darkening just long enough to lull her into relaxation, then shocking her once again with their blazing glare.

Could she really die?