

A Halloween-themed illustration on a dark purple background. At the top, a large spider with a skull-like body is positioned between two large jack-o'-lanterns. The spider is surrounded by intricate, golden web patterns. Below the spider, the text 'SCHUSTERMAN-BENSON LIBRARY' and 'PRESENTS' is written in a white, serif font. The main title 'Spooky Stories' is written in a large, white, serif font, with 'Spooky' on the top line and 'Stories' on the bottom line. Below the title, the year '2021' is written in a smaller, white, serif font. At the bottom of the illustration, a bat with its wings spread is positioned between two cauldrons. The cauldrons are filled with a golden, bubbling liquid. A lit candle is placed in the center, between the cauldrons. The entire illustration is framed by a decorative border of golden, swirling patterns and thorny vines.

SCHUSTERMAN-BENSON LIBRARY
PRESENTS

Spooky Stories

2021

Schusterman-Benson Library

presents

Spooky Stories
•2021•



First Edition: February 2022

Design, illustrations & editing by Amy Kemper

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to the haunts & ghouls lurking in and around Tulsa county—

stay spooky.

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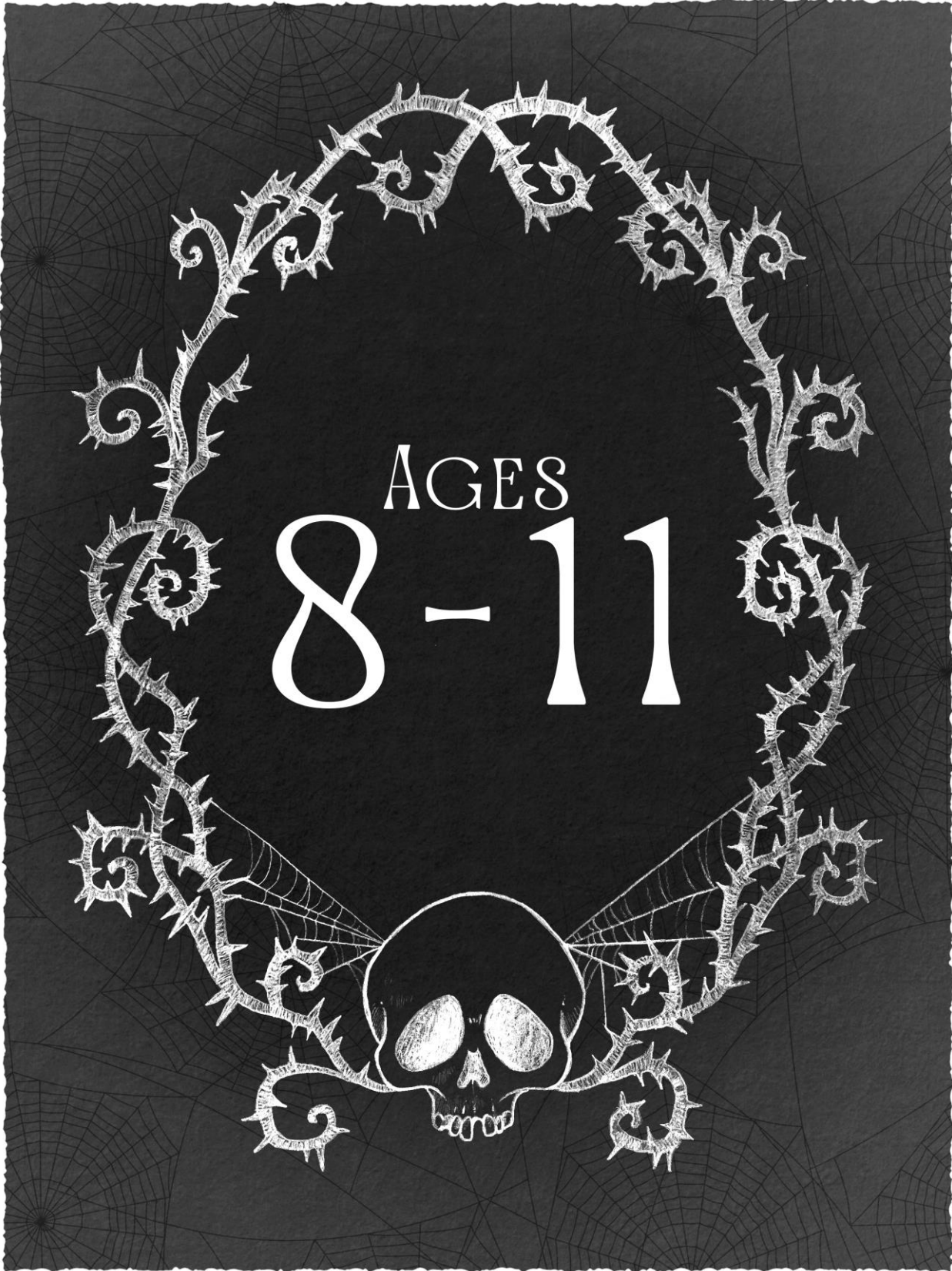
FOREWORD

The Schusterman-Benson Library would like to thank those who made this year's Spooky Stories writing contest possible—from the aspiring writers themselves, to the caregivers and teachers who encourage them.

Parents' Note: These stories have been written by students ranging in age from 8 to 18; as such, there is a variety of content suitability levels contained within. If you are concerned, make sure to preview the stories before sharing this book with your young reader.

Some stories have been minimally formatted for adaptation in this anthology.

All stories were submitted to the Tulsa City-County Library as original manuscripts. If you have any questions, please contact TCCL's AskUs at 918-549-7323.



THE HOUSE ON OAK STREET

Josey Voss, 8

Ricky lived near an abandoned house on Oak Street. Its shutters were falling, part of its roof had collapsed, and many of its windows had been broken out. Ricky never ventured that direction before, but two of his friends betted him to go inside alone.

As he approached the porch, the wind howled. The creaky steps made a high pitch scream sound when he walked up to the front door. The door was locked, but he noticed a basement window open that he could climb into.

He climbed into the basement, which smelled like hundreds of years of dust. He looked around to see cobwebs and spiders running across the baseboards. Just beyond the door was a stairway. Ricky went up the stairs and saw a creepy shadow of a person peering down at him from above. When he walked up further, he could tell it was just an owl, eerily staring at him. When he arrived on the first floor, he saw a huge bookcase full of dusty old books.

He picked one up that showed a picture of his elementary school on the front. "Clearlake Elementary, 1922," was the title. He started scrolling through the pages, and stopped as he saw a picture of himself on page 18. "Ricky Dawson" it said. Then he glanced on the wall to see a picture of his family, covered in dust.

"Ricky, it's supper time," yelled his mother from the kitchen.

"Yes, mom, I will be there in just a moment."

He shut and put down the book and walked toward his mother's voice, disappearing into the wall.

THE SILKEN TATTERS

Sarah Yelle, 11

Samantha was sweet. Samantha was kind. Samantha was everything you would ever imagine. She had beautiful auburn hair and pale silken skin. Her sky blue eyes seemed to look at you with elegance, so much that they looked like the type of blue of the sky during spring or like the color of a smooth pond at daybreak. She seemed to have everything. Well, everything except parents. She lived with her brothers in a little house, in a small village, not very far from some woods.

Samantha knew everyone in the village, and everyone knew her. But, one day a newcomer came to the village. A stranger. He said his name was Mr. Silk. He was a fine man with a nice face. He was kind, and well-dressed. He acted sensible and Samantha liked him at once.

She always tried to find time to talk with him. Until one day what Samantha was hoping for came true at last! They were sitting in the bakery talking when Mr. Silk asked, "Beautiful Samantha, I ask you, shall you please me very much and go to the Fall Festival Dance with me?"

Samantha waited to answer. It was true, the Fall Festival was only nine days away. Samantha was excited that he asked! But she wanted to test him. "I am sorry, Mr. Silk, but I cannot tell you my answer yet. Let us meet here tomorrow and I will have my answer for you."

So, they met every day for a week. Every time Mr. Silk asked, she always answered the same, "I am sorry, Mr. Silk, but I cannot tell you my answer. Let us meet tomorrow and I will have my answer for you."

The eighth day came, and Mr. Silk asked once again, "Oh, beautiful Samantha, I beg of you, would you please me very much and go with me to the Fall Festival Dance?"

This time Samantha finally said, "Yes, Mr. Silk. I would be delighted."

On the night of the festival, they danced more elegantly than any of the others. After the dance, Mr. Silk led Samantha into the woods for a walk. They

walked for an hour when Samantha looked up at the moon. She had learned how to tell the time by looking at the moon at a certain angle. The moon was full tonight and Samantha could tell that it was exactly midnight.

Right then, Mr. Silk came to a complete stop. They were in a clearing in the woods, next to a small pond. Samantha asked why he had stopped. The next things she heard were a series of snaps, like the snapping of bones, or of the snapping of a neck.

Mr. Silk's body faced away from her, but his head slowly turned completely around and stared at her. His eyes were wide open, ghost white, and glowed in the moonlight. When he opened his mouth, it was all black. Veins popped out on his face.

Samantha screamed, "What are you?!"

Mr. Silk replied in a very deep voice, "I am a creature from the deepest depths of all that is doom, destruction, and mayhem. Of all evil, and horribleness. You, foolish human, have fallen into my trap!"

Samantha ran as fast as she could. The ribbons in her hair came out, her dress got caught on a tree branch, it tore, she tripped and fell, oh well, she got up and ran on.

Pursued by Mr. Silk, Samantha began to run out of breath. Mr. Silk had now not become flesh, skin, and bone, but silken tatters, intricately woven and sewn together. Samantha could make out only a face, which was all there was in the silken tatters. A huge face with malice, and evil, and anger written all over it. It was all silk.

Weary from running, Samantha slowed down. She tried to keep going, but Mr. Silk caught up with her. Samantha screamed once more as Mr. Silk overtook her. Silk consumed every fiber of her being. Horror was the last thing she saw. She screamed in terror as the silk enveloped her.

The only thing left from what had happened that night in the clearing, next to a pond, in the forest was a doll that looked exactly like Samantha. - its face etched with terror, and beside it, a few silken tatters.

A note from the author:

This story was based on an RV camping trip that my family and I went on, to Beavers Bend in Oklahoma. I walked my dog down the road next to the lake. Across from the lake, was a playground with a pond beside it. Floating in it was a doll with a few silken tatters next to it, so I decided to make a story about it.

THE ZOMBIE INVASION AT WEST HIGH

Evalynn Haney, 8

The fire alarm goes off at West High, but there is no fire! Threatening screams are heard all around. Zombies!

Alex runs from the football field.

JC drops her paintbrush mid stroke.

Jade stops playing her flute.

Alex, JC, and Jade run to the gym and hide together. Zombies start opening the doors. Jade pulls out a pencil and starts stabbing zombies as they come at her. Alex punches a zombie in the face. JC does a pirouette and kicks some zombies heads off. They fight off the zombies until there are no more. “Let’s get out of here!” pants Alex.

They walk through the school, seeing no sign of life. A glowing light shines from their home room. They look at each other horrified. Silently, they sneak to the room. Alex peeks in the doorway and whispers to his friends “come on.” JC and Jade run over to Alex. They hear a voice that is deep and spooky. They listen closely and can make out the words “Kill all life in the building! Go now!” Alex wobbles with both girls on his shoulders. He flops forward “Oof!” He cries. The thing that said to “kill all life” looks at Alex and yells “get them!”

“Run!” screams JC, yanking Jade’s arm. Alex starts chasing after his friends. Jade stops. She hears a voice crying out. She forgets about everything and runs towards the voice. Her friends run after her swapping confused looks. They run in and find a girl and a cat. The cat hisses at them. The girl picks up the cat and says the words “shh Whiskers!” while looking up at them. “She hates new people. Ow!” the cat bites her. “Mila!” Jade yells. Whiskers purrs at the sight of her. Jade introduces her friends. “Mila, these are my friends, Alex and JC. Guys, this is my twin sister!” They say “Hello” as Jade says their names. “Hi, I’m Mila, this is Whiskers.” Mila jumps up yelling “watch out!” JC does a flip into a zombie’s chest killing it, just as it was about to bite her. A

zombie runs up to Alex with its teeth bared. Alex punches the zombie in the side. Jade sings as loud as she possibly can “aaaaaaaah.” It scares the zombie! Alex says “I never knew you could sing like that!” Jade blushes.

“Less chatter, more scatter!” cries Mila. They start running again. They stop at the teachers’ lounge. They hear whimpering coming from the room. They quietly step through the doorway. A boy jumps up and pulls out a pocket knife. “Hi-yah!” he yells. JC runs up and says “It’s ok, we are humans!” The boy puts up the knife and waves two fingers, “Hello, mate! I’m Issaac.” Alex clears his throat and says “I’m Alex, these are my friends JC, Jade, Mila, and Whiskers.” Suddenly, a zombie pops up from behind Issaac! “Watch out!” screams JC. Issaac calmly says “I know” as he kills the zombie by doing a back flip into its chest. “Let’s Go!” yells Jade.

They sneak through the halls. “I think I know a safe place.” says Jade. The teens follow after their friend and hide in the auditorium. Whiskers jumps out of Mila’s arms and runs away. “I think they’re coming!” whispers Mila.

“Oh, no!” cries JC. They look up to see that they never locked the doors. The main doors slam open. Two zombies march in, holding a bed with a zombie acting like a king on a throne. They were spotted! “Hello humans.” the zombie king says with disgust. Alex was the first to attack “Hiiiiiii-yah!” he yells charging at the zombies. The king pushes him aside with ease. “Alex!” cries Jade. JC attacks. “Oh, no you don’t!” she yells. The king yells “Fight!” Zombies flood into the auditorium. Issaac joins the fight. Whiskers charges towards the open doors, Mila chases after him. The friends all punch and kick, fighting for their lives, killing millions of zombies! Finally, only the zombie king was left. They all stood in a line. Jade yells “All we need to beat you is courage, bravery, hope, love, and teamwork!” At once they all attacked the zombie king, killing him on the spot.

They had won! “Yay!” they cheered happily. “Teamwork!” the friends yelled.

THE TREE WITCH

Levi Harshman, 9

There once was a magical forest where all animals had their own unique job to keep the forest clean from the careless humans. Some of the jobs were squirrels pick up the acorns, the vultures eat the dead animals, the deers run around and make the dirt compacted so new things can grow, the bees pollinate the flowers and the tree witch has a power to turn bad guys that don't care for the forest into a tree.

In the magical deep dark forest there would be people that would always litter. So one day the tree witch got upset because she saw litter on the ground and started to look for the next person to litter so she can do her part to protect the park. She found two boys that threw a bottle so she screamed in madness and said, "I will turn you both into a tree" so they ran but not fast enough and they could feel the roots growing on to them.

Soon they were trees. Being a tree was boring. And it was scary because they couldn't talk, they were cold and at night it was very scary because it was quiet besides bugs clicking.

The tree witch said "Now you will sit here for the rest of your life until you get chopped down. You will see all the good animals doing their job and helping the forest and you will watch me turn other guilty people like you into trees."

The boys thought "Why did I throw that bottle? I am never going to be able to celebrate holidays and birthdays. I am just going to have to sit here bored all the time until I get chopped down." They cried.

They started to realize how bad of a thing they did because they saw a deer eat their litter and die and all of that deers friends started to cry. They felt a jab on their branch and saw a teenager throw one of their limbs into the water. Then they saw adults throw sparklers down and hit leaves on the ground. And they watched the forest catch on flames and a big gush of smoke surrounded them. They started to be on the forest team. They saw how bad of a

thing they did.

One year later, a squirrel witch came and said “I see you have learned your lesson you may be free BUT you must pick 100 pieces of litter.” They were happy to be human and move and talk. They said “yes I accept” so they picked up the 100 pieces of litter as they were told and continued their life and made signs that said “If you litter you become a tree” and the forest was litter free.

THE END BY LEVI

VAMPIRE'S HISTORY

Genevieve Byrne, 10

Let's go back in time...to cavemen time. Vampires were peaceful creatures who used to help the cavemen. They ate pomegranates and they hung out with animals. Was it their fault they went rogue? No it was mine.

In the medieval times or the renaissance if you put it like that, a sorcerer was born and that sorcerer was me. You see I didn't think the vampires were trustworthy because I knew they could suck blood if they really wanted. I needed everyone to see that they would suck blood. So I cursed them to suck blood, to suck blood to survive. The first year, vampires had to suck blood five times a year but the curse got more serious every year. It became so serious that the vampires now to drink blood every month. By the time you're reading this it probably got even more serious. Even though I attempted to sustain the curse, I don't know if it was temporary or not. That's what this story is about.

I was in my father's study and I came across something intriguing; it was a book about vampires. I was reading and I found something in Burgus the vampire language (we learned Burgus in Primary School). I read it and it said: *We can't tell any of the humans about this, we can suck blood if the vampire population gets low and that will increase our population...I don't know what to do with this information.*

I was astonished, but I had my suspicions. I knew I was right somehow. I wasn't that astonished anyway. That night I went to a jousting match with my father and we had a tremendous time for the first fifteen minutes. Then the vampires came. A few minutes before the match began, I cast a spell to make the vampires have to suck blood to survive. I needed to show everyone how bad they were. But then the curse backfired on me. Two vampires came and they fed on the jousters, sucking their blood and then the jousters lay on the floor dead—we thought. Everyone gasped. My mission had been completed. Before I was able to reverse the curse, it suddenly got worse. Something happened and

the two jousters woke up, pale and with fangs in black cloaks. They went for the people in the stands; everyone ran. The curse kept getting worse and worse and soon there were vampires left and right. Now let's travel forward in time to know a little more about this curse.

I'm in my study—yes I'm still alive. I'm an immortal. But that's a story for another day right now we're talking about vampires. I was at a concert last night because I now love rock and roll (mainly Elvis Presley and that's the concert I was at) and guess what happened? A vampire—I tried to fend it off, then I realized something, lifting my curse didn't work well. It made vampires forget how much they loved humans and made them think that they hated humans. Well at this concert I took a quick detour after I killed Elvis (on a toilet), because it turns out he was a vampire also. Then I went to the grocery store and the person at the counter was also a vampire but there was already someone there taking care of it, it was a girl named Elise. (Elise is now my wife but more on that later). Elise handled it and I didn't have to do a thing, yeah it was a nice change of events.

It is time to go to the future where you might be reading this and by the way I do not like the new rock, it's too wild. I have two kids named Genevieve and Mera—that's Burgus for moon and sun. We are all a happy family. We all listen to Elvis and all of us love it!!!!

So I was at the store and I saw a vampire getting a pomegranate. I thought to myself: could it be? Vampires eating pomegranates like they did so long ago....

That night I got home and I told my family everything. They were astonished and then we ate our dinner. Next we went to the vampire hunters meeting and I told all of them everything, starting at the very beginning. Suddenly the door opened and vampires came and we all ran but then vampires got a lot of the hunters so I took my stuff and I ran and ran I know I know I am a coward but I was so scared.

Oh wait, there is something I did not tell you. The night I cast that...that

spell...I... well—how do I tell you this? I.....er.....eh...well the vampires came and they...oh...they killed my Dad. Do you know how that feels? It's like, in a way, I killed my own father. Having to live with the fact that now he is a vampire because of me—it's just too much sometimes.

Reliving that story gave me courage. And so I ran and ran and ran and ran and ran and got back to the vampire hunter fortress. I fought the vampires off. After I did I found how to undo the spell but it would cost me something great—my sorcerer magic. And without my sorcerer magic, I would die. I had no choice so I told my family this the last time I will talk to you. Trembling, I said to them: G-G-G-Good-goodbye. I will miss you and I am sure you will miss me. Goodbye. Now the world will be peaceful. Now I will be with my dad.

And now to you reading the story, I say: I will miss you and now...now I am just stalling but I can't help it. I am so scared. But I guess it is now time to say goodbye.....but before I go I can not help but to say I wish that I was not the one who did the curse. If I did not I would feel like a hero but I am not. I am so sorry for that curse. I did it and I can not reverse it. So instead I can make up for it so now goodbye.....

THE END

Story dedicated to my cousin Mera

THE CANDLE

Lochlan Burgess, 11

There was once a little spider named Jim living in his web all warm and cozy watching all the bugs go by, eating his cricket sandwich. But in the corner, he saw a black figure, but he did not mind. He was getting ready for bed. Brushing his fangs and he saw the black figure again and this time he was worried.

He did not know what the black figure was, so he chose to stay up all night until he figured out what it was. His plan was to take a flashlight and find out what it was. He started in the living room searching every corner and crack but there was nothing in there, so he went to check the hall, he looked behind all the pictures and even the statue, but nothing was there. Jim started hearing a noise, so he followed the noise around his web, and it led him to the attic which was the biggest room in his whole entire web, so he had a lot of searching to do. He looked all through all the boxes but all he found was his toy bugs that he would play with as a kid.

He looked through all the old furniture, but nothing was their ether, and it was the same thing for the old mattresses the TVs and the basketballs. Nothing was there. Jim thought that the thing might have moved to a different room, so he went to the kitchen and that is where he saw it. The thing was a monster, and it was mad it had one white eye and one black eye, and its skin was crimson red.

Jim was so scared he ran as fast as he could he went back through the hall up to the attic through all the boxes back down through the hall into the living room and outside but Jim lived super high up in the air and he almost fell he was wabbling back and forth on the very edge but he used his four bottom legs to pull himself back to the door but when he tried to run back inside the monster had caught up to him and the monster dragged Jim back inside and that was the last time that anyone had ever saw Jim again.

Two weeks later someone came to investigate the web. Her name was

Jessie Coatrack. She was not the best investigator, but she could still get stuff done. Jessie started searching through the living room first, looking for anything, like fingerprints or hair. The only thing she found was a red strand of hair, so she took that back to her office and scanned it, but her computer said “this species is unknown.” Jessie was confused by this. So, she went back to the web and started searching the hall. Behind all the pictures, but she found something in the statue, there was a deep dark tunnel, so Jessie went down it.

She flew down the tunnel swerving back and forth, up, and down. finally, she reached the end of the tunnel. It was pitch black and she could not see anything, but she could still feel. She found what she thought was a candle, but she could not see anything. She remembered that she has a lighter in her pocket, so she pulled it out of her pocket and tried her best to light the candle and she finally got it.

All she could see was a tiny bit in front of her. She started walking around looking for anything she could find. She could not find anything, but she could hear something, so she followed the noise felling around and it led her to something that was like a maze.

She kept going through the hall that seemed to go forever. The more hall she went down the more Jessie was lost, and the noise grew louder it was dark and her candle was about to go out.

Jessie was getting tired but if she fell asleep, she might have missed something that happened. So, she decided to sit in a corner and wait there. But she fell asleep and while she was asleep, the monster that took Jim came out and woke up Jessie before taking her away into the maze. When Jessie woke up, she did not know what happened. She did her best to find her way out, and her eye could see better now so at least she could see, she found some sort of light so she started following it, she thought the light would lead her out of the maze.

