

THE COOL KIDS

by

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“Nerds? They got those here, too?” – U.S. transfer student; first day at Eton.

Nick’s great grandma had made The Blanket by hand, or had inherited it from someone further back in the family tree who’d made it by hand—I can’t remember the details, I was just excited to have people over. Friends. Mother says I’m a pushover, that’s why I was unpopular at school—back in the day, the kids in my class called me an arse-licker. I prefer the term people-pleaser.

Nick forewarned me it smelled like his grandma had, before the rot claimed her. He said it was worth tolerating though, because of its incredible warmth. I had no choice but to politely agree when he first unfurled it—indeed, it was the softest, coziest blanket I’d ever had the pleasure of touching, but yes, it also reeked of death.

I only popped back to Monkton to check up on my folks’ house whilst they holidayed by the coast; they’d begged me to come and water the plants, empty the mail box, and so on. The hired help had fallen ill. I hadn’t been back for years. I’d not kept in touch with anyone from school in Monkton. Imagine how excited I was when I bumped into Nicholas Granger from school in the village shop. At school, Nicholas Granger had been one of the cool boys who’d hung out with the hot girls, and I was and am definitely neither. He said he remembered me; he’d missed me. Then he invited himself over.

“So, nine then? I finish up here at half eight,” Nick said. I glanced over my shoulder to check he wasn’t talking to someone else behind me. Nope, the shop was otherwise empty.

“Certainly, Nicholas Granger,” I replied—picture my face, alit like a birthday cake, when he told me I should call him ‘Nick’.

“Is it okay if I bring some others?” he asked. I handed him the correct change for my comestibles.

“Please do,” I laughed, nervous with anticipation.

“Sweet. We can have a little party. I’ll bring some more of these,” he said. He winked and tapped the top of the solitary can of beer I was purchasing before placing it into my bag for me.

I did think it odd for a second that Nicholas Granger was talking to me; actually, inviting Shannon and Nell (the latter being my school crush, every upper sixth’s school crush), the twins from fifty-two, cross-eyed James who wasn’t even cross-eyed, and Tall Mike all over to my house—for a party. I could barely contain my excitement. And I did also think it strange—for a moment—that these kids, the ones who sat at the back of the bus, the ones who (on more than one occasion) had flicked wet peas at me from the corner of the school canteen, were still knocking about, together, in Monkton, over twenty years after we’d all graduated from school.

At school, as friendships formed amongst and between my peers, I’d felt invisible—like the eye of the storm, still, observant—whilst everyone whirled around me.

“We’ve got to stick together now mate, ‘Class of ‘98’. We’re the only ones left,” Nick said as I left the shop.

I simply nodded and hurried home to think, to prepare. Mother and Father would not have been happy with visitors inside. Guests had always been strictly forbidden. Not a single soul bar the three of us and the hired help had set foot over the threshold for as long as I can remember. Mother pretended it was because she liked to run a tight ship, but I knew it was because of the abductions. Kids disappeared regularly in the nineties, whilst I was school-aged. Lots of kids. Missing posters had been pinned up everywhere. Every lamppost in Monkton had been decorated with paper tassels, paper faces. If milk cartons had still printed lost children on their sides, you’d have seen a new set of chops staring at you every morning over your cornflakes.

I decided to spend the afternoon gathering kindling and chopping wood for a fire. We’d keep the party outside, low-key. We’d all be fine outside. There was no way it was not happening.

A large part of me expected them not to show at all, but they did indeed all turn up at nine. On the dot.

I led them around the side of the house, to the garden, to where the fire was blazing a proper treat.

It got a chilly half an hour after the sun dropped, despite the dancing and the flames, and the beers started to run low.

“I’ll go and grab the blanket,” Nick said, winking at Shannon and Nell, “and a few more supplies. When I get back, we can drop the acid.”

“Acid?” I said. “Okay.” I’d never taken anything stronger than a paracetamol, but I was with the cool kids now. Acid is what they do. And acid, it appeared, was what I was going to do too.

“Marcus, dude, I need you to come too, to help me get up in the attic,” Nick said. He downed his beer, lobbed the spent can into the fire pit. They both fist-bumped me before they left. I’ve seen people do this on TV. I knew the score. This meant I was in.

Part of the crew.

The gang.

Down with the cool kids, at age thirty-seven. Why had Mother tried to keep me from these people? They were awesome. Beer, drugs, girls. The ladies were sexy as hell.

Nell handed me the last beer. “You take it. It’s your party,” she said. Then she kissed me on the cheek. Does that count as first base? Closest I’ve ever come to a woman—a real one, anyhow.

I cracked open the beer. “Thanks. Yeah. Pumping isn’t it? Totally lit.” I replied, unsure of how this new language sounded in my mouth. She smiled and licked her lips at me then turned to chat with Shannon.

