

The Calling

The house on Maple Street stood astute in its silence, its peeling paint and crooked shutters whispering secrets to the wind. The realtor had called it a "hidden gem," but the neighbors' eyes darkened when they spoke of it. Amy clutched Eric's arm as they stepped inside, the scent of damp wood and something metallic—like old blood—lingering faintly in the air. The backyard stretched unnaturally wide, its grass too green, too lush, as if fed by something other than rain. And there, at its heart, stood the playground: a rusted slide, a swing set with chains that groaned in the breeze, and a merry-go-round that seemed to spin on its own.

Eric, belligerent with exhaustion, dismissed Amy's unease, "It's just an old playground," he muttered, but his voice wavered, furtive and thin.

That night, Amy lay awake, listening. The house creaked like an old man's bones, and the wind carried something else—laughter. Not the bright, careless giggles of children, but something jubilant yet compulsive, as if the joy itself were a lie. It slithered through the cracks in the walls, wrapping around her like a snake.

"Eric," she hissed, shaking him. "Do you hear that?"

He groaned, pulling the blanket over his head. "Just the kids playing, Amy. Go to sleep."

But the laughter wasn't just sound—it was alive. It pulsed in time with her racing heart, inciting a dread so deep it settled in her bones. She crept to the window and saw them: shadows darting between the swings, their movements furtive, their forms too small, too wrong. The playground seemed to breathe, its metal bars glinting under the moonlight like teeth.

Amy's breath hitched. The swings were moving. Not with the wind—no, they swayed with purpose, as if pushed by unseen hands.

The next morning, Alex and Mia were astute in their excitement. "Can we play outside?" Mia begged, her eyes wide and bright. "We heard kids last night! They sounded fun!"

Amy's stomach twisted. "Stay in the yard," she said, her voice tight. "Don't go near the playground."

Eric rolled his eyes. "You're being obnoxious, Amy. Let them play."

But as the children raced outside, Amy watched from the kitchen window, her coffee growing cold. The playground seemed to lean towards them, its rusted slide gleaming like a serpent's tongue. The air smelled of iron and something older—something deprived of life.

By noon, the children were gone.

The police arrived, their faces deprived of hope. Officer Olson, a man whose jubilant demeanor had long since faded, wouldn't meet their eyes. "This isn't the first time," he muttered, his voice scathing with unspoken horror. "Every family that moves in here... the playground calls them. And the kids..." He

trailed off, shaking his head. Eric grabbed him, his voice strident with panic. "What do you mean, calls them?"

Olson pointed to the rusted slide. Scratched into the metal, jagged and raw, was a single word: OLIVIA.

"The teacher," Olson said. "She vanished decades ago, after the first child went missing. They say she still teaches here." His gaze flickered to the swings, swaying furtively in the breeze. "She's waiting for them."

Amy's vision blurred. The playground seemed to tilt, its shadows stretching like skeletal fingers. The laughter returned, louder now, compulsive and tedious, as if it had been waiting for this moment.

That night, the laughter wasn't just in the air—it was inside the house. It slithered under doors, whispered through the vents, and coiled around Amy's thoughts. She saw them: children with hollow eyes, their mouths stretched too wide, their voices obnoxiously cheerful. They beckoned to her from the hallway, their fingers furtive and quick.

Eric wasn't immune. He woke screaming, his skin slick with sweat. "They're in the walls," he gasped. "They're calling us."

Amy knew then that the playground wasn't just taking the children. It was taking them—piece by piece, memory by memory. The house itself seemed to coerce them, its walls pulsing like a living thing. The swings outside never stopped moving.

By dawn, Amy and Eric stood at the edge of the playground, their hands trembling. The laughter was a strident scream now, the air thick with the scent of rust and something older—something hungry.

Olivia's voice whispered from the shadows: "You've stayed too long."

The swings creaked in response, their chains groaning like a deprived beast. Amy looked down and saw her hands—translucent, fading. Eric's form flickered beside her, his voice frugal with terror. "We're already gone," he realized.

The playground swallowed them whole.