When she found the end of the light it just led her to another candle. Jessie was getting worried what if she never got out. Jessie panicked and started running around the maze as fast as she could.

She slipped on a rag and slid into the wall, the monster almost caught her, but she threw a skull at it. Now there were potholes in the ground, and it was harder to run because of it. She looked back to see where the monster was but when she did there was a deep hole in front of her and she fell into it the monster ran up and caught Jessie. And no one had ever seen her since.

LOST IN THE DARK

Jack Morgan, 9

I was walking next to the oak tree when my dad called me for school. I came inside ready with my backpack on. Today was my first day at my new school. Let's start at the beginning We had just moved into my grandpa's house because we had lost our house in the city. Our grandpa had just passed away. My name is Ace our grandpa's house is right next to a forest, I was told by my grandpa to never go near the house in the woods because there was a little girl who had gone there and never returned. My grandpa believed in that type of stuff, ghosts, and fairy tales. At school, I wasn't unpopular or popular, just well-known for my first day at school.

I met a friend Leo one night we decided to sleep at my place. That night Leo woke us up because he said he wanted us to go to the house in the woods. "Please Ace let's go to the house in the woods" begged Leo. "No" I responded, "I was told never to go there!" I said angrily "but there are two days until Halloween let's do something scary," said Leo "ok, fine but only for three hours." I said. We went to the forest, and I was pretty sure that might be the last time I ever saw my house again.

I felt like we were lost in the dark. The forest was creepy. I think we heard something say, "help me". When we got to the house in the woods (Leo named a tree Harold), we went inside. I set my timer on my watch for three hours It took longer than I thought, "Ace what does this say?" asked Leo. It made sense that he asked me to read something because he wasn't that good at reading and I was one of the best, but anyway back to that story. I went to Leo "what does it say?" Leo repeated, it says "she is still here" "is that blood?"

Right when he said that we backed out of the room. Leo tripped over a dead rat he fell back and went unconscious. Two hours after that I got tired of carrying Leo through the house I blacked out when I woke up Me and Leo were tied to chairs Leo was already awake trying to get out, but the ropes would not budge. My timer had started to go off, we heard a creaking noise and I

screamed, A rat started to crawl up my leg it made a chirping noise and fell dead. "That was weird, don't birds make that sound?" said Leo "in the stories my grandpa told me the dead/ghost lady that's here loves birds" I responded. "Wait there is a ghost here!" exclaimed.

I tried to call my dad on my watch, but it was no use. All I could do was scream for help like Leo, still no use. But when we would scream it would attract more rats, "hey Leo don't you see when we scream more rats come?" I asked "ya" Leo responded "aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh" screamed Leo, then a rat came and nibbled a little bit on his ropes but then it chirped and died. We both started to scream "aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh" more than a dozen rats came and chewed the ropes but died in a few seconds. We screamed a few more times but then we heard that creaking noise again at that moment I found the Greek omega symbol on the door.

When I looked at the omega sign I fell asleep I woke up because of Leo, who was out of his chair? "how did you get out?" "I kept on screaming" responded Leo. "Now let's get you out of here I mean the chair," said Leo. Leo untied me in the process he helped me up, we were about to leave when Leo fell to his knees and started screaming his hands over his ears "what's wrong?" I asked then I heard it to a really high-pitched chirping noise it felt like my ears were bleeding.

The only thing the sound did was torture you, it made me want to bang my head on the wall, which would have killed me because of the barb wire and spikes. The noise stopped after a long time of torture, then we heard the creaking noise again, but it sounded like it was getting closer and closer this time it sounded like it was right behind the door. It happened in a nanosecond the doors slammed open and revealed a floating girl about my age 15-16 "she is holding a knife" whispered Leo (Leo was shivering he was so scared).

The girl tied us back up and was about to stab us with the ten-inch-long knife suddenly, Leo screamed it attracted one-thousand rats (I think) but when the girl went "chirp" all the rats did the same and fell dead. I had just remembered something from my grandpa's stories the ghost girl had a curse

like the one of Achilles so I kicked her in the heel so she fell asleep (I think). That gave us time to call the rats (which never died because the girl didn't "chirp"), the one rat that we called got us both free we went through the doors but met an obstacle.

You guessed it the obstacle was a pit of barb wire and broken glass "This was not here before!" Leo said. The only thing on our side was the rope hanging over the pit. "How are we going to reach that?" I asked. "Jump," Leo said "What!" "Are you crazy!" I exclaimed "well never reach it," I said sadly "worth a shot," Leo said and he jumped I thought for sure he was going to die. The most amazing thing in my entire life had just occurred there on that spot, he had made it, so when he got to the other side he tossed me the rope and I did the same. When we were running out, I checked my watch. For some reason my watch said it was three in the morning. When we got back to town, we reported to the police but when we went to the house in the woods (I thought) it wasn't there. When we went home there was my dad on the floor crowded with police officers, I asked what happened and they said, "He was attacked by a ghost girl...at least that's what his wife said."

A GHOST FOR HALLOWEEN

Presley Roberson, 10

Tomorrow is Halloween, and I still don't know what to wear! William is planning to be a vampire again. He's been a vampire for five years now. Anne is planning to be some kind of princess for the third year in a row. There are so many options to choose from! Maybe I'll be a deer. No, a deer is too childish. Oh! How about a witch? Then it hit me. Two years ago, I went trick or treating with William and Anne, and I was dressed as a witch. That was the night we nearly got ourselves killed. While walking the neighborhoods, we got lost. It was so cold that night, we almost froze to death. Then we saw a bright light and were able to find our home. Thank goodness.

"Jules! Breakfast." Anne cried. I snapped back to reality. My real name is Julia, but Anne calls me Jules.

"Coming!" I cried back. I raced down the stairs. I was so hungry I could have eaten the whole dining table.

"What are you dressing up as for Halloween?" Anne asked.

"I don't know yet. What about you?" I said, although I already knew the answer.

"I'm going to be a princess," Anne said with so much pride that the wind laughed at her. I tried not to laugh myself.

After breakfast, we decided to wake William. We walked in his room only to find his bed empty. "Where's William?" Anne asked.

"If I knew I would have told you," I replied. Just then, we heard a creak of the staircase. "What was that?" I said, terrified but not wanting to show it.

"BOO!" William cried.

"Ahhhh!"

"Ha-ha! Got you!" William said. William has, what I call, a pranking problem. He's been pranking so much, I'm thinking of throwing him out the

window.

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” I said sarcastically.

“Oh, come on Jules, don’t be mad. It was just a little prank,” William tried to explain.

“A prank that scared me half to death,” I said, with so much anger that if I touched lava, it would have been as hot as me.

“Sorry, Jules. I didn’t mean to scare you that bad,” he said. The way his voice sounded made me think he was actually trying to apologize.

“It’s fine,” I said, finally cooling down. “Wait, your prank just gave me an idea of what to be for Halloween!” I said excitedly.

“What’s your idea, Jules?” Anne said curiously.

“A ghost!”

They both looked really confused. “Let me explain,” I started. “When William scared me like that, he scared me half to death. A ghost is in-between life and death!” I said, excited that I finally had a Halloween costume.

“Oh. That’s a great idea Jules!” William said.

“Ya. I wish I picked that instead of a princess,” Anne said, obviously jealous that I had a better Halloween costume. Wait, how am I supposed to make a ghost costume by tomorrow? I thought. There is no way I’ll finish! Maybe I’ll just put white makeup on my face. It was basically my only option. Either way, I knew this Halloween was going to be the best in years!

Today is Halloween! Now I just have to get through school, and then, costume time! I’m so excited. I looked at my clock. It was 6:37. The sun didn’t want to get out of bed, but I was so excited, I couldn’t wait any longer! I hopped out of bed, slipped on my house shoes, and got dressed as quickly as possible. I decided to wear a purple shirt with jeans. I put my hair in a ponytail and added a little scrunchy. I had some extra time, so I decided to read. I’m reading this cool book called, “The Breath of Fire” It’s amazing so far. A short time later, William and Anne burst in my room. “Have you ever heard of knocking?” I spoke.

“You wouldn’t have let us in.” William said annoyed.

“I know,” I said, trying to be funny, but apparently it wasn’t working.

“Are you ready for school? It starts at 8:00,” William said.

“I know that. Last time I checked it wasn’t even 7:00 yet,” I replied.

“Well, you’ve been reading too long, you bookworm. It’s 7:55,” Anne said annoyed.

“Oh! Sorry guys. I guess I just got lost in my book.”

“It’s fine,” William said, obviously still annoyed.

We rushed out of the house and ran to school as fast as we could, so that we could actually get there by 1st hour. We made it just in time.

“Okay everyone. Today, you need to check your homework with me,” said Mrs. Hannah as she started going through all the questions from the previous day’s work. I got all of them right! William on the other hand, not so much.

“I got a 0% out of 10 questions!” he said. “How is that even possible?” He was so mad, he didn’t even talk to me or Anne, all during school.

Finally, the bell rang and school was over! Now it was time to figure out this Halloween costume debacle. How was I going to dress as a ghost? Maybe I’ll just put some black eyeshadow around my eyes and some pale powder on my face. Luckily, William has both of those things because he’s dressing up as a vampire. I went straight to his bathroom and put on the makeup. I finished the costume by wearing a long-sleeve white dress, with leggings of course, it did just snow the night before. “Perfect!” I thought as I checked out my reflection in the mirror. As I walked down the stairs, I could tell my siblings were annoyed by how long it took me to get ready, but I was too excited to care. “Let’s go,” I said as we all grabbed out bags for candy.

We walked out the front door and down the street a few blocks, but before we even got to the first house we heard a loud, ferocious bark behind us. We looked back to see the neighbor’s dog, a monstrous mix-breed who had never been very fond of us had escaped their fence and was racing toward us.

“RUN!” William said. We ran for what felt like forever, then ducked into a wooded area to try to hide. I had no idea where we were, but the dog had given up and that’s all I cared about. Just then, I saw something shiny in the snow. I realized that it was my ring that my mom given to me just before she died. I wore it everywhere and never took it off.

“William, Anne? Will you help me grab my ring,” I said, still panting from our run. “It fell when we were running.” They nodded and pulled.

“I think it’s stuck,” said Anne. I reached down to uncover my ring to see what it was stuck on. Then I froze. There before me, were three skeletons. One of which had my ring on it. But my ring was on my finger. I was so scared, my heart stopped. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe...

but maybe that’s because my heart actually stopped two years ago.

THE VIDEO

Miles Zellner, Ezra Johnson, Bauer Fidler; 11

One day at Camp Redfarm, a young boy named Robert, who was about twelve years old, was in a bathroom going to the restroom. Then he was done he washed his hands and found an iPhone lying next to a sink.

He looked for who could have owned the iPhone, but he found no one. So he decided to keep it. Later that day in his cabin, he got a look at the pictures on the iPhone just to see if he could figure out who owned it.

While he looked, he found a video. He watched the video and it showed a little boy his age finding the same iPhone he found in the bathroom. The little boy found the iPhone laying right where it was when Robert found it. Robert thought that was a little odd, but he kept watching. He saw the little boy in the video stare in the mirror in terror, and in the mirror there stood a tall monster with skinny limbs, grey skin, pitch black eyes, and a bloody smile. Robert thought that was scary so he turned the video off.

Over the next few days, Robert kept watching the video, but every time he watched it, it looked like something changed, but he just couldn't put his finger on it.

Then after a few days, he realized that every time he watched the video the little boy changed to look a little more like him! He decided to destroy the iPhone, so he went to the camp's pond and threw the iPhone in the water! Every day after that was normal, and Robert eventually calmed down...until one day when he was called to the counselor's office because he got into a fight. One of the camp directors said the counselor was going to the restroom and that Robert could just wait in the office. In the counselor's office there was a fan, a table, a few chairs, a shelf with books, and a TV.

While waiting in the office he heard a noise outside. He went to see what it was but found nothing, so he decided it was just an animal. When he went back inside, the TV was on. He looked closer to see what was on the TV, and the video from the iPhone was playing on it! But the boy was Robert this time!

He heard the same noise he heard earlier...it was just closer. He heard it again, and again, and again. He went back outside to see what it was, but there was still nothing there. He ran back inside and looked at the TV to see if it was still on, but the TV wasn't even there anymore. He decided to go back to his cabin, but when he turned around to leave, there was the creature from the video staring back at him.

Later that day in roll call when they called Robert's name, he didn't come, so they waited for him to show up. After twenty minutes, they decided to send out a search party for him. They looked everywhere and never found him, but they did find one thing. In the bathroom they found a suspicious looking iPhone laying next to a sink.

HUMAN VS SPIDERS

Melissa Zavaleta, 8

Davis is one of four siblings; the others are Tom, Victoria, and Caroline who is the youngest. They live in Colorado in a woody area. One dark and foggy morning their grandpa called Davis and asked if they could remodel his abandoned cottage in the woods. Davis declined because he and his siblings had plans to go out into the city of Denver, however knowing traffic was too bad that day their mother said “we can go another day”. Davis and his siblings agree that they can go help their grandpa after all and Davis calls his grandpa to let him know.

“Hey grandpa! It’s Davis, it looks like we can meet up with you.”

“Great! I’ll meet you at the Cabin in thirty minutes” replied grandpa.

A while later Davis and his siblings arrive at their grandpa’s cabin but grandpa is not there.

“Maybe we should just go inside by ourselves. It’s been forty minutes.”

Tom said.

“Guys, doesn’t grandpa always leave the backdoor open?” said Victoria

“I don’t think we should go in,” said Caroline in a shaky voice.

“What are you, scared duuuude?” mocked Tom.

“Come on guys let’s just all go in and we can get a head start” said Davis.

The four siblings cracked open the back door escaping the fog and walked into grandpa’s dusty cabin. They decided that they should start with the wallpaper. However, once they started taking it down Tom noticed something white and sticky behind it. The four siblings continued peeling to get the job done, but they felt nervous and confused. Once they had taken it all down the four siblings were shocked to find the walls covered in cobwebs. That was when Davis noticed and told Victoria about the huge spider on her back. Victoria turned around and froze while her eyes widened. In a panic Caroline went into the bathroom to find something to kill the spider with there she

noticed a hidden brown rusty lever that opened a secret passage of black widows. Caroline called the rest of her siblings and they all followed the long black path. This led them to a door that was camouflaged into a tree and was just big enough that they could crawl through. Caroline refused to enter but the three other siblings pushed her in.

That's when they saw the biggest spider web in the world. Then they saw what they assumed was the leader spider, Arachna, hanging on the highest web overlooking the rest of the spiders.

Arachna spotted the four humans in the crowd of spiders. Arachna immediately sent a group of spider guards over to inspect the situation. The siblings were handcuffed with spider webs and taken to the dungeon where they found what they least expected... Grandpa. The siblings were in shock after finding Grandpa in the spider cave, they had so many questions.

"Is this why we didn't see you at the cabin?" asked Tom

"Did you also find the lever in the bathroom?" asked Victoria

"Yes, I also followed the path after pulling the lever in the bathroom." explained Grandpa

"I'm really sorry you guys are trapped down here too, the past hours have been torture!" cried Grandpa

"GRANDPA, IS THAT A SPIDER LEG UNDER YOUR SLEEVE?" screamed Davis. Embarrassed, grandpa yanked up his sleeve revealing a long black hairy spider leg under his right sleeve where his hand used to be.

"Yes, and you guys don't have much time before they inject you with their venom and you slowly and painfully start to become a spider." said grandpa.

The kids started freaking out and trying to break the webs they're trapped in but failed miserably. That's when grandpa explained he is now able to understand the spiders when they speak.

The kids gave up for the day after trying to escape the web all day. Clueless the siblings were injected in their sleep, but grandpa was awake the whole time. The next morning he revealed what had happened last night and

their hearts raced. They realized they had a major setback escaping because they couldn't get out of the web until they were fully spiders.

A week later after days of trying to break out grandpa had turned into a spider. He was now able to break free and let the siblings out of the webs. They were going to wait until night when no one could see them escape. Grandpa also told them about a possible cure to the serum they were injected with but it can only be found in the corner of the earth.

"How does grandpa know all of this information?" asked Victoria.

"I have no idea, but more importantly where's the corner of the earth?" Caroline whispered.

"Aren't you supposed to be a genius? The earth is a sphere there are no corners of the earth." Tom argued.

"Keep your voice down and that's enough sassiness for today Tom." Davis said and Tom grunted.

Even though they didn't know where the corner of the earth was and they were slowly becoming spiders themselves, the siblings were not ready to give up. They were finally going to get freedom after a long week in the dungeon. Grandpa carefully crawled to the kids and unwrapped the web. The kids were free at last and made a run for it, they promised grandpa they would come back for him. But grandpa said not to come back for him. The siblings thought that was weird of grandpa to say but continued with their journey. On their way out Caroline grabbed a crumpled up piece of paper from the ground that she saw a guard drop which she didn't know if it would be useful or not.

They finally crawl out of the brown door that got them there in the first place. Now the kid's arms are half spider half human, luckily the spider serum works slower on children. In the darkness of the night they sprint to a spot in the woods where they knew they'd be safe. In this spot Caroline decides to straighten out the paper she grabbed. The siblings all huddled around the paper squinting to find out what it was, after studying it more they realized this was the spider's version of the world map. They noticed their map showed the world as a rectangle and there was a spot that said "The corner of the world."

The kids felt thrilled they finally knew the corner of the world was real. They suddenly became suspicious because they noticed they were very close to the corner of the world. They started walking to their destination and finally got to where the map said was the corner of the earth. They were shocked to find out that the corner of the world was their grandpa's abandoned cabin.

"Woah I wonder if grandpa knows the cure is in his cabin?" Davis said.

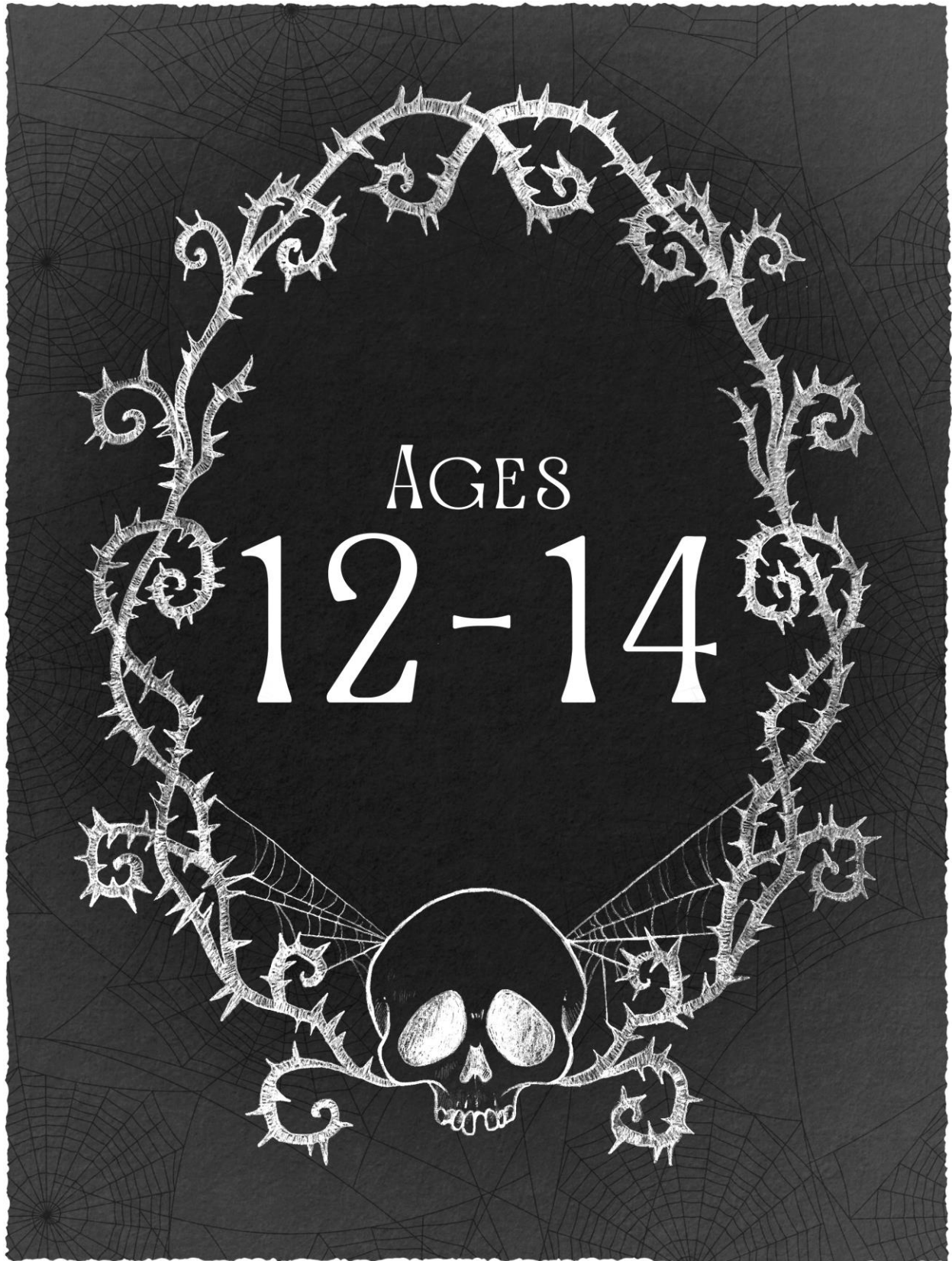
"Who cares, let's just get in there and find the cure!" Tom exclaimed.

The siblings walked in through the same back door they had entered a week ago. Once they got in they searched all over the house and started to lose hope until Victoria noticed the lever Caroline pulled a week earlier that caused this. She made a tough decision to pull the lever again and the lever cracked open where she found a mysterious purple slimy dark liquid. Victoria immediately called her siblings and they soon realized that the liquid was the cure. They all poured about a milliliter of serum in separate cups and drank it together.

They now had to go save grandpa. After a few hours of walking and breaks they finally stumbled upon the old tree with the hidden door. They crawled through the same door they carefully snuck down to the dungeon. Where they found an old little leather journal which they remembered is their grandpa's diary. Caroline desperately opened it to find out where her grandpa was. That is when the siblings found out that grandpa lured them into the spider world and confessed to injecting them with the spider serum at night. Caroline, now reading out loud to the group of kids, continued turning the pages in a panic. The next page revealed he had let them go because he felt bad for the pain he had caused them. And the last page of the leather journal had the words *'If only they knew I am Arachna and can switch between human and spider!'*

Caroline dropped the journal and was frozen. In that moment the siblings heard a familiar voice behind them say:

"Well well well, look who came back for their grandpa. I told you not to. You'll regret this." said Arachna.