Nick and Marcus returned with a fresh crate of beer and The Blanket. Lordy, it was huge. Must've taken the old lady a lifetime to stitch or weave or knit it. It was covered with ovals, all different shapes and sizes, all different shades, and hemmed in lacy, red cotton.

"It's so soft," I said, stroking the nap with the back of my hand. "What is it made from?"

"No idea," said Nick, his eyes were saying something different to his mouth. "I think she started it as a school project and it just grew and grew over the years. It's just a blanket. Dude, how the heck am I supposed to know what it's made from? Fucking warm though."

We all sat in a huddled crescent. Nick draped the heavy fabric over our legs and I tried to ignore how much it stank.

"S'bad isn't it? The smell," said Nick. "Doesn't matter if it gets beer on it though—we don't want to ruin anything of our gracious host's now, do we?" And dear Lordy, no we didn't. My parents would've had a fit if I'd brought their deluxe eiderdowns out by the fire.

At this point in the night, I probably should've excused myself, tied things up, and gone to bed. It was way after eleven, but I didn't because I was sat by Nell. She was holding my hand under The Blanket. Does that count as second base? Felt way more intimate than the kiss on the cheek, like she really wanted me.

"I could only find one tab though, dude," Nick said. I'd no idea what he was talking about. "You have it, bro. You deserve it. Great party." He placed a small piece of coloured paper—tinier than a postage stamp, more colourful than a paint chart—directly onto my tongue.

"Thanks," I mumbled. Nell squeezed my hand a little tighter under The Blanket.

"Pleasure, dude. Wash it down with some beer."

I followed my old new friend's instructions. They really were all being so jolly kind.

The fire started to die down and I pointed out we were running out of wood.

"Shall I go and search for some more?" I said, starting to feel unsure about where my hands ended and Nell's began, about whether the zoetrope of racing rainbow horses circling the fire had been there at the start of the night or not, about whether Nell had always had a third eye in the centre of her forehead. Such long lashes. "I've got an axe."

And then I noticed the moon had changed to razzle-dazzle purple-pink and wasn't sitting still, and the ovals on the blankets had all got little faces.

"Nah, mate. You sit and chill," Nick replied. "Let's all play a game instead; a sexy game—before we wrap things up."

"Good idea. A sexy, sexy game," said Nell, who was stroking the side of my cheek with the back of her hand. Her hand had turned into a bunch of bananas and her third eye, now on the end of her nose, winked at me.

A game I thought how exciting. Will the striped pygmy marmoset juggling yellow rugby balls by the oak in the corner of my garden be joining in too, or is he here purely for the ribbons?

“You get under the blanket,” Nick said, tugging at my sleeve. “Me and the others are going to choose something that you’ve on you, on your person, that you don’t really need, which you need to take off. When you’ve guessed what it is, chuck it out at us.”

“A guessing game? Something I don’t need on my person. Take it off. Throw it out. Got it,” I said, as I tried to retain the radiant word fodder he’d scattered into the glitter cloud by my face and stack it up into the correct order in the pyramids of my mind-zone.

“Spot on, dude. You’re one smart cookie.”

They all stood up and left me alone, sat underneath the blanket. I studied the little faces. Each one seemed to be smiling at me, grinning and winking in time with the horses and the monkey who was clapping and the penny farthing wheel which I sensed was spinning somewhere in the distance to the tune of the calliope which perhaps only I could hear. I stared at all the little faces, admiring the detail in each one, and winked back at each with my third eye which I think had opened up for business in that moment too.

“Okay. We’ve decided. Start striping off, you sexy beast,” Marcus shouted and turned up the portable stereo. Nick made a noise like a foghorn. It really was exceptionally nice and toasty under the blanket, with all my tiny newfound friends. I did hope the others, my guests, now deprived of the blanket’s hospitality, weren’t catching a chill. “Are you warm enough, everybody?” I think I asked.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Marcus replied, his voice sounding merry enough. “We’re all toasty, bro, dancing by the fire.”

I lifted the blanket and peeped out at the other humans. “Oh yes, so you are,” I said, and yes, there they all were, oscillating like flames, horned and fanged. They were all stood—it appeared—inside of the fire. Or perhaps my three eyes were playing tricks on me again? Paint chart postage stamps are certainly peculiar stuff.

“Let’s start then, bro. Pick an item, chuck it out,” said Tall Mike.

I threw out my shoes, then my socks—I was certain I didn’t need any of them, especially not as I was now lying back so comfortably on the floor, under the cavernous blanket I’d gotten somewhat lost in. Were they bats—the little people, the faces staring down at me? They spoke at me in echoes, followed my thoughts with their eyes, offered words of encouragement as they helped me out with the game.

