

The Bright Side

by Kelly Toughill and Arundell Morrow

Gloria

It's not all bad, living next to the Hellmouth. Not what you'd think.

Take marshmallows. Bet you didn't know that did you? Get a long enough stick, you can roast marshmallows with the heat of burning souls. Jerry made me a retractable pole. He'll show you when he gets here how he did it. I can thread up to four on the end, but they come out better if you only do two at a time. Spacing, you know. Jerry made himself one too. He likes his marshmallows all golden brown. I like mine black: charred and crispy. Ash against the sweet, that's my taste. That's why we each need our own poles.

Our neighbour, Betty, asked Jerry to make her a retractable pole too, but no way. I mean, what was she thinking? As if.

So, roasted marshmallows on demand, night or day. Bet you didn't know that, did you?

But there are other perks too. The glow is really bright. Yeah, we don't need streetlights anymore. That saves us a whack-ton in property taxes. We had to petition the city for an exemption. I mean, why should we be paying for the power and what-not for streetlights if we don't have any? Stan led that fight. Some wanted to let it be. Not me. Good job, Stan, I say.

I bet all you've ever heard is the quote-unquote bad stuff, right? The smell? The danger? Uh huh. Lame-stream media strikes again.

I mean, don't get me wrong — there are some definite downsides. Ever since the Hellmouth opened, I've had to drive all the way around Happy Acres to get on the highway. Added ten minutes to my morning

commute. And having it swallow the whole block like that, well, it wasn't so good for property values. But you got to look at the bright side, dontcha? Better roadblocks than getting run over by those pretentious wanna-be demon types.

I heard when the Mouth opened up over by Trelawny that it drew all kinds of unsavoury visitors. They were banging on drums and chanting all night, keeping the whole neighborhood awake. Well, yes, sometimes we hear sounds from the Hellmouth, but that's more like a background chorus. I don't hear it at all anymore. Kind of like birds in the morning when you're trying to sleep; you just tune it out.

And of course, those Hellmouth tourists over on Trelawny were messy. Very messy. And sloppy too. You'd think after one slipped into the Mouth that the others would back off. But did they? No. Not until the Army cleared them out.

So, I'm grateful for the perimeter patrol they set up for us right away. That wall, those roadblocks, they keep us safe from God-knows-what. Certainly, safe from those weirdo demon wannabes with their bongos and their didgeridoos. And we haven't had a single burglary since the Army showed up. Not one. Or not one that I've heard of. Jerry might know better. He'll tell you when he gets here.

But does the lame-stream media report that? Tell you about the marshmallows and the night glow and the increased security? Course not.

But surely there are downsides you say? Well yeah, heck yeah. Of course. There are downsides to everything. That's life. Joy and sorrow are eternal twins. That's what I was taught. But the downsides aren't what you heard.

First, the smell is not bad at all. It mostly smells like a wood fire. I'm told the smell is like burning applewood, not regular wood, but I wouldn't know. We never had a fireplace, but I hung out by that big fire pit up at the ski lodge in Collingwood on my grade twelve trip. I didn't know how to ski, but I did know how to flirt. It was a great trip. I had a blast. And that woodsmoke smell from the Hellmouth, well it reminds me of one of the best weeks of my life, reminds me of what it felt like to be young.

So, woodsmoke and a hint of barbecue. No sauce really, just the occasional whiff of a rack of ribs. And yeah, some of my neighbours don't like it. Honestly, nobody around here barbecues much anymore. Not at all. But I don't mind it. Like I said, the smell reminds me of good times. And it comes and goes. East wind, not so much. West wind, yes. And in the winter, a northwesterly? You get this crazy smell of smoke and snow together. I really like that. Frankly, when the wind's been out of the east for a few days, I miss it. When it backs around to the west, well, it smells like home again.

So, the danger. That is just totally one hundred percent made up. Nobody just slips into the Hellmouth. I mean, you can't get that close. It's too hot. You have to get sucked in.

I know, there was that wanna-be demon type over on Trelawny, but I don't buy it. Heard he was having marital problems. Was he a cheater? Kind of suspicious that there was no video of the accident, don't you think?

Bottom line is, you can't just choose to go to Hell. Hell chooses you. That's what I believe. Every single one of those souls did something that got them there. They deserve Hell. All of them. Yes, every single one of them. And yes, I'm including those families living on the block it swallowed up: the Cleavers, the Dressups, the Van Dykes, the Simpsons, the Roses. I

knew those families. The stories I could tell. I won't. But you know, I could. The Hellmouth chose that block for a reason. It wasn't random. No siree. Well, that's what I believe. And that's the important thing, isn't it, what you believe?