FEVER DREAM

Edwick Moseman, 14

He looked around, his vision clouded as he laid on the floor, with no memory of how he got there. He couldn't remember anything, not his name, not his age, nothing about his life or family. He was wearing nothing but a cheap hospital gown that contrasted to his tan skin. The backside of the gown had gotten damp from laying on the wood chips. He sighed getting up from the damp wood chips, looking more closely at his surroundings. The fog went on for miles, nothing else visible except for the run-down playground and the abandoned schoolhouse. It felt reminiscent in some way. In what way, he couldn't exactly recall.

He felt a jolt go through his body. He looked down at the ground, a black liquid seemed to seep from the ground. He quickly looked up, studying the park around him. He couldn't see the source of what was happening. The ground was quickly filled with water rising higher and higher, first reaching his ankles, then his knees, then his hips. The water didn't stop, he couldn't move. He felt like he was bolted to the ground. The water was getting dangerously close to his head, but he couldn't so much as move a finger. He desperately tried to move a muscle in his body, but they lay dormant as he internally thrashed anything to keep his head above water.

The water reached his head as he took a final gasp of air. He stood there, frozen, slowly losing oxygen as his breath gave out. He tried to scream, move, anything that would keep him from slowly drowning in the water, He was crying, desperately screaming as water filled his lungs, ignoring how he tried to do anything to stop it to show that he was trying to stop it. His body gasped for air, and he so desperately tried to move his body. He tried to scream, tried to do something as simple as moving his fingers, but nothing came. He kept trying and trying till it all went black, his life slipping through his fingers.

It was dark, the blackness around him that is. He died. That's what happened. That's what *should* have happened. What was happening now

contradicted that, he was conscious. If this is what death is like, no one would've stayed here longer than ten minutes. It was soul-sucking, it made him feel hollow. The ebony was comforting in some strange way, in the same way as an abusive parent, saying they love you while torturing you day after day.

His eyes felt heavy, his body compelled him to close his eyes, but he wasn't tired. He didn't think he could sleep in the situation he was in. Despite that, his eyes shut, feeling like his body was out of control.

A cold breeze blew down his back, flicking his eyes open. The void was gone, now being replaced with a plane field, unkempt grass going on for miles, never-ending. It was more pleasant than the other places he had been, the sun shining through the thick clouds that floated above him. He gazed up at the sky for a while taking in the sunlight he'd been kept from in the void.

He heard a bird caw behind him, he turned his head, looking over his shoulder, it was a crow. Its feathers, black and rough, as its beady eyes stared back at him. A strange gleam in its tiny eyes. Another caw was heard behind him, then another, then more than he could count.

He swallowed hard as he turned to look where the sound came from. A murder of crows was fast approaching him from the sky. He didn't even have time to blink before one scratched him. His arm jolted with pain as the scratch mark started bleeding. More crows attacked him, scratching and pecking at his flesh. One got to his eye, stabbing the thing til he couldn't see out of it.

He was flailing his arms desperately trying to knock the crows off of him, but there were too many. When he got one off two more would come to attack him, he was bleeding profusely, his skin being scratched raw from most of his body. The agonizing pain made him scream, but nothing came out, not a peep. Only the sound of the crows invading his mind, tearing his flesh from his bones, no one to help him.

He collapsed to the ground unable to move his body, still being tortured by the pain of the crows. They pried his skin and flesh from his skeleton yet he didn't die, only left in excruciating pain of feeling his body being torn apart. He

tried to do something, anything, but he couldn't move a muscle, the same sensation before he drowned. Pain without the power to stop it.

The murder eventually left, after what felt like hours of excruciating torture, pain stimulating every nerve he felt. He couldn't see or hear, or anything other than pain. His flesh was mostly torn from his bones, but the parts that were still attached would make him want to kill himself before he endured it any longer. He wanted to scream the way his body did, wanted to do anything to relieve the pain, but nothing would come. No tears, no scream, no movement.

As he tried to throw his body into a fit of struggle, he was back in the void. Back in the empty abyss, he had been in for who knows how long. He looked down at his hands, they had gone back to their normal fleshy selves. He let out a sigh of relief, his body lying comfortably on the infinite ebony that lay beneath him. He gripped the hospital gown he was wearing, his heart was still racing from when the crows attacked, the panic having yet to settle down.

He still didn't know why he was here, was it some punishment he was facing? Was he in hell? Is that why he was subjected to such a frivolous torture? He was never a religious person, but maybe that was what was happening, he was being punished for the things he's done. Forced to face the sins he's committed all of his life.

His mind was starting to spiral, but it didn't get much of a chance before he was thrust into a chair. It was soft and made of velvet, positioned across a long table with an empty chair, looking to be around the same one he was sitting in. The chairs were the least interesting part, as trays of food laid before him. Separate genres and courses lay before him, giving him all the food he could ever want. Paranoia slowly crept up his back as he looked around, the high church-like walls increasing him in a room with no doors.

His eyes widened, as his mouth watered. He didn't know how long it'd been since he had eaten, but it had felt like years since he had consumed real food. He felt a pang of hunger shoot through his stomach as he noticed that he was starving, feeling like he would die in the next few minutes. He looked around

cautiously before he took his first bite, taking in the savory food. Gluttony flashed over his eyes as he started shoveling food into his mouth, endlessly trying to fill the hunger that now encapsulated his body.

He continued in that state for some time, how long it was he could never be sure. He'd completely lost what his internal clock was like it was lost. He could never tell how much time had passed, whether it'd be weeks or minutes in what had been happening.

The different flavors melted in his mouth as if this had been the first time he had consumed something. He closed his eyes, still pulling the food in his mouth, giving just enough time in between for him to breathe as hunger prodded at his stomach. The paranoia kept screaming in his ears, telling him that something was going to go wrong, that he was going to continue to die over and over again. He tried to push the thoughts down with each bite of food, keeping some false hope in his thoughts.

As the hunger started to lessen, he slowed down, savoring the food in front of him as he chewed each bite. Until he bit into something weird. When he picked it up it had seemed normal, but when his teeth met the flesh of the meat it had tasted like raw pork. A foul scent wafted to his nose, snapping his eyes open.

He gagged at the sight that befell him. The beautiful meal that had laid before him had been replaced with human flesh and organs. He looked down at the meat he had been biting into, to discover it had been a human calf, the bone sticking out from the flesh it was buried in. He gagged again, this time twisting his body over the chair to vomit, chunks of meat and blood coming out with it. The chair had been replaced too, the velvet cushioning becoming stretched skin, sewed crudely across the contents of the chair.

He tried to stand up, but his legs gave out before him, along with the rest of his body. Causing him to smack his head on the corner of the hard table before falling face-first on the ground. Nausea hit his body like a truck and he vomited again, this time choking on the acid, inhaling into his lungs as he lay lipless. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, just like the other times. His

body twitched as he continued to throw up the contents of his body. His heart pounded into his brain as he barely stayed continuous. He felt his heart rate skyrocket as his eyes rolled to the back of his head as he began to seize.

He couldn't feel any single part of his body, all of them bombarded his senses all at once. He just wanted everything to stop. He slowly started to lose consciousness, everything around him fading.

He didn't wake up in the void this time. He woke up in an empty room, the sound of ticking filling his ears. The annoying kind, like from an old-fashioned clock. It was loud and obnoxious, taunting him about something he couldn't put his finger on.

The room was empty, barren walls and floor from any sort of uniqueness or comfort. The only thing strange about the room was the windows, which didn't look like the sky outside. He walked slowly across the floor to one of the windows, his bare feet, slightly clinging to the floor every time he stepped.

He grazed one of his hands across the bare wall, which occasionally was nicked by one of the loose nails.

He stooped at the base of the window, as he pulled his hands away from the wall, He looked down at the window, dark colors swirling around the outside. Eyes spared back at him, some big, some small. They almost looked like stars in a way, as each of them stared back into his eyes. It didn't seem creepy, but absurdly, comforting. They felt like they were there for him like they cared.

He knew this sense of comfort wouldn't last forever, as the next thing to kill him would soak more of his hope dry from his soul. He would rather kill himself willingly than endure that pain again. The ticking got louder as the words materialized in his brain.

A loud clunk was heard from behind him. He whipped his head around scanning the room. No physical body had appeared, but as his eyes trailed down he could see a sharp knife placed in the middle of the room.

The ticking pounded in tune with his heartbeat as he slowly walked toward the metal object. The dagger shimmered from the light illuminated from

the windows. He bent down, slowly picking up the handle from the ground, gazing at the stainless shimmering blade that presented itself before his eyes. He knew what was going to happen. It would all be over. The repetitive pain, the paralysis and, the death. It would all be over.

He shifted the blade in his hands, moving it away from his chest. His hands were shaking, moving the blade in a sporadic motion, his breathing rapped with anticipation. He took a deep breath, making the last shard of doubt leave his thoughts. He plunged the blade deep into his chest, the blade piercing his chest's major arteries. He grasped the end of the dagger, twisting it as he pulled it out of his chest. His arms were shaking as he pushed out his arms. He trusted the blade back into his chest, repeating the action as much as his muscles could bear.

He dropped the blade to the ground, he studied his body as blood gushed from his chest. His legs eventually gave out, sending him to fall to the ground. Blood dripped from his body, staining the hospital robes that draped over his frame. He smiled slightly, as his body twitched and his vision faltered, He felt happy, it was going to be over. In his dying heart, he knew this was it. That it was going to end at last. He let out his final gasp of air as he lost consciousness, his life fleeing from his body as the ticking finally subsided.

The flatline stayed constant, even after the doctors had done everything they could do, the boy's body had finally given up. She sighed, Dr. Ester beside her stopped doing chest compressions. After they marked the time of death, Dr. Ester left the room patting her on the shoulder before he left. Dr. Illsman gave a shuddering sigh, even if she had done this for years, she'd always be haunted by a patient's final breath.

She stepped out of the room, Elliot's parents nervously waiting outside. She looked at them with sadness in her eyes. They looked up at her, the color draining from their faces. Dr. Illsman took a deep breath before delivering the news.

"I am very sorry for your loss, Mr. and Mrs. Damon. Elliot passed away in

his coma today.” Mrs. Damon burst into tears, crying into the shoulder of her husband. His face was wet with tears as he silently grieved over his dead son.

“I am again very sorry for your loss, you have my condolences.” She paused before she entered back into the room, “...He was a good kid.” She left the couple to grieve in peace, stepping back into the room with their son. It all had happened so suddenly, his heart just suddenly stopped. Like he wanted to go, that it was his time.

“I’m sure you had a good reason for leaving us, Elliot. Whatever that may be, I hope you’re happier now.” She gave a sad smile, wiping a tear from her eye. She turned to leave the room, as Elliot was taken out of the hospital bed which he had occupied for so long.

STATIC

Emma Shotton, 14

Tickets have been sold out for months. You could find people selling them for hundreds of dollars; yet still get it for cheap. You could go to any school, no matter what age, and hear at least 20 people talking about it. You could go with anyone, your family, friends, or even enemies; and you would both still enjoy every moment of the night. What a wonderful time to make everything go perfectly wrong.

Walking down the halls of Juniper Hills High School gives you a major headache. Everywhere you look you see the neon outline of Piper Stacy concert posters stamped to the walls. They call it her “Hometown Highlight”, the biggest event that has happened in Juniper Hills in years. We’re not that small of a town. We’re big enough that Piper can make an income out of us, but we’re still small enough for everyone in town to come. I’ll admit it, I don’t really like her music. It’s too “peppy”. So I’ll go to her concert, but only to be with my friends.

Joe, Liam, Samantha and I all met after school in the parking lot together. We were going to get a bite to eat before the concert tonight. Every teenager in this town went to eat at the one and only one place before they went somewhere together; Cathy’s Chicken Shack. Or for short we just called it “The Shack”, a small diner right by the high school where kids would walk there in practically five minutes; so that’s exactly what we did. Joe and Liam were already there in the parking lot as I walked with Sam towards them. Sam and I have our last class together which makes it easy so I don’t have to find her after school.

“Do you think that The Shack has their Halloween milkshake?” asked Sam. The Shack always has holiday milkshakes that Sam absolutely loves.

“Probably, Halloween is in a week.” I replied.

“Ok good because that’s my favorite one that they have.” said Sam giddily.

“We know, you tell us how much it’s your favorite every single year. It’s just a shake, calm down.” replied Joe sarcastically.

“Well you don’t have to be all rude about it. You’re just jealous that I have something special to look forward to.” Sam snapped back.

“Oh my gosh. Sassy Sam back at it again.” replied Joe.

“I told you to stop calling me that six years ago! You insensitive-”

Liam interrupted. “Hey guys sorry to break up this nice conversation but what’s going on at the Shack?” Yes The Shack is where everyone went, but there was never a crowd of people trying to scoot their way through the door; although, that’s what we all seemed to be looking at right before us.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” I asked one of the teenagers in the crowd. “Piper Stacy’s in there getting a shake!” The four of us looked at each other and I crammed myself through the crowd until I reached near the door. There she was. Signing shirts, papers, and whatever random item someone could grab. Then all of a sudden I get pushed up right next to her. She grabbed my arm and signed in black sharpie, “Pipes” and a little heart right next to it. I then get shoved out from the entrance of the restaurant and now into the normal dining area. Soon my friends caught up to me and we all sat down and ordered almost immediately. Sam showed me how Piper signed her shirt and Liam and Joe talked about how her music is too girly. But other than that, we didn’t talk much. We watched the crowd and how they never got bored trying to get a picture for ten minutes. All of our meals were barely half eaten before we got up and left that stampede of a mess. Sam got her milkshake to go and we were gone in a flash.

It was 6:30 by the time we left. Just the right amount of time to walk to the concert and be there at seven, exactly when it starts. When we arrived we went straight to the back seats. Though of course Sam dragged me straight to the front as the lights dimmed. We waited for a light, one subtle light shining on Piper’s clear, dewy skin. The audience was hushed, but no light shined. The lights were back on. The whole audience was confused. Were they not ready yet? Was something malfunctioning? Everyone was throwing these questions around in the audience trying to figure out if anyone knew just a little bit of information. Then the lights flickered. Not a flicker that happens

whenever you just turn a room light on. It clearly went off and on as if somebody was at the light switch manually flicking it up and down. Then again, it flickered, up and down. At this point the lights seemed like they were almost buzzing. Like a bomb about to explode, they quivered. Then they were all off. The audience quickly gasped at the sight of complete blackness. If you were to wave your hand in front of your face you would not be able to even see a blur of its motion. Was this a part of the show? Was it some big entrance Piper wanted to have? A wave of light flashed in my eyes, but as my eyes adjusted to the light, Piper was in fact, not there. Instead a man in all black stood there with a microphone. "Sorry about the inconvenience. We just needed to announce for Piper to please come back to the side of the stage. The performance will begin shortly." Then he walked off.

"I guess I will go get some water." I told Sam. I had a feeling that this would take awhile. The line wasn't too long, maybe just a five minute wait. I could go to the bathroom and maybe at that point the line would have died down. She could start performing and everyone would go back to their seats, leaving the line wide open just for me. I walked around the halls for a while not being able to find the bathroom. At this point it was just an empty hallway with windows smeared across the walls. The hall was a dead end. As I turned around to head back I saw the slightest blur out of the corner of my eye. I turned facing a window. Piper? She looked paranoid. Speed walking down the sidewalk towards the parking lot she turned her head over her shoulder every millisecond. I didn't think I was supposed to do anything. I wasn't going to run after her and ask her what she's doing. She looked too scared. I saw her an hour ago, she looked perfectly happy, confident and not nervous at all. Something much deeper than stage fright had to have happened.

I was ready for tonight's performance. To go out on stage and belt it all out, making my hometown proud. It was going to be special, with a performance of my new song no one has heard yet. I even made an appearance at the best place to hang out when I was a teenager. I guess that hasn't

changed, every teenager was still there. It started so great when I got to the performance center. My makeup took barely any time and it looked perfect. Hair was perfect. Warmed up my voice and I might even say it sounded perfect. Until something happened, similar to what I had experienced when I was seventeen.

I always thought the radio in my house was broken. That it was just so old and started to malfunction. I told my parents we needed a new one all the time. They always just brushed me off since they didn't experience it going crazy before. I guess at the time I just never pieced it together that it only malfunctioned when I was alone.

I was seventeen and home alone on a Friday night. My parents were at some fancy party and my 16 year old sister was at the movies with some friends of hers. So I decided that while I was alone I could practice my singing. My family always complained about hearing it all the time so why not practice it whenever they can't hear it at all. I turned on the radio and started singing to any song that came on. Although like always, it started to become static. I got so annoyed and tried powering the radio off and back on again. Usually it would work but for some reason, after a couple of seconds again, it would start to static. I tried pressing every button but nothing would work. Then it turned off, then back on. It sounded back to normal but then I realized, these aren't the right lyrics. They made no sense at all actually. I remember it saying, "Lights on music off on lights off bad good" or something along those lines. Then it started to get clearer and clearer. "Light on when music is off, lights off when music is on, be careful, last chance." It repeated this over and over to the tune of the song. Until I unplugged it. I guess not only did it unplug the radio. It also unplugged the lights.

I remembered what the song said, "lights off when music is on, be careful." I ran over to the light switches. I flicked them up and down yet they wouldn't do anything. I ran over to another light, nothing. Another. Nothing. Another. I didn't get to flick it up. I felt something. Something behind me. A breath. A cold, deep breath rolling across my neck. "Hi sugar I'm home!" My

mom pronounced as she walked through the garage door. The lights were back on as soon as she had turned the knob.

I never understood what happened. I guess it was a blessing I moved out a month later after graduating and I never saw that radio again. It must have been there tonight. Somewhere in that performance center was that old radio. I was about to get onto the stage and the lights even dimmed for me to walk onto it. Until they didn't undim. I heard the maintenance workers saying they weren't working. I heard it somewhere. The radio was connected to my ear piece. Saying the exact same thing. So I ran. I tore off my ear piece and ran straight out of the building. Who knows what would have happened if I didn't. As soon as I got out of there the lights went back on. I don't know who is doing this but that radio is dangerous. Trust me, I'm not just some crazy pop star.

I read the newspaper and watched the news today. After I went back from getting our waters they announced the concert to be canceled. People threw things they were so mad. The four of us left and I went back home. Now today, the next morning, I wanted answers. The news and media all said she had a personal emergency and she was incredibly sorry. But I saw her, why would she be paranoid if she was leaving for an emergency that didn't have anything to do with her concert. So I'm going to her. Call me nosy but something isn't right and I have a weird feeling that if I don't know what's happened it will happen again and won't end the same way.

She's still in town at the Inn and is leaving today at noon. I only have a couple of hours. I grasped my bike tightly and rode all the way to the other side of town. Luckily, she was right at the front of the Inn. "Piper!" I yelled out.

"Sorry no autographs right now! And if you're here about the concert please I am very sorry I didn't mean to-" I cut her off. "No! I just need to ask you some questions."

"Questions?"

"Yeah, questions..." She looked nervous like she wanted to leave immediately.

“Sorry if I’m taking up your time but I just saw you leave last night and you looked scared.”

She gave me a shocked look. “Oh! Don’t worry about it, I just had to leave for something very suddenly.”

“Like what?” I tried to put her on the spot because I could tell that she was keeping something.

“Okay, you’re a really smart girl and I see what you’re doing.” she said sternly. “This town has something. A weird being that was there when I was seventeen. It came back last night so I left. I could have saved you so please, no more questions.” She began to walk away.

“Wait!” I ran after her. “Just one more and I promise. Can I help in any way because you aren’t the only one who was, or is, in this town.”

She sighed, looked at me, and bent to where our noses were almost touching. “The radio, a black and red radio, if it malfunctions, get out. Music on means the lights will be off.” and so she left. Leaving me to wonder, what would have happened that night if she didn’t stop the radio, and what would happen if I ever were to find it.

(NO TITLE)

Jay'Lynn Levan, 13

A cold breeze blew through my hair. "I didn't mean to hurt her..." I said as I dropped the blood-covered knife on the floor. I gripped my short black hair through the grease. I attempted to scream, nothing came out though. I coughed for a minute then started vomiting. I was disgusted as to what I had just done. I walked towards a stream, I was in the woods, I bent down and put my hands in the cold water, washing the deep red blood off my hands. Once finished I walked out of the dark woods and to my house. Once inside I went upstairs to my bedroom. The smells of my mother's cooking filled my nose. It was upsetting knowing that I'd never hear my dogs barking early in the morning or get to feel her lick my face to wake me up.

"Dinner is ready!" I heard my mom yell. I walked down the stairs and sat at the dinner table. "Where's Coca?" my mom asked. I poked at the steamed broccoli, it didn't have the best smell.

"Toby?" my mom said. I responded with one word, that word alone was enough to make her scream. "Heaven." I mumbled.

My mom fell to the ground screaming and sobbing. My dad soon ran into the kitchen seconds later. "What's wrong!? What happened honey!?" He said in a concerned tone. My mom looked up with shaking hands, "Go to your room Toby!" she yelled at me. I got up and did what I was told to, I went to my room and stayed there in the dark, the only light being the streetlights. I had fallen asleep.

Later that night I was back at the woods, back to the same place I had killed the family dog Coca, but this time my mom was the one bleeding, on the ground, just like our dog once had been. I screamed, I screamed loud. My eyes began to cry like a stream and my nose ran. "I'm sorry! I didn't do this!" I yelled. I looked over to see another knife in my hands. The knife had so much blood on it I couldn't even see my reflection. I ran my fingers across the bloody knife. I knew the cops would be here any moment, I screamed loud enough

someone must've called them; so I sat and waited. Moments later I saw a flashlight, I assumed it was the cops but it was my dad. He was so scared he was frozen in place. I looked at my dad as he dropped his flashlight and fell to the floor.

“I didn't mean to hurt her...” I whispered.

THE TOWN

Cayman Unger, 13

This was supposed to be a fun vacation. But now we're heading to a hospital that seems to have appeared out of nowhere, in a town that has held us captive for weeks now. My wife limps beside me, the blood from her abdomen leaving a trail behind us.

"It's okay Gloria! We're gonna make it! You're okay!" I try to comfort her, but I don't know how much longer I can obtain the blood from pooling at the pit of her stomach. If I don't get her in fast, she'll be long gone.

The hospital stands alone. No parking lot, no people. Just a building. Field surrounds it, the wind blowing the wheat back and forth, adding an even more ominous feeling to the lonesome brick building.

After trudging our way through the field, we finally made it to the front doors. I'm practically dragging Gloria while she slips in and out of consciousness. I hope and pray that there are people inside. It feels like forever since I've seen people, and it probably has been.

I thrust the doors open, and the metal bangs against the white brick walls.

