

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Nightshift for the Dead

A horror short story by C.R. Lang

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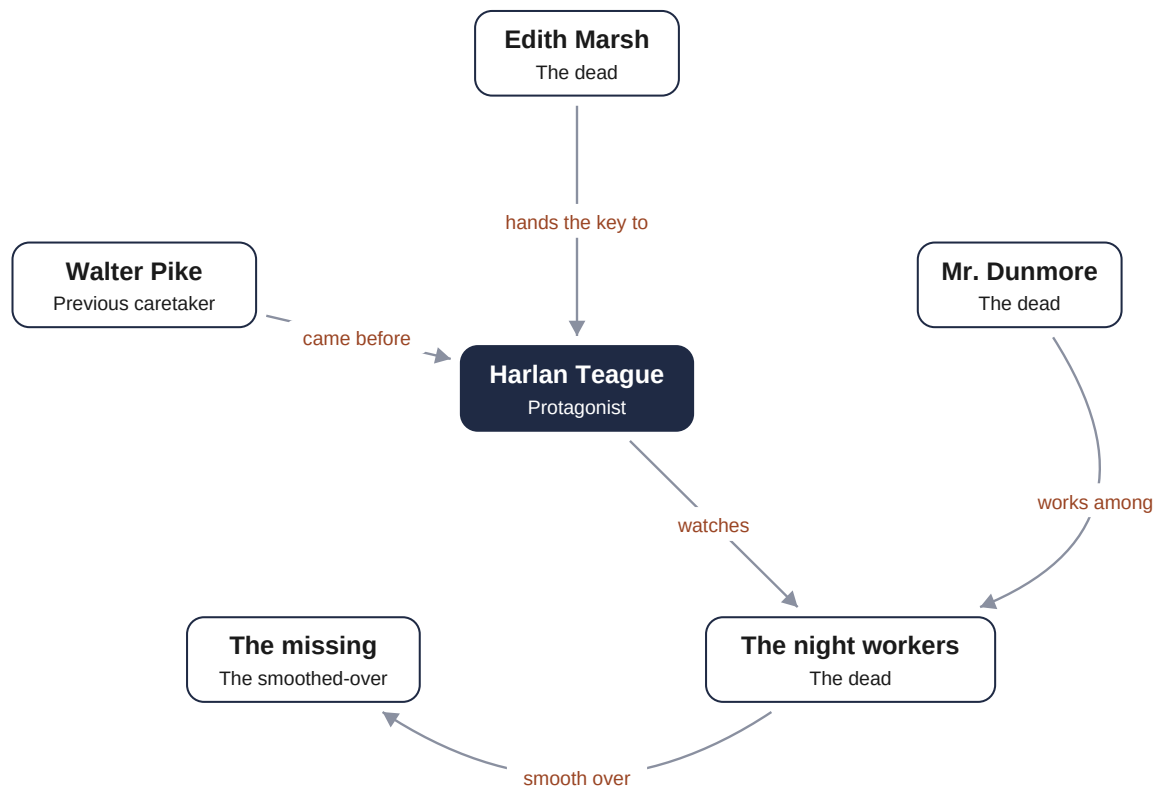
About the story

A cemetery caretaker in a too-perfect small town discovers that the dead come out after midnight to repair the streets and wind the clocks, and that anyone who disturbs their work is smoothed away.

This guide assumes everyone has finished the story, so it discusses the ending.

Character map

The main character is in the dark box. Arrows show who acts on whom.



Who's who

Harlan Teague (Protagonist). Caretaker of Greywater Cemetery for twenty-two years. Values routine above all.

Edith Marsh (The dead). Buried in the spring. Brings Harlan the brass key, cold-fingered and gentle.

Mr. Dunmore (The dead). In the ground since the year Harlan started. Pulls cable from a utility box.

The night workers (The dead). Dozens of the dead who mend the town in silence.

The missing (The smoothed-over). Voss the musician, the woman on Alder Street, the boy with the camera.

Walter Pike (Previous caretaker). The last name in the ledger, 1998.

Themes to look for

Order and its price. The town runs perfectly. The cost is anyone who disturbs the routine.

Duty. Harlan is chosen because he follows rules ‘without asking why.’

Community and conformity. The town never questions its good fortune. Is that peace or complicity?

Inevitability. Harlan was never afraid ‘because some part of him had always known.’

Discussion questions

- 1 Harlan’s second rule, never be on the grounds after midnight, is one he ‘arrived at on his own.’ What does that tell us about him from the start?
- 2 Why is Harlan more frightened by his lack of fear than by the dead themselves?
- 3 The dead treat people who disturb the routine like potholes. What does the word ‘maintenance’ make you think about?
- 4 Why do you think the townspeople never wonder how their town stays so perfect?
- 5 The dead ‘escort’ Harlan to the shed rather than leading him. What’s the difference?
- 6 What do the dead need from a living caretaker, according to the ledger?
- 7 Did Harlan have a real choice when he signed his name?
- 8 Is Greywater Falls a good place to live? Would you stay?

Craft corner

For writers in the group: two ways to look at how the story is built.

Atmosphere. The story is quiet and polite, not gory. How does it still build dread?

Foreshadowing. Reread the first paragraph. How does ‘a man who valued routine’ prepare the ending?

Try this together

Imagine the next page of the caretakers’ ledger. As a group, write the rules Harlan will pass to whoever comes after him, the way a job handbook would.

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