So, downside? Yes. Like I said, no sweet without sour, no day without night, no good without bad. Just the nature of the universe, you know? Well, I already mentioned how I have to drive all the way around Happy Acres every morning to get to work. But for me, the one real bad thing about the Hellmouth is that I lost the sky. It's the night sky I miss the most — all those stars twinkling in heaven. It's hazy all the time now. You'd think an east wind would blow it away, but it doesn't. Weather Network says sometimes the haze is thinning, but I can't see it. But even if the haze did blow off, the glow would be too bright for me to see the stars. I guess you could say that's what I miss the most — my darkness. My night.

Jerry, well, he's got other thoughts. He'll tell you when he gets here. Wonder where he is. The rascal.

Jerry

Sometimes, it just calls to me, you know?

The Hellmouth.

Not literally. Not like I hear my name or anything like that. It's more metaphysical. Is that the right word? I think so.

It's an attraction. Like when you feel drawn to a woman — or a man, I guess — you just want them. You aren't going to do anything about it, but you can feel it; your neck gets warm when they're nearby; your spine gets a little tingly; maybe even your palms sweat. Like that, but different.

Do other people feel this way? No idea. How would I know? It's not the kind of thing you'd talk about, not even if we all still got together, which we don't. Not anymore.

Like, can you imagine? "Heh Stan, you ever feel like walking into the Hellmouth?"

Yeah, that would be a conversation stopper all right. Kind of like saying, "Heh Stan, ever thought about banging Bill's wife?"

But you know, on second thought, it isn't really like that. Not like wanting to bang someone. It's more like a woman — or a man, I guess — you really want to get close to. Maybe touch. But not fuck. Not really.

I guess it's hard to explain, which makes sense. Everything about the Hellmouth is hard to explain. Sometimes I wish it had never opened up at all, that I had never heard of such a thing as a Hellmouth. That no one had. But most of the time, I'm glad it's here, glad it's nearby. It makes me feel warm — not just in a roasting marshmallow kind of a way — but warm inside, like having an old relative close at hand, the kind who knows you so well that you don't even have to talk any more. Yeah, like that.

Gloria?

No. I've never mentioned this to her either. Why would I? She is very fixed in her beliefs. Only those who deserve to go to Hell are sucked into the Mouth.

And I guess I believe that too. You can't choose it. I don't think so. You couldn't get close enough to get over the lip. You'd fry first, crisp up like one of Gloria's blackened marshmallows. Maybe if you had a catapult, or something. But you'd never get enough velocity just running. And the barricades, they'd stop any kind of car or truck, wouldn't they? But people still get sucked in. Hard to know when a neighbour has been swallowed

and when they've just had enough and gone away. But people do get swallowed. I know they do. I've seen it. I saw it.

Timmy. Jon and Barb Lockett's boy. Thirteen, I think he was. His mom had already disappeared. Jon said she left, but we all had our suspicions. Barb and Stan had a thing a few months back, but surely a little romp in the proverbial hay doesn't buy you a ticket to Hell. If the price of admission is that that low, we're all doomed. Some think Jon made Barb disappear, but that seems unlikely.

Timmy was walking home, taking the old bike path that skirts the north side of the Mouth. He was walking slow, dawdling I'd say, and I was driving by, also going slow, anticipating the wait at the roadblock. And his feet just lifted off the ground. He was just dangling in the air. He didn't squawk or flail about or say a single word. And then it was like he was on a conveyor belt. Took him right over the barricade and straight toward the fire. Weirdest thing was he didn't crisp at all. He should have. Would have if he'd been a marshmallow. And I watched. Yeah, I did. He didn't say a word. Didn't try to escape. Did he smile? Maybe I imagined that. But I didn't imagine the rest.

Jon told himself that Timmy had run away, but he knew. I didn't tell him what I saw. Why would I? But he knew. Otherwise he wouldn't have moved so soon. Left three days after Timmy didn't come home. Sold his split level to one of those pseudo woo-woo gurus. God those guys bug me. Trying to tell us what it all means. They don't know shit. None of us do. Maybe that's the real attraction of the Hellmouth: we finally have a genuine mystery.

So, I'm with Gloria on her theory that the Hellmouth chooses you, you can't choose the Hellmouth. But we might disagree about what you have to

do, or say, or think, to deserve it. You know, the criteria for entry. I'm pretty sure Gloria and I would disagree about all that, but what's the point of discussing it? You just can't know, can you? You can't.

But still.

I go by there every day now, the path where Timmy disappeared. I go slow. I dawdle like Timmy did, and I wonder, would I fight it? Would I struggle? I don't think so, but I don't know why I think that. I mean, I can hear those souls down below, and I can tell you: they aren't singing. They aren't singing at all.

And yet.

I want it.