"IS ANYBODY HERE?" I scream. My eyes dart across the room. There sits a single nurse who seems to have just pulled herself up from a nap at her desk. I prop my wife's arm back onto my shoulder and hurry over. "My wife needs help! Right now! Hello?" The nurse's eyes seem dazed, glossed over. She was wearing a smile, no hints of distress or urgency anywhere on her face.

"Are you blind? My wife is dying! SHE NEEDS HELP!" I screamed at the nurse, expecting some sort of reaction to emerge from her. She only glances towards my wife before smiling back at me.

"Ok. Help will be with you shortly. Please take a seat and try to relax."

"Relax? What do you mean relax? She needs help now!"

"I understand sir, but our staff is busy." I take another look around the room. No one. My chest heaves and I feel the anger beginning to build up

inside me. My wife is losing blood. She's dying.

I lean over to the desk to the nurse and begin speaking in a low voice, "I need you to get my wife a doctor, NOW."

"Once they're done with the patient they are working with, they will attend to you. Now please sit down and try not to worry." She still seems undisturbed, happy even.

I face away and try to console my wife, knowing there's nothing else I can do. I lay her down on the marble floor, her head propped up in my lap. I try to shake her awake, try talking to her. I start speaking my final goodbyes, being sure to tell her how much I love her and how much better she's made my life. She spoke back to me at first, and even though her sentences didn't make much sense, I still teared up knowing this could be the last time I hear her voice.

I savored the sound of her, and I tried to put to memory the feeling of her warm skin. I pulled the hair away from her face and studied her features. Eventually, she stopped responding to anything I said.

I felt her fingers grow cold, I watched the light move out of her eyes. I saw the life drain from her body. My eyes swelled, and within half a second tears were running down my cheeks and splashing on Gloria's body below me. She still didn't move. Her blood began to pool around the both of us.

Suddenly, two doctors appeared.

"We're here for your wife." The shorter one spoke in a rehearsed tone.

"Well, you're too late," I choked out. My voice cracked and hoarse. It became hard to breathe. I had to focus on my breathing to keep me from completely losing it. "She's already gone." My eyes burned, my face felt hot.

"Well we're here to operate," he spoke. The tone in his voice never changed, never faltered. He sounded as if this were some cheap commercial for medicine.

"Didn't you hear me? SHE'S GONE! DEAD! DECEASED!" Silence followed. "WHY WONT YOU HEAR ME?" They stared back.

Without any warning they started towards my wife's corpse. I stared in

shock as they began lifting her, taking her back into the operating room.

“HEY, HEY PUT HER DOWN. PUT GLORIA DOWN! THAT’S MY WIFE!” I tore at their clothes, trying to hold them back. Despite their slim figures, they were unusually strong. One took Gloria in his arms while the other stayed back and kept me away from entering the back room.

He began to back me in front of the desk. I kept my arms behind me, feeling until I lifted something heavy. There was hardly anything on the desk, so I took the keyboard. I swung my arms back in front of me and hit it as hard as I could over his head. With the hit, he shuddered and held his head.

I took the chance as his defenses were down to run. I pulled open the doors and began running my way down the hall in an attempt to find the operating room. The hallway morphed as I ran inside, and new passages were opening up. What the heck? What is this place? I ran straight down the hallway, looking down every turn to see any sign of the doctor or my wife.

I paused, and heard footsteps travelling down one of the hallways. The sound pittered and pattered, resembling the sound of a million tiny feet careening their way towards me. Except they weren’t. Almost as soon as I noticed the sound, it disappeared. I turned down a hallway to my right and ran until I finally heard the sound once again.

Pitter patter pitter patter. . . I chased and chased, picturing Gloria’s lifeless body awaiting me in the doctor’s arms. I had to stop him. I began running down random hallways, twisting and turning with the walls. After an hour of running through this maze, I had to stop.

Gloria was the only thing I had in my mind. Her face, her jokes, her. She was everything to me. Her smile was enough to brighten my mood on a bad day, her curly hair was the perfect shade, and her personality was so unique and beautiful. She was perfect, and now she’s gone.

The cold cement hit my back as I slid down, down, down. The floor was wet and rigid. Glass was scattered all around me, and as I kicked and sobbed the glass moved around even more. Wait. There’s glass? I wiped my face and stood up. I walked farther down the hallway, trying to find the source of all

this glass. That's when the stench hit me.

I gagged and turned away with the feeling of vomit rising up inside me. I choked it down and continued through the mess of walls surrounding me. As I walked I noticed a faint glow from around one of the corners. I ran towards it, and once I got to the corner I tried to keep my breathing quiet and controlled. The glow, which now turned a freakish green color, came from a room I haven't seen before.

I checked the floor for any more glass, and realized it created a trail leading into the room. I made my way inside, each step becoming slower than the last. Cold sweats ran through me. My face was glazed, damp, stretched. I began to shake, my breaths became more shallow, I was being too loud. I know it. I have to stop. I have to leave. I can't do this.

All this, yet I'm still moving closer and closer to the mysterious door. Stop it! What are you doing? Turn around! No. My hand twisted around the knob. Click. I brace myself and push the door open. My face morphed into horror as I saw what was inside. I slowly backed away, fear etched deep inside me. I couldn't go in there, there was no way. I looked at all the dismembered bodies lying on tables and hanging from ropes. Creatures made from different body parts were floating in tubes spread all around the room.

Body parts hung from hooks like meat in a butcher shop. Was Gloria's body somewhere in here? Lying in pieces around the room like she was nothing but a toy to be assembled by these people? There was no way. I walked inside and began searching for any signs of her. There had to be a reason the maze led me here, even if it was a reason I didn't like.

Twenty minutes passed, but I still haven't seen any signs of her anywhere. ANY of her. So I turned around and began to exit. As I turned, I heard water swish around from one of the tubes. I tried to never look at the tubes during my time inside, but I guess now I had to face my fears.

I turned around, the glass cracking under my feet. A creature stands in front of me, around eight feet tall, with body parts sewn on and mismatched. There were arms sticking out of every side, multiple legs that hung at the base

of the creature, and the worst part. Faces. Faces of all the victims of this evil town sewn and patched onto every flat surface. There were no chests or stomachs, the entirety of this creature was faces, arms, and legs.

My insides flipped and a scream, loud and unnatural, escaped me. I turned and ran as fast as I could away from this freak of parts. I ran and ran, hearing the pitter patter of the legs following me. I realized that was the cause of the glass, this creature has been out the whole time. Waiting. This scared me even more, and I ran faster knowing my life was on the line. I could hear the legs catching up. I could feel the multiple hot breaths hitting my back. I turned a corner to my left, and I bright red light lit up the hallway. An exit sign! Arms tagged my shirt, legs kicked my feet, teeth bit my back. I stretched my arms out to push the door, but then I was suddenly pulled back. What seemed like a million arms were grabbing at me. I couldn't believe I was about to die in the hands of this creature.

Legs kicked my sides, hands grabbed my clothes, faces bit at my exposed flesh. I could hear my own skin tearing as teeth tore me apart piece by piece. It was like I was being skinned. Bruises covered my body, fingernails scratched and tore my flesh. I became a bloody mess.

As my skin disappeared from my body, and the monster slowly finished eating and gnawing at my skin, I began to lose feeling. Everything became numb. I looked at the exit, still emitting a bright red light. I missed my chance. I should never have gone back for Gloria, I mean she was already dead.

As I was about to pass on, I looked up one more time at the creature that killed me. The last thing I ever saw was my wife's sewn face crying over my dying body.

ORPHANAGE

Madelynn Parnell, 13

My eyes slowly open as I hear Anna scream.

“What is it this time, Anna?” Charlotte groans. I know she’s probably just having another one of those nightmares that she always is rambling about. I just think she wants attention but she’s convinced some of the younger girls that ghosts of past orphanage children still roam through the walls and rooms: “This time I actually spoke to one of the children, she was a small girl who was around nine years old. She told me that this place is dangerous,” she whispered. “This orphanage is safer than being on the streets homeless and alone,” one of the girls snapped.

“Why aren’t you girls dressed and ready for breakfast?” Sister Hargrove said with a frown. Every girl in the orphanage is scared of sister Hargrove but I think that she is a very sweet and calm lady. When my parents dropped me off at the orphanage, I was six at the time, and Ms Hargrove gave me her special necklace that she said would give me hope and good luck. Ever since then we have secretly been each others’ favorites of the orphanage.

All fifteen of us girls run downstairs for breakfast still in our nightgowns. When we sat down to eat one of the nuns walked up to Betty, “there is a lovely couple here that would like to meet you Betty.” We all know what’s happening, they’ve found her a home, something that we all had been waiting for until we gave up on hope. Betty smiled brightly and rushed upstairs to grab her stuff.

“Betty can’t leave now,” Lisa said, “she promised me that we would find homes at the same time.”

“Lisa can’t you just be happy for her?” Sarah said while rolling her eyes. Then all of the other girls started joining in on the conversation, some crying, others yelling at each other angrily.

“What do you think Stella? Should we be happy for her or should we cry like a baby over her leaving?” Sarah asked me, and before I could answer the nun told us to cut it out.

I sigh in relief that I didn't have to answer that question and pick at my food. Betty hurried downstairs and dropped her hairbrush and the nun told her to come along with her. I picked it up and decided to run it back to her. But when the nun was taking her she led her into a big room and shut the door. I decided to knock on the door but nobody answered so I went back into the kitchen.

When I got back into the kitchen the nun yelled at me for following them and took me upstairs to talk to her. I told her about how I was just returning Betty's hairbrush before she left. "Did you go in that room or see anything in there?" she sternly asked. "No I didn't go in there or anywhere near that room." I said. And without another word she dismissed me.

Why did she seem so concerned about that room? And why was she acting so odd? Then a sudden urge of curiosity came over me, I wanted to know what was in that room. All of the girls and I head outside for playtime when I notice the nun that took Betty to her parents was exiting a door that I had never noticed before, and she was covering a large sack in her hands. Then as I was staring, the nun caught me staring at her. Her eyes grow cold and dark and I immediately look away frighteningly. She walks off to the pond behind the shed hurriedly, and she returns without the bag. What was in that bag?, why would she dump it into the pond?, and where did that door lead to?

Ms Hargrove called us back inside for our daily chores. I got stuck with sweeping duty in all of the rooms except that one room that the nun had taken Betty in. I decided I was going to clean that room too, even though I was scared to disobey the nuns, especially Sister Hargrove. I start with cleaning our rooms and listening to Sarah talk about how annoying the chores that we have are. Then when no one is watching me, I scurry downstairs and to the door where I find it cracked open. I peek through the crack and I don't see or hear anyone so I slowly open the door and walk inside.

To my disappointment, the room was completely normal. Inside there's a couch, two chairs, a rug, a window, and a small bookshelf. I don't know what I had expected there to be, I had been nothing but foolish to meddle around.

As I turn back around to walk out of the room I hear a small sneeze come from underneath the couch. I lean down and look under the couch to find Anna laying down quietly, she crawls out from underneath and locks the door. “What are you doing here?” she snaps.

“Well first I would like to know what you are doing here,” I whispered back.

“Okay well you are going to think that I’m crazy but, there is a secret door in here that the nuns keep going in secretly and I want to figure out what is in it,” she says, “Why are you in here?”

“I was just curious to find out why the nuns won’t let us in here,” I say.

And then she tells me the whole story of why she was in here. The door on the side of the house, the sneaking around with bags, forbidding us to go in this room, all of those things were related to each other. So the both of us agreed to find that hidden door together and crack the secret. The two girls fumble around the room looking for buttons, leavers, and loose cobblestones in the wall that could open a door. I was digging through the bookshelf when all of a sudden I noticed something. One of the books was attached to something that was behind the wall. I push the book forward and the bookshelf slides over to reveal a dark hallway in front of me. Anna and I stand in awe but then slowly walk through. We huddle close and look to our sides until we see a small light at the end.

But then we hear a blood curdling scream coming from the end of the hallway where the small light is. We froze terrified and shook with fear. “That’s the scream that I heard in my dream” Anna trembles. But now I think we both know that the scream wasn’t from her dream, it was real. We run back to where the bookcase was but as soon as we get close to the secret door, it slams shut. I try to pull it open but the door doesn’t budge. “We have to figure out who is screaming.” Anna says.

“Are you mad?” I cry.

“We don’t have another option,” she whispers sharply.

We creep back down the hallway towards the light. We tiptoe quietly

down the long hall and I hear Anna sobbing. But we don't speak a word to each other. I soon hear a voice coming up behind us and I turn around to see a nun next to the bookshelf staring directly at us while holding a rope, and her expression is beyond dark. "Run," Anna whispers, and when we did I looked back to see the nun chasing after us. My heart is throbbing in what it feels like my head as the light comes into a better view.

Anna and I run up to the light to find another door in front of it and start trying to open it. But then my feet start to feel wet, I look down and scream to see blood coming out from underneath the door flowing onto my feet. The nun is getting closer so at this point we just want in the room no matter what the cost. Anna grabs the light from the walls and starts trying to break open the door. I help her and we start to hear a creak. We push it with all of our effort and open the door. The nun is in view but we slam the door shut and lock it. Anna and I turn around and our eyes bulge as we see Sister Hargrove herself standing in front of us with a rope, behind her Betty hanging with a rope surrounding her neck and dripping blood. Then my eyes scatter the room when I find the bodies of ten other girls all stabbed to death laying on the floor.

The girls here never got adopted, they were killed. Neither Anna or I can even scream or cry were in so much shock. I look in Sister Hargrove's eyes and she steps towards us with a blank expression. "You girls should have learned to sweep at your own door," she said raspily. I look over at Anna and see blood rushing from under her eyes, she falls over onto the ground and lies still, dead.

I look down at my hands to see them filled with blood as I cry. I'm stained red all over but have no idea how. Was this some dream or illusion? And what do I do? I scream as loud as I can but no one probably hears me. Sister Hargrove stares at me with no concern. "How could you?" I say softly but she doesn't reply, she just stares. Suddenly I find myself falling onto my knees, then on the ground, and my world goes bloody red.

NIGHTMARES

Sang Nu, 14

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK! The whole room trembles. I flinch at the loud sound while quickly dashing to the corner of the room farthest from the door. As I slowly slide down, the decaying wall pokes at my back. I softly lay my blistered feet on the crusty yellow carpet floor as it jabs at the soles of my feet. The humidity makes my matted brown hair stick to my face and my nightgown cling onto my body parts. While I calm myself down, my eyes nervously dash around the room. It's less like a room and more like a prison with a single window that lights up this 5 by 5 foot room. The walls are caving in from age and the smell of human sweat, decay and death fill the air surrounding me.

My legs start shaking uncontrollably and my heart beats rapidly. I try to distract myself because the thought of home makes my eyes swell with tears threatening to escape any second.

“Please open the door, Ruby!” The woman pleaded.

The sound of its voice sends shivers down my spine. I squeeze myself tighter, trying to hide myself in the shadows. My throat is dry from screaming, but there's no water to soothe it. My stomach rumbles angrily. I don't even remember the last time I ate. How long have I been here? “I just want to go home,” I whimper quietly.

I didn't realize I was crying until the heavy, hot, wet tears started trickling down my cheek. The salty droplets sting my cracked lips, then slide off my bruised chin. I quickly wipe my tears and snot with the sleeve of my nightgown. My so-called night gown is in shambles, about to fall apart from all of the damage of trying to escape.

A migraine starts hammering against my skull from all the crying. I get migraines a lot and taking a pill was the only way to ease the pain. This time the pill isn't here to help and this throbbing pain is making me lightheaded and tired. I realize it's suddenly quiet, too quiet for it to be a good thing. The silence is more deadly than the noise. With every passing second the nothingness gets

louder and louder. I slowly start standing up, but fall with a thud against the filthy carpet floor. With no food in my stomach, I have little energy to function with. Laying down on the carpet felt nice, but every time I close my eyes to sleep, I wake up from the thought of it hurting me. I try to think about the happy memories, my family's Thanksgiving dinner, my sleepover with Lia and Joy, my picnic date with Lucas and my track meets.

A foggy thought pops into my head, *maybe I should go check the door. I mean I'd rather die trying to escape*, I think to myself. I muster up some courage and silently stand up. I quickly brew up a plan, open the door and try to discreetly escape. I go on my tippy toes and start walking towards the door. Step by step, I get more dizzy and nauseous from fear and my heart beats faster and faster. I'm two feet away from the door. From the sliver of moonlight shining through the window, I can see how beaten up the wood was, barely hanging onto the hinges. I calm myself down with a breathing technique I learned at therapy, inhale, inhale, exhale. I reach for the door knob, but before I can reach for it, I hear a strange noise.

A tiny click, then BAM, the door is open. I let out a gasp as my body goes rigid from terror. I tried quickly to turn around and run away, but it was too late. The sharp blade is pressed against my throat. Adrenaline rushes throughout my body and droplets of sweat trickle down the sides of my temples. My mind is blank. I don't know what to do. I hurriedly make a plan B. Plead for my life until it lets its guard down, then run or take it down by hand if I have to.

"I can explain," the woman mumbles to herself.

"Please let me go, I won't tell anyone," I tried to plead.

I wake up after breaking out in a cold sweat. I blink my eyes twice to make sure it was just a mere nightmare. I guess the sleeping pills didn't work or I didn't take enough. Oh shoot! I quickly realized I forgot to check on Nancy, my little sister, before sleeping.

"Nancy!" I call out to my sister.

It's dead silent. I quickly take off my cover to go check on her, but somehow I'm already in her room. I gently put my feet down on the wooden floor, which creaks with every step I take. Eek! I accidentally step on something squishy. I can barely see in this pitch black room. I look down ready to grab whatever toy it was that I stepped on. I stumble around until I feel the light switch and turn it on with a click.

I stand there frozen, mouth wide open, emotions overflowing. The echoes of my heart beating slowly drills through my head. The silence swallows me whole. Oh no I couldn't have done this could I? I asked myself. Her body lays still on her white fluffy rug with red outlining her body. I picked up her cold, lifeless body. The kitchen knife is 4 ft away. I look at myself in her body length mirror in front of me. I'm covered in red. My sweaty night gown stained with blood. Nancy's precious blood.

"Please wake up Nancy, please!" I cry out shaking her dead body as if it would bring her back.

The boundary between reality and fantasy blurs in my head. My vision starts blurring as the room starts spinning. Right before I close my eyes, I hear something.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

THE SCARE OF A LIFETIME

Bryce Doty, 14

Welcome to Erie House!

This haunted house is not your ordinary haunted house, it will scare your shoes right off! Come inside and prepare for the fright of your life! The first tour starts at 5:30, and there will be a new one every 45 minutes! The final tour starts at 11:30! \$5 dollars per person.

“Seems like it’ll be a little cheesy,” Jhak said, “Cyren Vance, why would you do this to me?”

“Yeah well I couldn’t find anything else cheap and nearby,” I retorted, “It was *your* job to find a good haunted house, but nooo, you had to go to that stupid Halloween party that our school throws, and you didn’t even tell me you had to bail on our planning session!” Jhak mumbled something I didn’t quite catch and pushed open the door to the haunted house. The inside was decorated with fake spider webs hanging from the ceiling and walls, with pumpkins on every surface, most with cheery faces.

“Oh-no,” Jhak groaned, “This is going to be the lamest haunted house ever.” I gave him a look and told him to shut up. I noticed a chair and went to sit down and wait for the next tour. For Halloween, I had decided to be a knight, and after hearing what I was going to be, he decided to dress up as a king. Jhak always had to outdo me. He had a foam crown on top of his messy dark brown hair, and a royal blue robe that looked like a fancy bathrobe. All in all, he looked like the Burger King mascot, just without the goofy face.

I had found a relatively cheap suit of armor, sword and shield and all, on eBay, but what I didn’t realize was that it was made completely out of heavy metal, and the sword was real. I tried to return it to the seller but he wouldn’t let me. At least I would be well protected from the extremely dangerous and scary haunted house. As I was sitting down my sword scabbard caught in between my legs and I tried to move it but forgot that a shield was on the hand

I was using to correct, and somehow I ended up on the floor with my sword half out of the scabbard, one of my gauntlets off, and my shield on my lap. Great. Jhak was laughing uproariously and the one other person in the room who was dressed up like a vampire was snickering. Jhak's laughter was starting to get hysterical and he was on all fours on the floor.

"Shut up burger king," I said grumpily and slid my shield across the floor at him. I had slid it a little harder than I meant and it cracked into his wrists and his arms collapsed under him as he faceplanted into the shield. I let out a bark of laughter and Jhak got up, acting indignant. I ignored him and tried to untangle myself. After a few laborious minutes, with Jhak and the vampire snickering at my efforts the whole time, I was a knight with all his armor in the correct places even if his dignity wasn't. This time I was more careful sitting down, I set my shield down first and held my scabbard out of the way, and I was seated.

Right after I had situated myself a group of zombies, ghosts, vampires, avengers, and Power rangers entered the lobby.

"Was it *terrifying*?" Jhak asked, making the 'terrifying' sound spooky. A guy dressed up as Ant-man looked at the guide behind them, looked back at Jhak, and shook his head forlornly. As the previous group left the building, more pirates, mummies, members of the Justice League, and anything in between streamed into the lobby.

"You all ready for the scare of a lifetime?" The tour guide, with a nice suit on, asked excitedly. The little children yelled in delight. There were about 30 people total, half of them little kids and the rest were adults. There was one other kid our age, looking grumpy in a zombie costume.

"First you have to pay for admission!" The guide said, in an annoyingly happy voice.

Jhak rolled his eyes and handed ten bucks over to the guide.

"You are paying me back for that," Jhak whispered, "And if this sucks even more than I expect, you may have to pay me a little extra."

"But you are the one that wanted to go to a haunted house, and you are

the one that was *supposed* to choose where to go, so shouldn't it be *you* who would have to pay *me* since it is *your* fault?" I asked.

"Shut up."

By then almost everyone had paid for admission, and we could start the "Scare of our lives."

"Alright, a few rules before we start, no running, jumping, pushing, or roughhousing of any sort, and do not touch anything. You all ready!" The guide virtually shouted.

"YES!" the kids shouted in unison. The guide headed toward the door and told us to follow. Everyone followed him into the pitch-black doorway.

I couldn't see anything at all, and I couldn't hear anything either.

"Jhak you there?" I whispered. No response. Before I could say anything else or start to freak out there was a deep rumbling in my head. I tried to rub my head, but I found I couldn't move. Panic started to set in. I tried to yell but nothing happened. Then words started to reverberate through my head.

"Hello, puny humans," The words had no inflection, no accent, they were just in my head. And they were extremely loud.

"Ohoho, this will be fun. I rarely get to have any fun, my *siblings* tend to ruin it. I do love to, hmmm, *play* with your species. You humans are so, *entertaining*."

The words filled my head, I couldn't think, couldn't feel, could just hear the words.