“Nope. Not your shoes or your socks,” Nell shouted. I heard her pick them up. She said she was keeping my things neatly for me in a tidy pile. I liked this woman, a lot. Is folding somebody’s clothes up for them third base? And what, exactly, are clothes?

I drew out my tie from my collar and folded it into a Milky Way spiral. It became a hissing adder in my hands so I threw it out from my cave.

“Nope. Not your tie. Keep trying.”

Whatever could it be? I thought. I unbuttoned my best shirt, the one I normally reserved for job interviews, pulled my arms out of the sleeves and scrunched it up into a ball. The shirt became a crying baby, screaming blue murder at me and the oval faces so I lobbed it out towards my new friends.

“Nope. Better luck next time. You didn’t need your shirt, for sure, but it’s not the thing we chose.”

And so the game continued. Belt, trousers, underwear followed, until I was bare-butt naked, underneath the ceiling of stitched faces, which all looked down at me, laughing, smiling, continuing with their speeches of encouragement.

I looked down and panicked.

I’d nothing left on me to take off, yet Nick had said quite clearly I hadn’t selected the correct item yet—something on me which I didn’t need. The words spun around in my jumbled mind as I stared down at my hands. Shadows. Sausages. Snakes in sleeping bags. I could just about make out the outline of my fingertips as the cave I was in glowed red with light from the fire. And then it struck me—my fingers. I was born with all ten, but I rarely used the little ones. Could this be what I needed to remove, to take off, throw out from my cave?

I stared at my hands for an eternity until Nell shouted: “Come on, you can do it. You can figure it out.”

I so badly wanted to impress her—she could be The One. The oval faces cheered along with Nell’s sweet voice in the key of Saturday, the pitch of candy: “Do it.”

Do it, the pygmy marmoset whispered into my ear.

So I bit off the pinky on my left hand—the finger I used the least. The first few layers of skin, soft tissue split easily, but I had to bite down hard and chomp to snap clear through the bone. Off it came, at the second knuckle. I spat it out towards my friends. A little blood followed, which I played with, spread all over my bare knees. Strawberry topping on an ice-cream sundae.

“Delicious,” said Nell followed by what could only be described as a chewing sound. Eating somebody’s finger nubbin? Must surely be considered fourth base.

“Nope. Try again,” said Nick as the other humans cheered me on. I decided to snap off a toe. Left little piggy went out to my audience. They cheered louder, but told me it was not the correct choice.

I worked my way through all nine other toes, then through my other nine fingers, until I was left with twenty bleeding stumps. The ends of me all leaked a red fluid which left a coppery taste on my lips.

“Great work,” said one of the blanket faces. A tongue slipped out of its third eye hole which slurped on the juices of my body.

“Smashing job,” said another. It galloped off into the wild.

“You’re doing so well, “said Nell, her mouth was somewhere close to mine, separated only by the thick, pongy blanket, and my heart throbbed faster with pride. But I panicked once more, because I so desperately needed to impress her, but had nothing left to offer. There was nothing left on me I could easily remove—

Then I looked down at my member who sat limply between my thighs.

Surely not.

“I’ve nothing left to offer,” I shouted from underneath the blanket. The oval faces all nodded at me in agreement. Above the music and the crackle of the dying fire outside, I could hear my human friends approaching my cave-den

“Do you give in?” The twins from fifty-two asked together.

“Ready to quit?” asked Tall Mike.

“Shall we call it a day?” Marcus sounded desperate, insistent.

I guess I didn’t have any other choice. I’d run out of sensible options and the tiny striped monkey had, after all, been waiting ever so patiently—I think he wanted to teach me how to juggle grapefruit aboard the hovercraft he’d just paddled a little closer toward me on.

“Yes. Yes. I suppose I have to,” I said through the fabric. “What was it then? What have I got on me that I don’t particularly need?”

“The BLANKET!” They all cheered in unison as they ripped it free from my bleeding naked body and tossed it down into the dirt. The bunch of them jumped down on top of me. Fangs and talons that had not been there before tore through my flesh. My old school buddies made a light snack of my limbs, torso, bones, and organs.

As the fire died down completely and my party became lost to the black ink of the night, every part of my body was eaten; every part except for the flesh-oval of my face. The pygmy marmoset took great pride in gnawing it clean-free from my head.

Things hadn’t turned out quite how I’d expected that evening, but it’s not so bad being stitched into the blanket. Now, I’m surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of newfound oval friends.

The end

Anotherealm rarely handles horror tales of this nature, but SJ’s work was so bizarre, so outré, so utterly different, and so well done that I felt I had to include it as 2022’s “October Horror Hallow” post. I expect comment on this in our BBS.