"Here's how this will go, you people will do your best to entertain me, and to do this you will *survive*. Your species focuses on surviving so much when your lives are so short, so meaningless. Nevertheless, you will do your best. Whoever is the last one alive will win, hmmm, what is valuable to you people? Currency... Money... The dollar! Yes, I will give you one billion of those. A little incentive, not that you need it. Well, this better not take too long, else my *siblings* will put a stop to it. They think my fun is... *disturbing*. Well go on, entertain me..."

For who knows how long I couldn't think. The words still reverberated in

my head. They were too strong, too powerful. After a while, I came to myself. I was sitting on a cold stone floor, wrapped up in a ball. I had been rocking back and forth, and had I been whimpering? No matter, the only thing that concerned me was, WHAT THE HECK HAD JUST HAPPENED??? This was either a VERY good haunted house, or that had been a dream, or I was going crazy. There was no way that that was real. I forced myself to stop rocking and opened my eyes. At first, I couldn't see anything, but as my eyes started to adjust I saw the other members of the tour huddled in balls around me, some of them whimpering. Where was Jhak? I spotted him lying on his side curled up in a ball. I unrolled myself and scooted over to him on my butt.

“Jhak, Jhak wake up,” I whispered, shaking him.

“Cyren? What happened?” He said blearily. After a moment he sat bolt upright.

“That voice! Was that real?” he said almost hysterically.

“You heard it too?” I asked slowly. So it hadn't been a hallucination or a dream. By then the other people had started to wake up or shake themselves out of their stupors. A few of the kids were crying and hugging their parents. One kid dressed up as Jack Sparrow was staring lifelessly ahead while his dad tried to comfort him.

“Where are we?” Jhak asked. Then I took a look at our surroundings. We were in a room that seemed to have concrete walls and floor, but in some places, I couldn't see any walls, and I couldn't see what was above us. I noticed that there seemed to be a dark red light, but I couldn't see where it came from. Then the room started shaking. Everyone jumped to their feet and tried to steady themselves. Then black rods started falling from the sky. Almost everyone started screaming including me, and I watched as a black rod fell right on top of the guide as he was standing up. It went right through his skull, down the length of his body, and stuck into the floor like the rest of the rods. Everyone stood shocked for a moment then we all collectively screamed and scattered. It was a blur of running and panic for a few moments. After a little bit, the rods stopped falling but by then I was far away from where I had

started. I stopped running and took a look at my surroundings. I could only see a few feet in front of me, beyond that was a dark red haze. I couldn't see anyone.

"Jhak? Jhak where are you! Is anyone there?!" I yelled. Nothing. I was alone. I sank to my haunches, terrified and lonely. What was I going to do? What if I never found a way out of this? What if I died and never saw my family again? I thought of my older brother, who always took care of me, who was always willing to play Smash Bros when I was bored. And my parents, who were always taking me to fun events, and always caring. And the dog that I had to beg to get, to promise to take care of it perfectly. Would I ever see any of them again? Then my ankles started sinking into the floor.

I yelled and tried to pull them out, but they were stuck. I pounded the floor with my shield but it felt solid. But I was still sinking. Ever so slowly I sank. Something grabbed my foot. I tried to kick at it, but my foot wouldn't move. The thing that had grabbed me started pulling me down quickly. Within a few seconds, my head was almost to the floor. Before I went under I took a deep breath, although it probably wouldn't do any good. I slid through something slimy for a few moments, and then it felt like gravity flipped, and I was being pulled out of the ground by my ankle. I was covered in black goopy material, with lumps all throughout. Then I got a good look at one of the lumps. It was an eye. Then I realized that the slime wasn't black, it was a dark blood red. I screamed as hard as I could.

The thing that had a grip on my ankle turned me around. It was a dark black fog in a humanoid shape. Then it flickered. It looked to be a half-rotted corpse with its head partly cut off. I was too terrified to scream at this point. I writhed as hard as I could and kicked at the thing with my free foot, but it had no effect. I realized that somehow, my shield was still in my left hand. I swung it as hard as I could through the dead thing and it hissed and disappeared. Unfortunately, that left me upside down in mid-air with nothing to hold me up. I fell headfirst into the condensed blood and body parts goop. Why was this happening??? What was happening??? How???

There was no time to think over those impossible questions because I saw more of those things coming towards me. They ranged from light grey to dark black in color, and they randomly flickered to what seemed to be how they had looked after they had died. The darker their smoke was the worse condition their bodies were in. I tried backing away but my scabbard caught in between my legs and I stopped so I wouldn't trip. The sword. I had a sword. I was an idiot! I drew the blade and swung it back and forth in front of me. I backed up, careful not to trip on my scabbard. Anytime one of the things got close I swung my sword at it and it drew away. I kept backing up and suddenly hit something behind me with my ankle. One of the things, a deep shade of black, leaped at me and I fell back.

I landed on solid ground with an *oof*. I heard yells of startlement behind me and I jumped to my feet and spun around. There was a group of people in front of me, and in the middle of them was Jhak.

"Cyren? Is that you? Oh my gosh, you are alive! I was so worried! What happened to you?" I didn't pay attention to what he said and grabbed him in a giant bear hug.

"Ack gross! What's all over you?" He asked.

"Better not to ask," I replied, "Are you ok?"

"Well besides being completely terrified I would say yeah, I'm doing pretty good. I've just been wandering around for a while with these guys." He gestured to the people behind him, who were looking around warily. I noticed that the group included the zombie teenager, Jack Sparrow, and the vampire. There was also a kid dressed up as Harry Potter, and someone that looked to be his mom dressed up as Professor McGonagall.

"We need to find a way out of here, Jhak," I told him. Jhak's face grew grim as he said, "Cyren, the voice said that only one of us was..." His voice drifted off and I thought that he just didn't want to finish, but then I heard it. A high-pitched whining in my ears. The rest of the group who had been conversing quietly among themselves held their hands to their ears and looked around wildly. Harry Potter started crying and his mom tried to comfort him.

“What is that?” I yelled. Jhak just shook his head and mimicked everyone else, holding his hands to his ears and looking around. I felt a prickle on my neck as if someone was watching me, and I spun around. There was a fading image of what looked to be a statue of the devil. It was smiling evilly at us.

“Look!” I yelled, pointing at the statue. Everyone spun to look at it just as it faded away. The whining didn’t stop though, it just grew louder.

“Help!” I heard one of the little kids yell. I turned to see what had happened and saw the fading impression of the devil statue, and this time it had one of its hands on the shoulder of a fading Jack Sparrow kid.

“Everyone run!” Jhak yelled. And once again, like idiots, we all scattered in different directions. I had just been running for a few seconds when I tripped and fell. I looked up to see a mirror, and I saw a reflection of myself. My helmet was gone and there was red goo all over my armor, but my face was clean. I watched as my reflected face started to change, it became covered in warts and my nose looked disfigured. Then the deformed figure of me leaped out of the mirror.

I screamed and scrambled backward, away from the gross creature. I didn’t have my sword or my shield, but I did have some armor left luckily. The creature swiped at me with claws that came out of its hands like Wolverine. They scraped against my armor and left scratches, but I was unharmed. The one thing I had that even closely resembled a weapon was my scabbard. I ducked as the creature swiped at my head, and worked at my belt. As the creature swung towards my head again, I got the scabbard undone and swung it as hard as I could at the beast. I hit its arm that was coming towards me and it gave way under my blow easily. The arm was bent backward, but the creature didn’t even seem to feel it. This time I swung for the head. It hit with a crunch and the scabbard sank into the skull, yellow blood spurting out of the huge gash I had made. The beast took a step towards me, then another, and fell into a heap at my feet, yellow blood still gushing out of its skull. I threw up. After I had calmed myself down from the ordeal, I walked into the red fog,

searching for another human, or a way out. After what seemed like an eternity of wandering around in red hazy nothingness, I heard a voice.

"Hello? Is anyone out there? Cyren? Anybody?" It was Jhak's voice.

"Jhak! Jhak, I'm over here!" I yelled. I heard a whoop and then I heard footsteps coming towards me. I stayed where I was, and soon enough Jhak, the vampire, and zombie teenager emerged from the fog.

"Where are the other two?" I asked. Jhak just shook his head. "I know what the voice said, but we have to find a way out!" I said emphatically.

"Whatever," Jhak said, shaking his head wearily, "The best we can do right now is just wander around in this nothingness." And that's what we did, for hours. Multiple times we heard screams in the distance, and we ran to see what it was. A few times we found bodies of other people in our tour group, but we mostly found nothing. After a lifetime of aimless wandering and idle chatter, we arrived at a door. And of course, we went through said door. Inside was a mostly empty room, but on the far wall was a painting. The painting depicted a huge dark tree, and hanging from it was a noose. The painting seemed ominous to me.

"We shouldn't stay here," I said, quite reasonably.

"Nah it'll be fine," The zombie teenager, whose name was actually Trent, said. "We could rest here for a while, what harm could a painting do?"

Everyone else agreed with Trent, so we sat down against a wall and rested our aching feet. We just sat there in silence for a while, then Victor, the vampire, got up to study the painting. He stood in front of it just looking. Something about the painting just seemed...wrong.

"Victor," I said nervously, "I think you should stay away from the painting." He turned around to face me.

"Why, what harm could it do?" he asked. As those words were coming out of his mouth the painting started falling.

"Watch out!" I yelled just as the painting hit his head. But it didn't hit his head, it just kept going until it slapped against the floor. We all jumped to our feet and rushed over to the fallen painting. We lifted it up carefully and

stared. There Victor was, hanging from the noose.

"Oh my god... Victor..." Jhak said, shocked. I was speechless. We let the painting fall back to the ground, and Trent went over to a wall and just sat there.

"How could that happen?" I asked Jhak.

"How can any of this happen," He responded. We stood there in silence for a little while, until the silence was broken by Trent yelling.

"Help! Help!" He yelled, "Something's happening!" We spun around to face him as he tried to push himself up to his feet, but his hands dissolved into black dust.

"Argh!" He screamed. Jhak and I rushed over to him but there was nothing we could do to help. We watched as Trent slowly turned into black dust, yelling the whole time.

"We have to get out of here," I said urgently.

"Agreed," Jhak responded. We jumped to our feet and ran out the door. We kept running until we were too tired and had to stop. We stood with our hands on our knees panting. Jhak's head shot up as he covered his ears, panic in his eyes. I heard it too, a shrill whining. The devil statue appeared in front of us, head thrown back in a cackle, glee on its face.

"No!" Jhak yelled, pure terror in his voice. The image disappeared and reappeared behind Jhak, arm extended. Jhak faded away. In a daze of grief and terror, I stumbled over to where Jhak had disappeared. I just sat there, until I heard a voice booming in my head.

"Congratulations, you are the winner."

"Let me go!" I yelled.

"Let you go? Now, why would I do that? Oh yes, you thought that the survivor would get to live. Well, you are sorely mistaken. Goodbye."

HUNGRY

Nadiyah Velasquez, 13

I ran as fast as I could down the neighborhood, “I have to get away from that...thing.” I passed by a house and quickly went inside. It was empty. I looked around and spotted a family portrait of a little girl and her family. I then entered the living room which looked old fashioned with the chairs, couches, and tables covered in plastic to avoid dirt. The tv dirtied with dust covering it and the tv stand. I then went into the kitchen hearing my stomach demand food.

The kitchen was a decent size with the refrigerator to my right. I headed over to it and opened the refrigerator only to find a head that looked like... “No. I-it can’t be.” My eyes began to tear up as I stared in horror. I tried to stifle my cry as my chest began to hurt. I couldn’t breathe, because I knew as soon as I did I would cry. Once I took a breath I bawled my eyes out as I stared at my mother’s head on a platter. Her beautiful brown eyes were missing and it seemed she suffered a lot before death as her mouth was still open. I stared at my mother’s head again as a second round of tears began.

I soon calmed myself as I grabbed a knife from the cabinet. I grabbed her head and put it on the table as I cut a piece. I brought it to my mouth and gulped it down shuddering at the taste. They say ‘if you eat a part of a loved one, they’ll stay with you forever.’ I continued to take piece after piece from her. I don’t know why, but something sparked inside me. I gulped it down, yearning for *more*. Until, there was nothing left and I wasn’t satisfied yet, I held the knife (just in case) and went upstairs. The smell, the smell of death, I turned my head to a room. The smell seeping underneath the door, I cracked the door open and saw.

A rotten corpse, a child’s corpse. It smelt foul (*delicious*), I walked slowly to the body, bits of drool dripped out of my mouth as I neared the corpse. I knelt down at the kid’s corpse and brought out my knife. Cutting into the skin, and taking the piece and eating it. I continued to eat more and more

until I was satisfied. Overcome with guilt after what I'd done I walked out the house, knife in hand. Searching for another victim, I went through the neighborhood and picked a random house. It had a tree near the window, a wood porch as moths surrounded the porch light. I walked to the house, and went to the tree to grab a rock off the ground. I held it firmly in my left hand and threw it at the window. The window burst as the shattered glass fell and broke. I climbed through the window as my stomach began to growl, *hungry* again.

I went into the living room passing by an old tv and couch, I traveled up the stairs and went into each room. They were all empty except for the last door. I opened the door to see no one inside (or so I thought), I checked under the bed, nothing. I turned towards the closet and heard whimpering. I slowly walked to the closet and pulled it open to see a little girl.

She was on the phone, I could hear the operator say "stay on the line sweetie everything will be ok." I stared at the little girl as she stared back. I stared hungrily at her. I lunged at her, surprising her, she screamed and cried but it did not affect me. I bit into her skin and continued until the room became silent. I stood up and wiped the blood off my chin.

The girl had bite marks on her face, shoulders, and legs. I heard the front door burst open and someone saying "POLICE PUT YOUR HANDS UP!" The police ran up the stairs with flashlights as I stared at the door waiting. Once they opened the door I threw myself at the first officer, biting his neck. The officers looked in horror as one decided to shoot. He shot me in the chest 5 times, I fell down deciding to play dead. They picked up my body and brought me to the police car. Placing me in the backseat with handcuffs on. I knew this wouldn't stop me. Once we were on the road, I slowly opened my eyes and got up. I stared at the officer again and moved closer. I bit his neck as he yelled out. I continued until he went silent. I reached into his pockets for the key and freed myself. I got into the front seat and drove off, later pushing his body out of the running car. I guess the thing I was running from the whole time was *myself...*

DOLLHOUSE

Harini Senthil, 14

I startled awake out of my nightmare abruptly and grabbed the closest reflective surface to me. It happened to be a golden handheld mirror with gilded edges. “Aaaaa,” I shrieked while the face that stared back at me confirmed what I had imagined in the dream. My aquamarine irises were now replaced by a pair of expressionless glass eyes. My skin was oddly translucent like plastic. A sprinkling of tinted rouge dusted my cheeks. I looked like a distorted version of myself. I lifted my arm up to stretch and it felt like my body had shrunk to 1/5 of its size. My limbs felt weightless and my arms were three inches long. But if they were three inches long, then how does it look proportional to the rest of my body? *Were the events of my nightmare actually reality?* I wondered.

There was no logical explanation for my current state. No one just wakes up in the morning a fraction of the size they were yesterday! *If what I had imagined last night was real, then had I really turned into a doll.* No, it was too far-fetched and ridiculous. I was probably just hallucinating in the middle of the night. Still, I couldn’t shake the suspicion that something sinister was happening to me.

She stood beside my bed. The top of her head barely reached half of the height of the footboard. Her hazel glass eyes were glazed over as if she was in a trance. The rouge on her cheeks was intact without any sign of wear and tear. Her auburn ringlets were perfectly curled just as they were back then. Not a hair out of place. She still wore that old-fashioned blue gingham frock. She looked exactly as she was in my childhood memories. How did she move from the dollhouse in the attic to my bedroom? I wondered. *And what did she want from me now? She was murmuring strange phrases to herself like she wasn’t cognizant of my presence. I felt myself shrinking in size slowly like a balloon releasing air. I opened mouth to scream but no sound came out.*

I scrambled out of bed and examined my surroundings. My legs were wobbly and I felt like a toddler walking for the first time. I was still in my room

but it looked different and it was proportional to my height. It was decorated like my childhood bedroom but I had repainted the pink walls, removed the stuffed animals lining my bed, replaced the toy chest with a bookshelf, and placed the dollhouse in the attic last summer. I couldn't shake the feeling of *deja vu* that this room existed somewhere in my house. I racked my brain for answers and the only place I could think of was the dollhouse. It was an exact replica of how my house looked five years ago. I had gotten it as a birthday present from my parents and I loved the idea that it was a miniature version of my house. Yet now I was trapped in the same toy house that I had once adored. *But why would I even be in the dollhouse even if I had mysteriously gotten smaller because of a doll?*

Suddenly, I overheard the distinctive clicking of heels getting closer to my room. *Who could it be at this time? Was it her?* My door squeaked open and Lucy sauntered inside. I gasped, *I was the same height as her. How did I shrink to twelve inches tall?* "What happened to me? Why am I here?" I questioned her. She took a seat on the rocking chair and responded in a honeyed tone, "Hello, Amelia. It's been a long time since you played with me. I miss our little adventures."

She continued on in her monologue, "You abandoned the dollhouse and thought that I was just an imaginary friend that you could forget with the passing of childhood. Well, how do you think that made me feel?" I could tell Lucy was out for revenge. She had a tendency to hold grudges even when she was my imaginary friend when I was younger.

I remember why I left the dollhouse in the attic. It was fun having a doll that could talk for a while, but no one actually thought that Lucy could speak. It wasn't like I could bring her to my kindergarten class for a show-and-tell activity. She only ever communicated with me. My parents believed it was just a childhood fancy like and that would pass with time. And it did, partially because I thought it was more convenient that way to cast aside the old-fashioned dollhouse and pretend life was normal. And that I was just a typical child who didn't have a doll that talked.

“It’ll be like the good old days. You and me and life will be perfect in the dollhouse. I won’t be lonely anymore.” Lucy continued. I sighed, *She just didn’t understand that I had outgrown her childhood games.* And now she had the audacity to turn me into a doll so she’ll always have a playmate.

“I’m too old for playing with a doll like you, Lucy. And besides, you have to turn me back into a normal sized human sometime. I can’t just be twelve inches tall forever.” I said firmly. Lucy’s eyes twinkled with a mischievous spark and she remarked, “Who says I can’t leave you as a doll?”

I was frozen in shock; *Was I really going to spend the rest of my life confined as a doll? I would miss so many people, things, activities, and rites of passage in the future. And I had to play with Lucy forever. No, there was no way this could be true.*

“How did I even turn into a doll?” I asked Lucy because I needed some clarity on my current state. She rocked back and forth and answered, “You had a dream last night about shrinking into a doll, right.” I nodded and she added, “Well, let’s just say that dolls like me have the special ability to turn one person into a figurine. And they must be able to speak with that person. You happened to fit all of the criteria and I wanted you to get your retribution for leaving me.”

I contemplated everything that Lucy had told me. If all of it was true, then one thing still didn’t make sense. “Do you have the ability to change me back into a human?” I inquired while holding my breath. She grinned maniacally and replied, “I can transform you back into a regular-sized person but why would I want to do that? I would be stuck in the attic without anyone to keep me company.”

“Now let’s play together!” Lucy said enthusiastically. I was still thinking about how I was going to get back to my life but I nodded to act normal and keep up the facade. Lucy walked to the miniature toy chest and pulled out a small set of chess. *I just needed to find a way to convince her to make me normal again.* Lucy placed the marble chess set on the ground and sat cross-

legged beside it. She motioned for me to join her and she opened the box. I hesitated before sitting down on the wooden floor. *What if I could trick Lucy into altering me into a human through this game? Lucy was extremely competitive when it came to any board game. She was so confident in her chances of victory.* “Black or white,” Lucy asked. “White, and if I win you have to change me back into a normal person.” I replied. Lucy thought about it for a second and answered, “Deal, but if I win, you have to stay with me as a doll.”

The stakes were never higher before on a board with sixty-four squares. Any chance of going back to my life depended on it. I knew Lucy was a sore loser but at least she always played fair. I moved the pawn in front of my left knight forward. She advanced her knight. We went back and forth silently in the exposition of the chess game. I castled my king and rook on the queen’s side to protect the pieces from Lucy’s incoming bishop. My rook took out a pawn and approached her king to put him in check. Lucy frowned and said, “Looks like you’ve gotten a lot better since we played years ago.” I reminisced about how much I had changed since I left the dollhouse in the attic. *I had certainly become less immature and I stopped clinging to childish fantasies from my imagination. It looked like someone couldn’t say the same.*

“Why can’t you realize that people get older and outgrow many of their childhood hobbies? Dolls might always stay the same but we are constantly evolving and changing. I’m not the same person I was when I was six years old.” I expressed emphatically. Lucy retorted back, “That’s not an excuse for leaving your favorite doll behind in your childhood.” *She didn’t understand that her old playmate was a different person now.* I thought of a new strategy to persuade Lucy that I was not going to be her companion in the dollhouse.

“I’m not going to be as fun to play with anymore, Lucy. Staying a doll won’t be fun for me - or for you.” I stated. She moved her king out of check yet lost her queen in the process. I was one step closer to winning. Lucy said, “I don’t see that as a deterrent. You might change over time.” She knocked out my knight with her bishop yet her brows furrowed while attempting to find a

way to avoid losing the game. Both sides had a graveyard of fallen pawns beside the board. I was left with the king, the queen, a rook, a bishop, and a handful of pawns scattered around the board. Lucy had her king, a bishop, a knight, and three pawns remaining. It was clear who had the advantage.

We each took our alternating turns and anxiously awaited the ending of this high-stakes game. Finally, we were left with both our kings, my queen, her bishop, and my rook. I brought my queen diagonally forward directly threatening Lucy's king. My rook was strategically placed behind her king so there was absolutely nothing Lucy could do to circumvent the demise of her most important piece. "Checkmate!" I declared triumphantly.

Lucy gritted her teeth and stated, "Fine, I lost! But there's no guarantee that turning you into a normal sized person will even work because I haven't ever tried it before." I was relieved that I had some chance of returning to my life but apprehensive of the potential side effects of her plan.

"Go back to sleep and maybe this whole thing will work, but don't blame me if you wake up tomorrow and you shrink even more." Lucy instructed. I walked to my bed and tried to rest while ignoring the thoughts in my head of all the ways this could go wrong. *Lucy could be lying and not trying to change me back into a person.* Anything was possible at this point. I could hear Lucy reciting the lines of a poem but I was unable to make out the exact words. I slowly drifted off to sleep amid the nightmares in my head. *What would happen to me tomorrow?*

I startled awake out of my nightmare abruptly and grabbed the closest reflective surface to me. It happened to be a golden handheld mirror with gilded edges. I gasped loudly, *Guess what face stared back at me?*

LIMBO

Addison Baker, 12

When the boy opens his eyes, all he sees before he is blinded by the bright lights is white. He hears a voice telling him something, but he's too disoriented to tell what it's saying. He closes his eyes again, bringing his arm up to his face as a shield, and the voice stops. He listens for the sound of his family talking before he realizes that he's not lying in a bed. He cautiously opens his eyes, dark grey walls greeting him as he does.

He looks around and sees a train track in the middle of the building, coughing as the smell of moldy debris hits him. "Hello? Is there anybody there?" he calls out, bewilderment and a bit of panic in his voice. There's no response, which adds to his confusion. He slowly gets up from the ground, walking around the area.

He sees a small ticket station, and though it's visibly abandoned, he lets out a sigh of relief, quickly walking towards the small station to check where he is. He looks through the window, quickly realizing there's nothing there. Before he can walk away, however, he sees a streak of red in the reflection, which his attention is turned away from when he sees a flash of a face behind him. He turns around and calls to whoever it is, "Is there somebody there? Please, help me, I'm lost, I don't know where I am or how to get home."

"I can't help you. No one can." The matter of fact tone makes him flinch, even as he reminds himself that it's a lie. The whispering voice doesn't seem to come from any specific place, only increasing his sense of dread.

"Screaming is useless. No one can hear you, not that it would matter if they could. No one gets out of here." As the whisper continues, he flinches in panic and his back hits the window. The boy doesn't hear any sounds other than his own breathing, which is speeding up by the second.

"Who are you? What's going on?" the boy asks, fear making his body shake uncontrollably. He wishes desperately to just get out of here, to see his family and tell them he's okay.

“I’m you. I’m who you’re going to be.” There’s something that closely resembles manic in the voice, but it sounds entirely sure of itself as it laughs hysterically.

“What are you talking about? That’s not possible. Why didn’t you answer my other question? Why can’t you just let me go?” His only response is another laugh. His fingernails dig into his hands and he barely resists screaming.

“Not exactly, no. Of course not. But *everyone* turns out like me,” the whisper’s voice shows its twisted smile better than its face ever could. “And why would you be any different? You’re not special. There’s *nothing* special about you. You’re just some scared kid that failed.

“And, even if I could, why would I ever let you go? You’ve done nothing to deserve that. Nothing to deserve freedom, to deserve life. The only thing you’ve really done since you got here is sit here and feel sorry for yourself.”

“What do you mean, even if you could? Of course you can. You’re the only one here! You’re the only one keeping me here!” For a moment, the empty train station is filled with people. The previously vacant seats are filled with people, all sitting silently, staring at the train tracks or at the sign hanging on the wall, now filled with towns that hadn’t been there before.

The next moment, they’re all gone, as if they had only been there to prove the boy wrong. “Your questions aren’t going to be elucidated. There’s no point in asking them.”

The boy finally snaps as he realizes that if he just sits there and does nothing, he’s never going to get out. He jumps up and runs, rushing through the path between the tube walls and the train tracks. “You’re not going to escape. Running is useless. You had your chance, and you lost it. You’re not any better than the rest of us, you don’t get to leave.”

“Why do you keep saying I failed? When? When did I ever have a chance to save myself? How do I win!” His voice breaks at the end, portraying his desperation. Despite this, there’s no pity in the reply.

“You can’t. Not when it’s already game over.” He shivers, tears running down his face as he finally stops. “None of us can win anymore. That’s not

gonna change with you. When I said there was nothing special about you, I wasn't lying. You're trapped here, just like everyone else."

"So what, you're trapped here too? Then we can both leave! Just help me get out of here," He pleads. When there's no response, he knows that whoever's been talking to him isn't going to help. "At least show yourself."

"No," The voice sounds happy, for some reason, as if it was waiting for this. He hides the fear that that fact causes him, instead smirking as if he had been counting on this. "Not yet. There's no need to rush, that would only ruin my fun."

He keeps walking forward, and yells out, "Then how are you going to stop me, huh? You aren't! I can just leave, and if you won't show yourself, there's nothing you can do to stop me." The words only earn an unconcerned laugh, as if the response was expected. He breaks into a sprint, an intense anger overcoming all his other emotions.

The boy trips on a few pieces of glass, and falls onto the ground. A dull thud echoes through the entire station, but he can't hear it over the pounding in his head. As he catches a glimpse of his reflection, he finally sees it. There's a knife wound going through his neck.

As he steps back in shock, a hand is placed on his shoulder, pulling him up. He struggles against the grip, and the man says in a familiar voice, "Welcome to Limbo. Please take a seat and wait for your train."

DEATHLY ANTICIPATION

William Huckell, 13

It was replaying, replaying again, and again. The scene, that stagnant, yet momentous reality that caused a massive withdrawal within him, kept replaying, replaying. Perhaps he needed closure of the treacherous repetition and its contents. This luring inclination must have brought him here, to her grave, his mother's grave.

The air was wastefully pleasant in such a place, the cemetery. No one could appreciate it after all, when there was a presence that coldens the hearts of many - their loved ones dead.

Had it, the reality, sunk in for him? The death, he really, cautiously, pondered. The graves seemed to be staring into his memory. He was trying to close his mind off to the thoughts of his mother, it was just another grave, she was just another grave. She is just dead. Until he saw hers.

He remembered the trenches of disbelief when he was called over to the hospital by his mother, whom he hadn't seen, let alone contacted, in years. They weren't close anymore, after their destructive, at least what seemed to be then, conclusion. She caused him... Pain. It didn't matter the specifics, he didn't need to reconcile, he already came to terms with that years ago. Although she remained his mother, the title to him had diminished in importance since that day, even being dampened foolishly to a point of hatred. He came for the reason of responsibility only, grudgingly obliging to the being he tied to his past, something he wanted to leave there.

When coming to see his mother, he realized abruptly that he still cared about this person. Although their strife seemed unidentifiably small now, it still was present. He wished he could stay in this moment forever, he thought at the time, making sure that lost time was re-created and held precious. He ignorantly perceived in his mind, eternity, forgetting his own mortality in a state of bliss. Eventually the sense eroded and he seemed to wake up from those blessed minutes into something that was eerie. His mother had abruptly

stopped her usual demeanor, which felt, in retrospect, all too uncanny. He knew that his mother must not be well to be here, but the words she rasped out, "I am dying," rang, ricocheting violently inside his head with sheer shock. The time which was spent now was only a meager compensation for the inevitable loss that struck him in the heart. Doom. The ticking of a clock he could hear now, with seconds rattling off unmercifully, each one a reminder of something he couldn't forget. Coherent thoughts eluded him as the solemn chaos erupted in his head, going through the unfavorable outcomes, seeing the pain of himself slowly amplify over time, over and over, again, and again. He couldn't bear it. There needed to be a way against reality itself. Then, everything stopped. There was no peace, but simple acceptance that he bore shakily, still slightly fighting the truth of it all. His mother's condition seemed to be a normal, but still a heart wrenching, scenario of life. He understood his role, but there was no solace from that. No action he could do could stop the pain, no help could be given, he was hopeless, and soon, alone. Almost like an answer to a prayer, a power outage occurred, which gave him an unearthly option, a thought that made him numb. Yet he, in the end, was scared to face the reality that anyone else could have, that everyone else would have. The clock ticked continuously, the pain of time urging him forward, to enact the way out. That was something he couldn't refuse. Three ticks later, it had been done. He had killed his mother.

The lies have already been told by this time, he had already gotten away with his escape of anticipation's doom by replacing it with his quickened grief. It chilled him to acknowledge the action he had done, every thought consumed by the dark cloud of reality his own hands had executed. He was below every other man in quality, he had killed an innocent being to deprive his pain. Again, and again, he thought about who he was, and repulsed by the answer he found, he was no better than the coward he had become. The various attempts to mask his pain, to escape from it, only led to the certainty of the pain, of inevitable doom, over, and over. The answer didn't matter, it was decisively too much to bear. He was staring at the grave, decorated by little,

softly colored, innocent flowers, and in a lulled state, stabbed himself.

He lay there for a while until he realized that he was living in something that couldn't be real. The pain didn't subside, and he was left there, with no words to be said. He had been taken into this sub-reality, where he assumed he would remain suffering by the grave, which had intensified into a new index of torment. He wanted stoppage, closure, anything else. He begged again, and again...To the grave, to his mother, to anything that could listen, to the thing that sent him here. It then granted the wish.

He opened his eyes, which opened to the room where his mother lay. These were her final moments, and his reason for murder. He saw everything he was afraid of in those moments of mania. He, after she passed, sat there saddened by her death, wondering why he couldn't be the one laying in her place. He, deliberately trying to forget the turn of events, peered out the window, revealing an impossible view of the cemetery, along with his dead body, looking at him and then the grave. The young man wept as the regrets crept into him, assuring he would never feel peace again.

THE KFC CONSOLE

Nathaniel Kwon, 13

Noah and his father, Trace, were sneaking up to the scene of the crime. Trace, Noah's dad, was one of the developers of the KFC console.

"Nothing has been touched since Monday," said Noah.

"Good," his dad said. "That means that nothings been tampered with." They checked out the surrounding areas of the house.

"Okay, so there are two guards, one at the front and one at the back. We'll sneak through in the middle of them," said his father.

"Are you sure they won't see us?" Noah asked. "I don't think that will work. The guards aren't specially trained?"

"Nope, just regular security guards," his dad said.

"Alright, let's go then," Noah said reluctantly after some thought. When they ran through, the guard looked over at them with his flashlight. Quickly Noah and his dad dove behind some rocks as the light passed over them.

"Shhh," his dad whispered. "One slip up and we could be in jail for the rest of our lives."

"How come," Noah asked.

"Well, we're taking things from the scene of the crime for one," his father said, surprised his son didn't realize what they were doing was a little bit illegal.

"Oh," Noah said, sounding a little surprised. "I knew that."

"I don't doubt it," his father said, laughing a little bit. After about 10 minutes they finished climbing to the top of the roof.

"Wow," Noah said, "This must have been a lot of fun for Colonel Sanders."

"Let's just get the console and get out of here," his dad said. "We don't want to be around here too long."

"Alright! I found it over here dad," exclaimed Noah.

"Shhh," said his father right as the guards' spotlights were swung

around and pointed toward the roof. “Duck,” he exclaimed. The guards swung the lights around the roof area for 5 more minutes before assuming that no one was on the roof.

“Let’s get out of here before they find us,” his dad said.

“Alright, let’s go,” Noah said. Noah and his father snuck off the roof and into the woods surrounding the mansion, and drove the console down to where his dad worked, to try and figure out if the console had any part in the crime.

“I’m going to plug the console in to see its code and see its log,” his dad said. “You just hang around in the lounge or something.”

“Alright,” Noah replied with little enthusiasm. “I’ll go play some more chicken dash, or wing drop,” he added, groaning.

“I’ll tell you when I find something,” his father yelled down towards the lounge, waiting for a response but not getting one. Suddenly the console turned on, without any warning. The plug was in but no one pushed the button. The console started glowing red as Noah walked, bored, down the halls of the headquarters for the KFC consoles. “Just more chicken dash. I wish they had a PS5 or Xbox here instead of just fried wing buckets,” he thought aloud. He had just turned one of the consoles on when he heard his dad calling him to his work area. “I found it,” he yelled excitedly. “I found it!”

Noah came running down the hall looking for his dad.

“What is it,” Noah asked excitedly.

“It’s in the code,” his dad said. “A virus somehow got onto the console’s hard drive.”

“How is that possible,” Noah asked. “You can only play two games on it anyways. It’s kinda useless.”

“Someone must have somehow downloaded this virus from an external source, bypassing the console’s two game limit.”

“Wow. I don’t know what that means but it sounds kinda bad.” Noah said.

“And get this,” his dad added, “He was trying to play Fortnite, on the

KFC console.” The console was also glowing an unnatural red from its disk reader and logo. Fortnite, which was Noah’s favorite video game but even he knew that Fortnite on the KFC console wouldn’t be very fun because the graphics are horrible. All the games on the console were kind of old school inspired, they were all pixelated and easy to play.

“I guess when the console tried to play Fortnite the system overloaded and the disk eject shot out a blunt object crushing his skull. It bounced off Colonel Sanders’ head and back into the console, splattering blood everywhere.

“We should take it apart and try to find the object that killed him,” said Noah.

“That’s a great idea Noah. Good thinking,” his dad exclaimed.

The console was relatively simple. It only had a few pieces, the bucket, the main fryer, the secondary fryer, and the gizzard readermajigie. The bucket was the shell of the console. Their console had one of the slowest internet speeds in the world. The console was called one of the oldest pieces of technology to be in stock. They had searched the console for about an hour then Noah found something.

“Hey dad, I think I found something,” Noah yelled excitedly.

“What is it,” his dad asked.

“Look at it! I don’t believe it—!”

CLIFFS OF SELF DISCOVERY

Carson Housley, 13

Finally, the bonds broke, and in an instant, I was plummeting into the chasm below. But just as I thought the darkness of the abyss below consumed me, pain boiled in my stomach, as if I'd been hit in the stomach with a cannonball. My vision turned red, and my extremities turned to jello.

After the pain dulled and my vision cleared, I looked to see what I'd hit. A tree branch, probably 15 feet below the tree I was previously attached to, broke my fall. I clung to the branch, desperately trying to keep my grip. The rough tree bark worked its way into my hands, tearing at any skin that got in its path. However, I pushed through the pain and pulled myself over the tree branch, straddling it so I could get a better look at my surroundings.

Cliffs reached for the heavens above, seemingly grasping for the clouds in an attempt to bring back the Sun. A large crack split the wall into two separate sides, spanning roughly the length of a football field from one cliff to the other. To my right, an icy blue ocean with waves leaping out of the water like they were trying to escape something below. To my left, the canyon continued to run for miles, only coming to a stop at the base of a mountain range. Under different circumstances, the sheer vastness of the landscape would be enough to make me pass out. But now, my only thoughts were how I'd be able to get out of this place alive.

Suddenly I noticed a platform, no bigger than a queen-sized bed. I was about twenty feet above the ledge and ten feet out.

"That shouldn't be terrible," I said to myself. "Just tuck, roll, and pop." And with that thought, I said my prayers and jumped.

As I fell, I made sure to hit the ground at about a forty-five-degree angle, so that I could tuck into a ball and roll, hopefully preventing myself from breaking my legs. Within a matter of seconds, the ground came up to meet me. I tucked into a ball and rolled, sprawling onto the ledge, clinging for dear life. When I opened my eyes, I was looking over the edge into a dark

abyss, listening to the sound of water rushing below and small rocks tumbling over the edge of the ledge. I quickly scurried back, hitting my head against the wall behind me. My heart was pounding in my chest, blood roaring in my ears. When I examined my body to find any sign of broken bones, I found nothing but bruises, scratches, and a sore body.

Behind me, the wall rose about fifty feet into the air, with small ledges dotting the cliff face. The ledges themselves were all over the place like God had put handholds there just for me. Just for a moment, I prayed, thanking God for helping me get this far and asking him to guide me the rest of the way, seeing that I got home safely.

The sky had turned an evil shade of gray, with crows flying between the two trees I'd come from and things above. The desolate landscape which I had previously found breath-taking, was now becoming creepier and creepier with every passing minute. Finally, I took one last look behind me, I began my ascent, back into the world above.

I've always had a fear of heights, but climbing up the wall didn't scare me at all. All I wanted to figure out was how I got there. Winds that hadn't been here before, but at any exposed skin they could find. More than once, the wind ripped one of my hands-free of a handhold, almost flinging me down to the water below. About halfway up, a sharp pain starting at my right hand, coursed through my veins and into my chest where it felt like I ingested molten lava. I yelled and even cried whilst trying to maintain my breath and keep moving up. When I got to a ledge that was large enough for me to rest on, I took a break and looked at my hand; it had 2 puncture marks on the outside of my right hand near the pinky. They oozed a green goo that burned when I touched it. The skin around the puncture marks looked dead as if Jack Frost had unleashed terror upon my hand, trying to pry it from my body whilst I was still alive. I finally mustered the courage to push forward despite the pain.

Irritatingly, pebbles would fall into my eyes. My hands would fling in the air, grasping for some kind of a handhold. Finally, my flailing hand

grabbed something larger than any of the handholds I've grabbed before. Adrenaline filled my chest and I flung myself over the top of the wall.

I screamed with happiness running around the top like a toddler after receiving a sucker. I kissed the ground, threw dirt into the air, and cried. But when I opened my eyes, I saw something I wasn't expecting: bones littering the ground. Thousands of human skeletons create a sea of calcium white. Little centipede looking-things crawled all over the place with green ooze leaking from their mandibles. But the scariest thing was that I was sinking - slowly, but sinking. My feet were being absorbed by the ground with hands made of dirt and bone grasping at my legs. Suddenly, a force from behind grabbed me and threw me towards the cliff. When I got up and prepared to defend myself, a familiar voice spoke to me from the figure in front of me. The figure removed his facemask and hat and looked me straight in the eyes.

"You passed the test." the figure said. "Finally, another worthy human."

The person I was looking at was like I was looking in a mirror.

It was me...

HELPLESS

Kameron Tate, 14

I could hear her. Every time, her voice was just around the corner, but every time I turned around, she was never there. Just cold, dark emptiness with echoes of her voice. I needed to find her. My sister was trapped here too. Somewhere in the endless halls, my twin was trying to escape.

I started to jog. I needed to find my sister. She was all I had. We only had each other after our parents disappeared. Together, we could find a way out of this building.

I brushed my hair out of my face, silently wishing I had a hair tie to pull the long, dark strands into a ponytail. I knew Ana kept extra around her wrist, once I found her, she would lend me one.

We were both tall, and dark haired. We both had intelligent, brown eyes and a small smile that rarely showed itself. We were both fifteen years old, although I was twelve minutes older, and we both had nothing. Nothing but each other.

I began to pant. My breath left my body in clouds of warm air and came back into my lungs colder than before. I wasn't used to running this far and everything about this place made me sick. The air was frozen and empty, void of all life and cheerfulness. The hallways, the endless corridors with no escape, were long, narrow and dark. Each hallway was identical, each one, taunting me with whispers. They made the hair on the back of my neck stand straight. They gave me a prickly feeling that I was being followed.

The darkness was the worst. In each narrow corridor, there was nothing but one dim, blinking, lightbulb, barely illuminating the hands in front of my face. And the darkness carried echoes, monsters from your deepest nightmares. It knew me. It knew my greatest fear. It preyed on my despair. And at that moment, it was hunting my sister.

And me.

"I have to get out," I told myself, trying to stay calm. "I have to find

her.”

Suddenly, a scream pierced the cold air. I whirled around to see who it was because whoever screamed seemed to have been right behind me. The blood curdling shriek told of such pure terror as it filled my ears, drilling into my skull.

I recognized the voice with horror. It brought me back to all the times my sister had woken from a vicious nightmare, or yelped after dropping glassware. But this was worse. So much worse. This time, her screams were shrill and long, as if she were experiencing the worst, most excruciating pain. I could only imagine what was happening to her.

“ANA!” I screamed, running down the dark hall towards the noise.

“ANA!”

She continued to wail. I could hear her! She was close! She was choking on her sobs. The noise cut into my heart like a fiery-hot dagger. I had to get to her! I had to help her!

“ANA!!!”

She seemed to be calling out my name, desperately pleading for help. Whispers of her voice begging me to find her, to save her.

May. May please. Help me. MAY. Please!

I had started to cry at this point. The cold, wet, beads of water rolled down my cheeks like icy rain. I was running fast. My legs were pumping, my lungs rattling, and my eyes searching for a glimpse of my sister’s face.

“ANA!! I screamed through my tears, “ANA, WHERE ARE YOU?!”

What is happening to her? Why is she screaming? My thoughts got faster and faster until they were as blurry as my eyesight, clouded by tears and distress.

I began to hyperventilate as Ana’s screams continued to echo down the narrow corridors.

“ANA!” I yelled.

I couldn’t see. I couldn’t breathe. The only thing I could feel was my

heavy footsteps, and the only thing I could hear was my own sobs and my sister's terrorized shrieks.

I ran. I ran and ran for what felt like endless seconds, chasing my sister, who was just out of my grasp. I panicked. I could barely tell the difference between left and right as I sprinted around the identical hallways over and over again. I was so distraught, I hardly noticed that I had tripped and fallen until I was spread out flat on the cold, hard floor.

As I lifted my head, I realized that the screams had stopped. At first I was relieved, the shrieks would no longer haunt me as I desperately ran down the dark halls. But then I realized that with no sound from her, I had no way to know where my sister was, or if she was even alive. The silence was a painful relief. It was so hollow and empty, like a quiet minefield right before an explosion.

Suddenly, I felt a cold chill set inside me, turning my blood to ice. I slowed down and turned around. Then I saw it. It was the thing that had been following me. It was like a skeleton covered in a papery layer of skin. It was very tall, in a way that almost seemed stretched out. It was made of pure darkness, everything about it screamed fear and death. Its fingers were unnaturally long and each tipped with a sharp, grimy fingernail. Its face was horrifying. It seemed like it had no facial features except for two, black holes where its eyes should have been, and a long, thin line for a mouth, stretching in a wide, lipless smile. It turned my direction. Its gaze bored into my soul, making me shudder uncontrollably. I began to crawl backwards, hoping it would not follow me. It was covered in a thin, dark cloak that was decayed and in tatters. Its scalp was covered in thin strands of black hair that seemed to float in the cold air. It moved in a motion that made it seem like it was gliding across the floor. It gave off a revolting aroma, smelling bitter and foul like sour milk and rotting wood. I gagged and tried to breathe through my mouth but I could still taste the stench in the air. I wasn't exactly sure if it was making any noise. As it moved closer, I could hear a high pitched, piercing sound, like a tea kettle going off. Maybe it was just my ears ringing.

It seemed like it was frozen in time, but I knew it was not. It might have been motionless, but it was watching me. Hunting me.

Suddenly, Ana's howls began to fill my head again.

I immediately forgot about the creature as I scrambled to get off the floor.

"ANA!"

I pulled myself up and began to run again, but I only made it down a few identical hallways before anguish overtook me and I sank back down to the floor and began to weep.

My lungs took in the bitter, lifeless air as my chest heaved heavy sobs. This was awful. Somewhere, the one person I cared about more than anything was screaming as if she were dying a horrible, painful death, and all I could do was run down endless hallways. It was like some kind of torture experiment, and I was the a lab rat stuck in the maze, desperate to reach my sister.

I reached down my shirt and pulled out a necklace. It was small and simple. It was made of string and plastic beads. I remembered making it. My sister had a matching one. We made them on our last night as a whole family. The night before our parents disappeared.

When our parents vanished, I made a silent promise to them, and to myself, that I would protect my sister. That I would defend her with my life. I told myself that even if I didn't have my parents, I would always have Ana. She was smart and funny. She always knew when something was wrong, or when I was sad or upset. She was the one thing that kept me from breaking. Now *she* was the one who was breaking, and all I could do was listen. I was completely helpless.

When will it end? I asked myself. This was worse than any nightmare, more terrible than anything I could imagine. I wiped my eyes but the cold liquid kept pouring out of me. For a moment, I wondered if one could actually drown in their own tears. If so, this place would be the place to do it. I couldn't even think without the gloomy aura of the place seeping into my

soul, and my sister's screams haunting me.

I couldn't take it anymore. I was tortured. I was being played with, like a chess piece in a twisted game. This had to end. I needed out.

I gripped the necklace so hard, my knuckles turned white and my hand began to hurt. Ana's desperate screams surrounded me. I was trapped.

Trapped. Trapped. Trapped. My mind echoed over and over again. *No way out. No way out.*

I was shaking. I was like a wounded animal, my breathing and heart rate unstable. I couldn't do this anymore. Ana was yelling and screaming and wailing. She was *dying*.

And I was completely helpless.

Helpless. Helpless. Helpless. My mind whispered to me.

I clapped my hands over my ears and screamed.

-MEM

Cody Brown, 13

Bleary-eyed I went downstairs for breakfast, but my house was empty. The furniture was missing and the walls, once dyed in a pretty mix between orange and beige, were now painted pure white, so much that it almost hurt my eyes. I loomed around the rooms searching for anything. A reasoning as to what in the world was going on. I went to call the police, but my phone had no service. After deciding it would be best to leave, I slowly walked towards my front door, still half asleep, and tugged on the handle. The door refused to budge, not even a centimeter. Attempting to see what could be outside I gazed through the peephole. I could see the rest of my neighborhood still going about their normal lives. Nothing was out of the ordinary. It was so in tune with the usual it felt like I might have even been reliving the day.

Snapping back to the problem at hand. I conjured different ideas on how to get out of my predicament. Then it struck me, I could simply go through the windows at the front. Now steering myself near a guest room that had a large glass pane separating me from the outside world, the thought of who did this crossed my mind. But the thought was not given time to linger. As I arrived in the guest room, I found no windows. Not even a sign there had been one. I wasn't even sure if throughout my entire time roaming this place if I had ever seen a spec of dust.

Sweat beaded down my forehead as realization set in. There was no way out. Once again I was given no time to think, as a loud noise from upstairs woke me from my trance. I thought, "Was somebody else in the house?" I had to find out what was going on. I had to go upstairs, and confront whoever was there. As I strode to my destination, trying my best not to make any noise. I heard another set of footsteps resonate from the same area, it seemed as if they were trying to run away. Instantly I upped my pace to a sprint in an attempt to catch whoever or whatever was trying to flee.

Unfortunately, once I had finally made it to the second floor loft, the footsteps had dissipated and I could no longer track where they had gone. Taking time to catch my breath I looked through different rooms upstairs. Upon approaching the end of the hallway I noticed a stain in the flooring just outside a bathroom.

Tension spread itself through my body as I closed the distance between the bathroom and myself. Finally turning the corner to enter the space, just like everywhere else, nothing was there. At first glance at least. My bathroom mirror was still displayed against the wall, and on it was a message written in a red substance, *FORGET*. "What does that even mean?" I questioned. Was there something I had forgotten? And why was I not supposed to remember it. All thoughts that racked my mind. Being slightly disturbed by the form the message was sent in, I rubbed my right thumb against the mirror to discern what the substance was. A cold, disconcerting feeling covered my digit as I raised it to my nose to smell it. It was just paint...thank God.

Still, I had no idea who had written this message, and why they couldn't have stayed to help me. Once again trying to catch my breath, I relented and let my exhaustion overtake me as I slumped into a corner. I let my head rest on the cold floor and tried my best to nap to take my mind off of the scenario. When I awoke I was unsure as to how long I had slept. I ushered to check my alarm clock, but only then did I recall what events had transpired. The time I had spent in the unusual house slowly flooded back into my mind. Still rubbing my eyes, it took me a moment to realize it. This was not the white room I had fallen asleep in.

Once again my surroundings had changed around me. Trying my best to focus my eyes, I gazed around the new premises. It didn't take long for it to click to me that the place I now found myself occupying was my childhood home, or more likely a replica of it. At first I was concerned but I soon came to terms with these strange events that had been going on.

The lights above me were a dim yellow. It lit up the room just enough for me to see the majority of the space. I pushed myself off the brown carpet

and nearly hit my head on the ceiling. I somehow never realized how low down it was. Taking a few moments to absorb the nostalgia, I traced across the room. Looking through old books and a wardrobe, which had a baseball cap, which I had received from my father as a makeup birthday gift because he was late. He claimed it used to be owned by some famous player, but I never really bought that story. Having searched the old room for anything else that might have intrigued me I came upon nothing and promptly left the room.

Exploring the hallways of the small house didn't give me much to observe. Walking by the kitchen I noticed another door was next to the garage door in the laundry room. I examined the door, which appeared to be bolted shut. Whoever had done it clearly didn't want anybody to get in or out. Numerous other oddities popped out to me the more I laid eyes on the surface. The knob had been ripped off, and you could see through the other side.

I took this as an opportunity, and began looking for something to shine through the hole. I went through different drawers around the home but found nothing but miscellaneous items such as paint and paper. Finally while rummaging through a cabinet in the old room I discovered a flashlight. With this I walked back to the laundry room and crouched down onto the floor so I could position the flashlight against the empty space in the door. Clicking the old device on, partially surprised by the fact it still worked. I took a deep breath and stared down into the crevice whilst illuminating it with the light.

Once the light made its way through the hole it was still hard to see but I could make out what seemed to be a set of stairs leading downwards. Now this area had piqued my interest. Wanting to find out what was in the basement, I slammed against the door with my full body. My shallow attempt to break the locks was unsuccessful. I set my flashlight down and tried again, this time aiming more towards the actual locks itself. A cracking noise emerged from the door but it still did not budge. I raised my left foot, and

began stomping against the wood. Eventually splinters began to fly out and the door collapsed off of its hinges. Relocating the flashlight on the ground, I flashed it towards the stairs and began my descent. The stairs seemed to go on forever as I went deeper. The further I went the more familiar things became, but I can't explain why exactly... they just did.

Walking slowly now, my flashlight began to flicker. "Nononononono." I cried out loud panicking to myself. As the light source reached its final moments terror set in at the thought of being this far down in a basement with no way to see where I was going. Just before the light died, it showed before me the ground had finally arrived. The instant my foot made contact with the cement flooring the light diminished and I was left alone in the dark.

Trying my hardest to keep calm I took a gulp and went forward feeling along the walls. Everything around me was frigid. I hadn't realized because I was distracted by the seemingly never ending stairs, but the entire basement was ice cold. My skin flared with goosebumps as I began to shake. The layout of the freezing basement began to feel more and more like a maze as I progressed. Soon after the cold became apparent and multiple faint noises began trickling all around me. Some even sounded like harsh grunts, but I chalked it up to paranoia. Slowly my vision became better and better in the darkness, just about to the point where I could see a few things in front of me. My pace slowed dramatically as I got the sense I was going to freeze.

The faint noises swarmed my ears, stressing me even more. My heart was now pulsating faster than it ever had, and my chest clenched with fear. Each breath was a struggle due to the thin air and my unstable condition. The echoing sounds came followed by an even colder area of the basement I had just staggered into.

I was now struggling to stand upright as my shivering grew worse. I was now worrying that this could be my last few moments. I began to coarsely stumble in the direction opposite of the path I had originally taken, in a desperate attempt to find the stairs again. My survival instinct flourished with each step feeling more and more intense.

Climbing my way towards what felt like death, light suddenly pried itself into my vision, and the air around me warmed. Looking up to see what had hit me, I realized that the basement had transformed completely. I was now standing back on the stairs and the long maze I had ventured had disappeared. It was now replaced with a short staircase leading into a small room packed with old food wrappers and a tiny cot pushed into the corner. Upon closer inspection the walls had multiple markings in them.

An eerie feeling overcame me as I recalled that this was my real childhood room. “How could I have forgotten the suffering I had endured...?” I questioned angrily, this basement was the place I was forced to sleep in for 18 long years. Letting my eyes wander across the room I noticed the numerous ramen packages I had eaten near daily. The cot had holes in it from damage done to it by time, neither of my parents ever offered to replace it.

The walls had copious amounts of carvings scratched into them with a piece of a knife I had gotten my hands on when I managed to exit the basement while my parents were away, which was most often the case. The etchings read out poems I had strung together for myself to read from time to time. Even as an infant this was the room I resided in. I went from the feeling of relief of surviving the experience to indescribable anger that I had let myself fall into the illusion my parents had ever cared for me.

My stomach churned uncontrollably. I took two pained steps down the stairs, reconnecting with my past, and disconnecting with what I had last had for dinner. Vomit spewed from my body in disgust of reality. Tears ran down my cheeks as I recalled every single detail of my daily life. Despite being in shock, I managed to bring myself to my feet and left my room.

I walked to the room I had thought was mine and peered in. It was completely empty, the walls were painted a pure white. One thing stuck out to me though. A mirror was still hung on the wall. I knew what I had to do in that one instant. Rushing through the house I tried to remember if I had seen any paint. It clicked that I had found paint earlier while searching for a

light. I began to run towards the kitchen, but slowed myself trying not to make any sound. Reaching the cabinet I pulled it open and shuffled through its various contents. Pushing past old notepads I grabbed at the first paint bottle I found, its color a crimson red, and crept back to the bathroom. I began pouring the paint onto my index finger. I lifted my finger up to the glass and a single word came to my mind, *FORGET*. Having left my mark I bounced back to the other house connected to the bathroom, and shoved the door shut.



MY BARN

Ehliza Bird, 16

Haunted. Chilled. Horrified.

All words I have heard of before, but never really understood what they meant until now. There was no turning back, no undoing what I had done. Better to just keep pushing through, then.

The blood curdling scream sounded again, only it was closer this time. I hated the way my heart pounded intensely, ashamed at my lack of courage as my body shook in fear with each agonizing step through the dark. I, brave and daring fourteen year old Blake Frank, was genuinely terrified for the first time in my life.

I kept asking myself how I'd gotten here, how I'd been a fool enough to follow through with what started out as a simple dare. I remembered the looks that had been on my friends faces when I had accepted the dare. To go to the abandoned farm on Woodchesters Street at midnight. Go inside the empty barn, bring back some hay as evidence. It sounded so simple then. If only I had known the barn was a deathtrap for kids my age. That it was abandoned and no one went there for a reason.

It was only when I had walked through the tall wooden doors to this barn had I realized my mistake. I thought of the horrified expressions my friends wore as they watched from the street when the doors slammed magically shut behind me, trapping me inside, making me completely alone in the dark. Well, me and whoever was screaming.

The scream finally ended, lapsing the pitch black barn once more into a dreadful state of prickling silence. I kept one hand alongside the rough wooden wall of the barn, trying to find my way back to the doors I had entered through. The darkness was so thick I couldn't see my own feet in front of me, and I wondered if I was hopelessly lost, doomed to wander in this haunted barn for all eternity.

That's when the song started.

I froze, heart pounding as the eerie tune crept around every corner of the barn, seeping through to chill my very core. The words were impossible to unhear, and I was forced to listen as I was trapped in the darkness.

*“You’ve come to my barn, you’ve made it inside.
Doomed forever with me to abide.”*

The pitch rose higher and louder, seeming to grow more confidence with each sentence it sang.

*“One chance I will give for you to escape.
Fail and your life will be mine to overtake.”*

My breathing became more ragged as the fear of the meaning of the words were sinking in. A little tinkling noise, which reminded me of a broken music box, began to play in time with whoever was singing. The effect created a rattling terror that gripped my very soul with an icy vengeance.

*“One way in, another way out.
And that is what you, my prey, must find out.
Follow the tinkling, let it give you a clue,
Or your soul will be mine to make new.”*

As soon as the voice fell silent again, I didn’t waste a moment. I strained to hear the faint tinkling of the eerie music box, playing the same tune of the song over and over. The instructions had been clear; follow the tinkling of the music, or I’d be killed by whoever else was in here with me.

I turned to my right, only hesitating slightly before dropping my hand from off of the barn wall and running through the darkness to get to the tinkling of the music. I smacked into something solid, causing me to fall down with a sharp thump onto my back. I mumbled a groan, sitting up and rubbing my

painfully pulsing nose. I stood back up and carefully stretched an arm in front of me, touching what I felt was the barn wall. Now I was confused, and my mind became disoriented. I didn't remember the barn being that small from the outside. I had only run a couple of steps before smacking into another wall?

The ringing of the crackling music box seemed to be coming from my right side now. It was so close, I knew it. Cautiously, to avoid slamming my face into any more walls, I put my arms outstretched in front of me and began to walk toward the music. I didn't even pause when the voice began to sing the same tune, only this time with different words.

*“Further instruction you must be given,
For in the shadows am I hidden.
To keep your life, you must hurry.
Tic toc, or your body I will bury.”*

I tried to ignore the continuous flow of fear torturing me, and focus on finding the music. I hadn't run into any more walls which I took as a good sign, but neither did I seem to be getting any closer to the music. Frustrated, I let out a low growl and stopped walking, straining to hear. Even though I couldn't see anything anyways, I closed my eyes, hoping it would somehow help me hear better.

Only a second later I was sure the music was on my left. My eyes snapped open and I turned, my adrenaline fueling me to still be able to walk on my shaky legs. The music was louder now, I was certain.

I had taken only a few steps when my arms felt something out in front of me. I gripped what felt like a waist high stand of some sort. I let my hand trail along to the top until I found what I was looking for.

The music box. It was on this stand. I was touching it.

I was just beginning to wonder if I needed to do something more when the voice began to sing again.

*“The stand will give you your next clue,
It will show you what to do.”*

I immediately dropped to my knees and started feeling along the sides of the stand, trying to feel any sort of clue of what I needed to do next. My left hand slid over a slight bump on one side, and it took me a moment before I realized it was a switch. Without thinking I flipped the switch, and a slight clicking noise happened before the floor beneath me dropped without warning.

I screamed as I fell, a discomfoting echo of my voice ringing along the walls as I descended. It must've felt longer of a fall than it really was, because I landed safely on my side with only a slight pain in my elbow from impact. Jumping to my feet, I blinked several times as I saw the only source of light coming from down the hall I was now confined inside. It was dim, but it was a light; the only light I had seen since being here.

I ran without hesitation towards it, wanting to be anywhere but in the darkness. My arms pumped alongside my body as I ran faster than I ever had in my life, finally reaching this dim flicker of hope. It was as I had guessed, a lit stubby candle with wax oozing down its sides and bubbling into a pile at its base, before overflowing and creating waxy patterns on the dirt floor I stood on.

I tilted my head, trying to get a better look at this little mess. I had never seen wax do anything as funny as this before. Curious, I knelt down and saw it did indeed create a pattern; I had just not recognized what it was until now. It was an arrow, pointing to my right. I looked up and saw a closed wooden door. I blinked several times, bewildered I hadn't noticed it until now. That's when the singing began again, only this time unaccompanied by the tinkling of the music box. I stood up quickly, feeling scared but also hopeful. This could be the way out. I crept up towards the door, and in the dim light the candle gave I could see words scratched into the door.

One way in, another way out

I recognized those words as the ones the voice had sung in the beginning. This had to be the exit. I reached for the doorknob, barely aware I was holding my breath. Wrapping my hand around the handle, I swallowed thickly before swinging it open.

The disappointment was sharp as I saw it only opened up to another pitch black room. I walked inside ever so slowly, inching my way past the doorway until I was fully inside. My heart leapt out of my chest as the door slammed shut behind me by itself. I whirled around, shaking the doorknob to open it back up. My heart dropped to the bottom of my stomach.

It wouldn't budge.

Inhaling in a shaky breath, I willed myself to turn and face the room I had walked into. My hands curled into terrified fists as the voice started to sing an additional verse to its eerie song. The tune was more hollow and lifeless than ever, especially without the tinkling of the music box to accompany it.

*“One more step and you can go,
Something for you I have to show.
For surely the unseen is the scariest part,
The thing that most frightens a human's heart.”*

I peered into the blackness, trying to make out any shape or possible figure that could be in here with me. The voice was right; the unknown of what lay ahead was the most terrifying.

*“Three steps to the left, turn right then walk straight ahead.
And the answer to who I am to you alone will I lend.”*

I didn't think I wanted to find out who was speaking, who had said would kill me if I didn't hurry through the barn to find the exit. I stood still for several seconds, trying to think of something, anything else I could do or go then the directions the voice had sung out to me. Heart pounding, sweat dripping down

my forehead, and adrenaline rushing, I decided it was probably not a good idea to keep whoever it was waiting. After all, they had told me I was free to go if I did this last step.

I repeated the instructions in my head as I followed them. Three steps to the left. My feet led me as my mind whirled with fear at what I could possibly be about to see. Turn right. My body obeyed, my mind recoiled in terror. Now all I had to do was walk straight ahead.

And I did.

I only stopped when my outstretched hands in front of me hit a dead end. It didn't feel like a wall like the other times; instead my hands touched something cold, and hard. A light suddenly flickered on above my head, zapping in and out for a few terrifying seconds before it held its light fully. My eyes immediately shut, then blinked several times as they tried to adjust to the light.

I could now see that what I was touching in front of me was a large, glass mirror. Then the voice sang again, and I watched my eyes widened in fear.

*“You’ve come to my barn, you’ve made it inside.
And now you can see why with me you have to forever abide.”*

It wasn't the words that terrified me. Neither was it the fact that I had to stay here forever, as the voice had said. What made my blood run cold and my heart seem to even stop, was the fact that those were my lips that were moving. That was my voice that was singing. Those were my eyes that were glittering with madness. I only needed a mirror to see.

Somewhere above me, I heard the barn doors creak open, and voices yell inside. They were yelling my name, Blake Frank. It wasn't the fact that my friends had come to search for me that made my lips curve into a smile. Neither was it the fact that it meant I wasn't trapped anymore, since they had managed to open the barn doors.

I turned away from the mirror, singing as I made my way down the pitch

black hall.

*“You’ve come to my barn, you’ve made it inside.
Doomed forever with me to abide.”*

GET DECKED

Leah Rule, 15

His head wobbled on his hand impatiently. The clock ticked rhythmically, his eyes traveling around it with every movement. Five more minutes before the class erupted with sounds of zippers and fabric clashing together as people put their backpacks on. The teacher droned on and on in the background with the false notion that the class was paying attention. Everyone was too focused on going home, back to their scheduled screen time and naps. Shoes clacked on the floor anxiously, signaling the eagerness to sprint out of the classroom onto the bus.

He looked back at the clock to see that only a minute had passed. School seemed like its own kind of endless purgatory. People sat on the edges of their seats waiting for that screeching sound of the bell to violate their eardrums. No matter how unpleasant the sound was, it was a relief. A cry of freedom. This time of the day was always so bittersweet to Ian. The act of waiting to be released is what made it so bitter, but what waited for him afterwards made it worth it. The moment he saw her would make up for all of the dread. Her presence alone was enough to turn his mood from exhausted to downright thrilled. She made him whole.

The bell rang at last and Ian leapt out of the door like a gazelle, hitting the top of the doorframe with his palm as a desperate attempt to seem impressive. He ran to his locker and dragged his backpack out as fast as he could, getting the strap stuck on the corner in the process. Once he disconnected the strap, he was off to the bike racks. His heart pounded in his chest when he remembered he would finally be able to see her. Hallie and him didn't have any classes together so the only interactions they got to have took place outside of school. The door was wide open and students spilled out of the doorway like a herd of brainwashed sheep. He pushed his way through the best he could, trying to get out into the dry summer air.

Warmth washed across his face as he made it out. Arizona is always hot

no matter the season. It was spring and unlike most states, there wasn't a lot of green during this season. The climate is too dry to grow anything. They lived in the uneventful town of Winslow. Hallie always said "There's nothing to do here except die slowly of a heatstroke," she has such a way with words. As he approached the bike racks, Hallie looked at him with annoyance. Ian didn't care, he was just happy to see her. He trailed his eyes over her, admiring her looks. Hallie has brown, curly hair that lies just below her shoulders. Her face is spotted with silver piercings. She's wearing an oversized Metallica shirt and black distressed jeans. A red flannel is tied loosely around her waist, this matched her signature red converse. She was carrying her graffitied skateboard by her side. Her nails were painted in chipped red and black nail polish. She wore stacks of rings on each of her fingers. Above those, a small tattoo of a spiderweb stretched across her knuckles. Ian remembered the night her parents found out about it and kicked her out for the night. That was the first time they got to spend the night together. He thought of the moment fondly.

Ian is tall and somewhat muscular. He has a bleached buzz cut with a faded purple heart right above his ear. He has large violet gauges in his earlobes that make his head seem bigger than it actually is. His nose is pierced along with his left eyebrow. He has black eyes that cause the appearance of a hole where his iris should be. He's wearing a large graphic-tee with some band he doesn't really even listen to on the front of it. He wears the same tight black shorts to school almost everyday. His long, black boots scrape across the ground with every step he takes. Hallie always compares him to a great dane puppy who hasn't quite grown into his paws. Ian usually laughs at the remark but deep down it hurts his feelings a little.

A smile flashed across Ian's face as he walked over to Hallie, hoping to get one back. The gesture fell flat and his grin dropped slightly. Sometimes it seemed like Hallie didn't really like him. They always met at the same exact spot everyday after school, always had the same greeting.

"What's up," Ian said cheerfully as he reached down to unlock the small chain that looped around his bike.

“Nothin’ much,” Hallie said dryly, “Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, just give me a second,” he said with strain in his tone as he tried to yank the key out of the padlock. He quickly hopped onto his bike and Hallie dropped her skateboard down at the same time.

“Do you wanna go to the park again today? We can stop by the entrance and grab some snow cones. I brought some extra cash if you need me to pay,” he bellowed, hoping she could hear him over the rattling of his bike chains and the subtle *clunk* of her wheels hopping over the cracks in the sidewalk.

“No thanks, I have a better idea,” she looked back at him with an evil grin, “Just follow me and don’t ask too many questions or I’ll push you into oncoming traffic,” she giggled to herself and used her leg to accelerate down the pathway. This is the side of Hallie that Ian fell in love with. She always found something to joke about. They had been friends since third grade and his feelings were just as strong as then, if not stronger. Her smile was the first thing that he noticed and it is sure to be the last. Her teeth were perfectly straight and a blinding white. Even after she got her smiley piercing, her teeth were still shinier than the metal in her gums. The corners of her mouth ended with deep dimples. Despite her being sixteen, the dents in her cheeks gave her a permanent look of youth. She’d often get mistaken for being in elementary when she was in middle school. That was when she got her first piercing as an effort to correct that error.

Ian still regrets that he never told Hallie how he felt after all of these years and now that he has the confidence to do so, he thinks it’s too late. She had made it all too clear that his feelings were unrequited. Even though he had every opportunity to move on, he found himself still holding onto hope that she would tell him she felt the same way. Ian would follow her through anything and oftentimes he did. Hallie was what most people would call an adrenaline junkie. She craved any and every kind of danger. Whether that be bungee-jumping, climbing up a water tower, or egging the principal’s house. No matter how hard Ian tried to prevent it, she would wind up finding something reckless to do. Ian was pretty much the exact opposite of that and in all his seventeen

years he could never imagine himself putting himself in danger without a reason. Of course that reason was always Hallie. In the beginning, she would practically drag him behind her on any adventure she decided to go on. After a while though, he finally started going just to make sure she didn't get herself killed. It finally occurred to him that he was most likely following her into another life-threatening task.

They had been riding for almost an hour when Hallie stopped suddenly and picked up her board.

"Here we are," she said, stretching out her arms and smiling at him goofily. He looked around to see where they were. Right behind Hallie was an overgrown pathway that looked like it hadn't been used in years. He leaned over slightly and peered behind her shoulder. There was a barbed wire fence with a wide, orange sign that read "PRIVATE PROPERTY: NO TRESPASSING."

"Where are we?" he said suspiciously. He could tell this wasn't just going to be risky, it looked like it was going to be illegal.

"Aight, so you remember when we used to binge those videos of people exploring abandoned buildings?" she said, biting her lower lip.

"Yeahhh."

"Well...it turns out we have our own little version of that," she set her backpack down and unzipped it. He waited there impatiently and when she stood back up she was holding a pair of shears bigger than her torso.

"What is that for?" he walked back slightly, a little intimidated by the look of insanity on Hallie's face.

"We're going inside," she responded, her eyes glimmered with malicious intent.

"Inside where?"

She spun around like an eager child on their birthday, "Welcome to Wenslow Grace Clinic!" Her eyes bulged with madness and pure joy. She ran to the fence and started cutting it to make an entrance. In a few seconds she was crawling through the small hole she created.

"Are you coming or not?"

He hesitated hoping someone would call him or something so he had an excuse to leave. Usually he would've followed her immediately but something about this place made his skin crawl. "I don't think this is a good idea Hal, why don't we just go to the skatepark instead?"

"Come on Ian, don't be such a buzzkill. Nothings gonna happen." she stated, trying to persuade him.

Normally, that was all it took before Ian gave in, but something about this wasn't normal. It felt like even if he wanted to go in, he wouldn't be able to. His body would do everything to prevent that from happening. He stood there silently trying to fight the urge to go with her. He knew something was off about this place.

"Ian, get over here before I leave without you," she announced, her voice rising significantly. He could tell she was furious with him.

"I-I can't, I'm sorry," he said regretfully.

She sighed, "Fine, but if something happens to me cause I didn't have a big, strong man to protect me, I'm blaming you," she joked.

Something occurred to him. Hallie may have been joking but he had a sneaking suspicion that something bad actually was going to happen. Hallie had already started walking away. He groaned before chasing after her. "Hallie, wait up," he yelled.

They reached the front door in no time. The closer they got to it, the more Ian's stomach started to turn. Hallie lifted the shears up to clip the chain holding the doors closed. Ian pushed through the entrance and the smell of asbestos and dust rushed into his lungs causing him to choke. Hallie laughed at him and slapped him on the back so hard he thought she had bruised one of his ribs. If breathing didn't already hurt before that, it sure would now. Hallie skipped inside and got her phone out to use as a flashlight. Ian followed behind her, jumping at every sound that he heard. He looked around the large building, taking it all in. They were in the lobby of the hospital. The front desk was littered with stained papers. The ground was covered with cracks in the tile and the ceiling was filled with bubbles caused from water damage. Far in

the background was the sound of water dripping and a nest of baby birds calling for food. All of the windows were cracked, some of them were fully broken.

They walked down through the eerie ICU hallway. Hallie had flipped the light switch and to their surprise it turned on. The corridor was blinded with disgusting fluorescent light. Most of the bulbs were burnt out and the ones that weren't flickered violently. They walked down the hall, peering into the messy sickrooms. Some of the mattresses were gone along with the sheets. Each room was covered in a sea of paperwork. The nurses station looked like it had just gotten hit by a tornado. Out of the corner of his eye, Ian could've sworn there was a dark figure staring at the two of them, but when he went back to look at it, it was nowhere in sight. After that, Ian knew they had to leave. He ran to Hallie and grabbed her by the shoulder, startling her a little bit.

"Hallie, we need to go," he whispered, "Now."

"What are you talking about? We just got here," she spoke like he was the one being unreasonable.

"I don't know, but something about this place doesn't feel right." His pupils had dilated and his voice was shaking.

"You can go ahead and leave, but I'm sta—,"

A loud *bang* sounded in the lobby, followed by heavy footsteps. Someone else was there. They sprinted down the hallway. Hallie ran with the thought that it was just the police about to bust them for trespassing. Ian ran with the hope that that was all it was. They turned every corner hoping to find a way out, the sound of footsteps following far behind them. Eventually, they ended up in the surgical ward. The dark corridor ended with a dead end, there was no place to go. They went to the first door so they could hide but it was locked. They repeated this action as they moved farther down the hall. Every door was locked except for the one at the very end. The sign on the side of the doorframe read "OR 5." They crashed through the door relieved to be hidden from whatever was chasing them.

They stood there gasping for air, heads against the door. Ian turned around with his eyes closed as he tried to calm down. He told himself to breathe. When he inhaled, a rotten smell penetrated his nostrils. His eyes shot open and as soon as he saw what was in the room he started gagging. Hallie turned around to see what was wrong and when she saw it, she stood there in shock. Three sliced open bodies were hanging from the ceiling like pigs in a butchery. The walls were covered in Visqueen and blood. Underneath each body was a large storage bucket filled with gallons of blood. One of the corpses was already decomposing. Her skin was green and flaking off into the bucket of blood. There were buckets of organs along the walls. In the center of the figures was a metal table covered in surgical tools. Ian leaned over and threw up on the floor while Hallie stood in the same place with a look of pure terror on her face.

Ian finally stood up and opened the door, dragging Hallie behind him. The person who was chasing them was nowhere to be seen. They ran straight for the doors as fast as they could. They ran down every path, trying to find their way back to the lobby. They reached a hallway that branched into a T. Just when they were about to turn right they saw a figure at the end of the corridor. It was too dark to see any distinguishable features but they could tell it was a man. They were about twenty feet away from him and before they got the chance to run away he was barreling towards them at full speed. He crashed into Hallie like a bull. Hallie panted on the ground after getting the wind knocked out of her. She let out a raspy scream and squirmed underneath the man. Ian was able to see what he looked like up close. His eyes were bulging out of his skull and blood dripped from his mouth. He looked and sounded like a rabid beast. He used his hands to hold Hallie's shoulders down. He imitated every one of Hallie's screams. Ian pulled himself out of his fear and grabbed Hallie's skateboard. He bashed it over the stranger's head. The man fell over onto the floor and Ian violently yanked Hallie up. They began to run and in the background they could hear the man howling with laughter.

They hurried to the exit but kept getting lost in the maze-like building.

They stopped at the end of a hallway when the familiar stomps of the man that attacked them could be heard behind. They dashed to the left and popped out into the lobby. A temporary feeling of victory washed over the both of them. They turned around to see the crazed man bursting through the doorway straight towards them. They sped up and when they tried to open the door it was locked.

“No,” Hallie screamed at the top of her lungs. The man tackled Hallie to the ground once more and elbowed her in the face. She gurgled for help as her mouth filled with blood. The only thing Ian could bring himself to do was tell him to stop. Hallie turned over onto her stomach and attempted to crawl away. She looked up at Ian with tears in her eyes. He started walking away towards a broken window. The man pulled Hallie by her hair and pulled a knife out of his pocket. Ian looked up to see that he was smiling at him.

“*Ian, help me!*” Hallie shrieked. Her teeth were broken and a mixture of blood and saliva was traveling down her chin. He noticed that her smiley piercing had been ripped out and was laying next to the man’s foot. He hadn’t realized that he was crying until he noticed the look of false pity on Hallie’s face. The man brought his knife down to her neck and pressed down on her throat.

“I’m so sorry,” Ian whispered and just like that he hopped out of the open window. He heard Hallie’s screams cut off suddenly and knew it had happened. She was dead. He ran back to the barbed wire fence and hopped on his bike. Tears were filling his eyes and his breath was shaking. He reached for his phone and tried to dial 911. At that moment, a figure of Hallie with her throat sliced open appeared in the middle of the empty road. She opened her mouth and out of it came the words, “*What did you do?*” Ian swerved trying to avoid her and went crashing into a ditch. He sat in the ditch completely dazed. Those words spun around in his head. What *did* he do?

DO AS SHE SAYS

Abby McLean, 17

I rotate in the small room, which smells like the fall-scented Febreze Grandma insists on using to combat the smell of old people, and look for what she was directing me towards.

“Grandma, where’d you get this one?”

“Closer dear,” she says and I step closer to her bed with the china doll in hand, its hair and clothes frizzy and rumpled from being tossed in boxes from houses and back in again without much care until it finally found its place on the sill in this nursing home room.

“Oh, but of course,” Grandma starts after a squinting pause, “that one was one of my mother’s and possibly my grandmother’s too. I’m not sure how I lost it for so long. It was one of the first in my collection.”

She stops talking and closes her eyes as if saying all that took much out of her.

“Lyla,” she starts again suddenly and louder than before, leaning slightly forward, “you should take it, I don’t need it, it sits there gathering dust and you know how much I hate dust. I’d rather you have it than me now.”

”Really?” I’ve never been interested in dolls much before, and not nearly enough to collect them like my grandmother but this one grabbed my attention. The idea that it could have once belonged to my great-grandmother interested me more than owning the doll itself.

“Alright,” I tuck it under my arm, “Thanks Grandma.”

She smiles, leaning back before almost springing forward in her bed again. “What are you going to name her?” she asks hurriedly, her words blending together, no time for pauses.

“A name?” I, on the other hand, take my time, holding the doll out at arm’s length, noting for the first time its heavily blushed cheeks and black eyes, open permanently, frighteningly wide.

“I don’t know...” I trail off, picking a name sounded oddly important to

her and I can't see why. "Do I need to pick a name now?"

"Well, I supposed not, but pick something soon," she says, settling back down as I tuck the doll back under my arm.

A sound, *click, click, click*, echoes down the empty hall, and that's my cue to run to my grandmother's bedside and give her a hug. She gives me a sharp kiss on the cheek just as my mother rounds the corner and pops a big bubble with her gum. I melt into my grandma's bed for a second longer before saying hello to my mom.

"Ready to go?" She walked up to us, placing a momentary hand on her mother-in-law's forehead. "Are you doing all right Jeaneene?" She bent over the bed, smiling and smacking. Grandma smiled in her face but grimaced in the whiff of fruity air my mother left behind.

"Yes, I am doing all right, and you?"

"Oh you know, day by day." she sighed, relaxing her posture into a slight slouch.

My mother's job at the hospital makes her ache, she has been a nurse practitioner since I entered elementary school and she makes a point of being as poised as possible. I savor the moments when I get to watch her visibly relax.

"I'm ready Mom."

"Lyla," Grandma leans her head over the bed to watch us leave, "name the doll before bed."

"Strange," Mother sighs after I nod and we round the corner. "Day by day," she murmurs, listening to the sound of her shoes clicking in the empty hall.

Click, soccer practice,

Click, Click homework and dinner, then *Click*, straight to bed.

I blink awake, what feels like five minutes after I fall asleep. The room is frigid and my throat feels scratchy and rough, so much so that each swallow hurts. I drape my quilt around my shoulders and shuffle to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

“Chester, ah no, no,” I say in a hushed voice when my cat starts walking in between my legs and under the blanket just as I am about to enter my room. I step forward onto part of the quilt that was dragging on the ground and slip slightly, spilling a bit of the water and startling my cat. “Ohh,” I hiss before pulling up my quilt.

Then I look up and see it. The red cheeked doll isn’t where I had left it, on a chair next to my bed. It is still there, but standing, not half fallen over like I left her. She is standing on the ground, and the room seems to grow even colder but it might have been because my fingers lose their grip and the blanket slipped from my shoulders. I let out a small screech and watch the doll.

Still standing, she takes a step forward and raises her arms, her hair starting to float around her shoulders as if there is an air vent under her that just began to blow, but of course there isn’t. Then her eyes start to glow, not like a toy, but like an animal’s reflective eyes. I stumble backwards again, spilling more of my water but I can’t take my eyes off of her.

She doesn’t open her mouth but sound started clearly emitting from her. It starts off only sounding like a groan or sigh then clearly like a B sound. I stand in a petrified silence as she says.

“Bbb-Ee-aa-tt-rr-ii-Ccc-Ee” she says each syllable, long and drawn out and hisses the C like her mouth is stuck together.

Beatrice.

I take a sudden step forward and jam my foot on the door frame.

Then I sit bolt upright in bed, my heart beats out of my chest. A dream. Of course it was a dream, a nightmare. There’s no blanket in the hall, no water, no cold air, and no scratchy soreness in my throat.

It takes longer for me to fall back asleep but a while later I wake up to the faint sound of my mother calling my name.

“Lyla!” She clicks down the hall, “what’s gotten into you? You never sleep this long.”

The clock says 8:20 and I have to be at school at 8:30. I pull myself up

just as my mother's put-together figure rounds the corner. I'm not sure how to even start getting ready that fast.

"Ahh!" My mother lets out a cry as she slips and grabs on to the door frame before she could fall.

"What happened to you last night?" She asks and watches me for a moment and then clicks out of view as if she never really expected an answer. Even if she did, I am not sure what I would say. 'I had a strange dream that woke me up but none of it happened...except for me spilling the water that you just slipped on, that was real, but I'm still not sure how.' That's what I would say, but I didn't have time. I hardly had the time to think about it. Time to go.

My mind wanders all day, I am not sure if anybody notices but I can't focus my attention on math, or anything else, and off of that doll's glowing eyes, and the tangible chill in the room in my dream. Well at least I have a name for the doll now: Beatrice.

"Walk these to Grandma when you're home from school please. I had extras." - Mom

The sticky note was taped on a cardboard box of two strawberry cupcakes. I shrug my backpack off, skip back downstairs, and walk next door to the nursing home. The caretakers there know me now, and I've memorized the code, so they wave me in and don't question me as I skip down the hall and lightly rap on her door before entering.

"Grandma, hello?" She is in a chair facing the window and the radio is on. Seconds before she sees me and her face lights up, I notice an expression of sadness, the expression that makes me visit her more often each time I see it.

"Oh, it's good to see you again," she rasps and reaches for my free hand before I place the cupcakes in her lap.

"I brought you these," I find a tray and help her unwrap one and wait as she takes a shaky bite.

"Lyla," she finishes quickly, "the doll, what did you name the doll?" Just like yesterday, she hurries the words out.

"Oh, what about Beatrice, I think it fits." Her face froze and her eyes

widened. I didn't want to tell Grandma about my dream, it would probably pointlessly worry her.

That's what I thought.

"You didn't name her before bed, did you?" She looked down, almost saddened yet reserved. I shook my head.

"Grandma," I leaned forward, "you're acting strange, what's going on?" She leaned back, closed her eyes, and swayed as if she was sitting in a rocking chair.

"I really can't say. I'm not allowed. Well I can say," she opened her eyes, her expression changing with eyes that forced me to pay attention, "that I owned that doll before you. I shouldn't have let you have it but well... anyways. It's all about the name but well that's past now. You should just do what she says."

'It's all about the name, I should do what she says.' What was she talking about?

"Oh my, am I tired. Well I'm sorry to be so sudden like this..."

"No, I should be going too." I give her a small hug as she closes her eyes and resumes shaking a little in her imaginary rocking chair.

'Just do what she says...'

Those words linger with me as I slug through the rest of the day.

"Lyla," my mother hands me something, "if you had a hard time falling asleep last night, if that was the problem then take this." I take three drop shaped gummies from her. "They're melatonin gummies, it'll help with sleep. Sleep," she emphasizes, "is very important."

I nod and chew the gummies, still not wanting to explain the night before, not even knowing what I would say, adding to what my grandma said, there is a slim chance she would believe me.

It was easy to fall asleep and I am flat on my back when I do, with my arms outstretched at my side. I wake up a while later and it's as though cool air in the room crawls over me, causing my skin to prickle. And I am unable to move. I tried to reach out and pull my blanket up further but my arms don't

work, not a bit. I clench my jaw and try and try to even squirm a little bit.

I feel her hair first, it's scratchy and brushes over my leg as the corner of my blanket slides off. She makes her way on my bed, watching me panted there, and she mutters the whole way.

"Move, move move, come come," over and over. Try as I might, I can't move, can't even speak. Then she starts to kick, again and again she pounds my legs first. How her little feet manage it I don't know but then she moves up to my stomach and arms.

Of course, it's a dream, that's how she manages. She doesn't really do it at all and it doesn't really hurt or it won't in the morning.

"Move, move, come, come, move." Over and over.

And then everything fades away into blackness. It just stops. I don't wake up, just out of the dream apparently, and away from the kicks and muttering.

I wake up with the steady beep of my alarm clock and all seems normal when I lean to switch it off. That was an odd dream, it must have been the gummies that kept me asleep through it all.

Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed I let out a sharp cry and stop moving. Frantically, I pull up the legs of my pajama pants and suck in a quick breath of air. My legs are covered in dozens of little spots of bruises. I curl over forward burying my face in my knees and I start to cry, What's going on! I want to scream and yell but that would be pointless. So instead I cry.

'Just do as she says,' my grandmother said, but I couldn't have done what she said. I couldn't move.

I make it through the day much like the one before but with my legs aching through it all. I don't visit my grandma, she had said she couldn't do anything anyways.

All she said was to do as the doll, as Beatrice, says.

What I dread most was having to sleep again, what else could happen. But the more I thought about the night the faster it seemed to come, it isn't supposed to work that way.

Finally, I fell asleep, and woke up again.

I knew what would happen and what I would do. So I swing my legs over the side of the bed. And there she is. She stands by the door, her hair floating around her, and her eyes faintly glowing.

“Beatrice,” she says slowly and quietly. This time her mouth opens and her scratchy strange voice is clear. Maybe since I am resigned to follow her and tired of getting hurt, she is able to fully talk to me.

“Come,” she says, before walking out of the room. I’m not sure how to explain it, but the way she walks is not normal. She moves fast, almost half gliding and half walking. It has to be something special because we were walking out the front door from my bedroom in seconds.

It isn’t as cold outside, unless I get too close to her, it is actually quite pleasant. Beatrice emanated cold like, well I don’t know what to compare it too, like crazy.

My mother and I live in the middle of an apartment complex and Beatrice starts climbing up the staircase and higher up the building. It should have been like climbing for how small she is but she keeps nearly floating over the parts of the staircase that her feet can’t reach. I trail on behind, keeping just outside of her bubble of freezing air.

We go all the way to the roof before finally slowing. At least my dream world has the dignity to make the sky beautiful. Oh how the stars sparkle in the midnight darkness.

Beatrice slows to walking without floating in between steps, with her two small legs. She walks all the way around the edge of the roof, examining the edges and side, with me trailing behind with my head tilted halfway to the sky. Just as it starts to feel like a true dream with a hazy and uncertain feeling, Beatrice turns to me.

“Come, move, follow,” and then she says a new word: “Trust” before jumping off the roof and disappearing into the shadows.

Questions and thoughts flash through my head. Her intention is clear: for me to follow her and to jump. And my grandmother had said to do what the

doll says. I trust my grandma, that was the word Beatrice had just said: Trust. Alright then.

I ready myself, feeling each moment as if it was tangible and sticky. I had forgotten that I woke up the other morning with bruises on my legs, and the morning before with water spilled. Maybe the dream made me forget it, but dreams shouldn't feel like this. Dreams feel like walking through fog, like a fallen cloud, you see one thing and then forget it, it never really happened, and you're never sure what will happen next. It's all an uncertain blur. This was like walking through honey. It made too much sense to me at the time but it really made no sense at all, and I felt like I could reach out and touch each moment that passed.

It was too late though now, bruises and spilled water didn't matter. All that did matter was that I trusted my grandma. So I took a step forward, and jumped off the roof into the nothingness below, following what I now know as the scariest thing that has ever asked me to follow...

THE SILVER TREK: ESCAPE FROM THE SEEKERS

Gavin Gutierrez, 15

I snapped awake, something was off. I rolled out of my cot, and promptly fell on the floor. It was nice there. Caravans didn't have amazing floors, but I was tired.

I lay there for a bit, and then it dawned on me. It was silent. I was on my feet immediately, the bells were silent. The Ward Master was supposed to stop that, they had to have a good reason for this.

I stumbled out of the wagon. The darkness was swirling, patterns picked out in the vid. Swirling into the corpses scattered around the campsite.

My vision doubled, then darkened. I fell forward, but I couldn't afford to lose consciousness. Even if everyone was gone. What was I supposed to do? The patterns shifted, they sensed me somehow. I was going to die. I was going to die. Wait, the bells!

I bolted towards the middle of the caravan. No light shone and the silence was unnerving, terrifying actually. I had never been in complete silence before. In these woods, it meant death. Towards the back of the caravan, light shone and blades met in a desperate fight.

I crept into the Ward Master's wagon. I had never been in here, the knowledge was above me. I could only hope to become a Master someday. I pushed open the door. The Master wasn't there, he was likely helping the others deal with the incident, but someone was. A dark-robed figure stood before me; he started when he saw me, but that didn't last long. Before I could react, some quick gestures on his part ordered one of the swirls in the darkness to race towards me. I barely saw the jagged lance of void, before I was out.

I woke up sometime later, everything was silent. The figure was gone. There wasn't time to think about that, I had more important things to worry about. Something was outside the wagon. I could feel it, it was pressed up

against my mind.

My eyes darted around, the massive bell at the center of the room was shattered. The Ward Master's bells were scattered around the room. The room was empty, there was no sign of the Master.

As I was looking around, the pressure on my mind increased. The walls started shaking, patterns forming on them. Jagged hooks of darkness and wood, feeling for me. I backed up, the things followed, they had me now. I bumped into a cabinet behind me as the patterns reached out.

A bell fell out. A small silver bell. It hit the floor, and its ringing was almost deafening. A small Ward shot out of the bell, pushing the patterns back on a ray of silver. I gaped at the small circle, standing between me and certain death. I had to get out of there. I snatched up the bell, my savior easily in my hand.

Outside was a horror show. Everything was in shambles. I had read stories about caravan raids, Seekers always wanted what the Silvers sent to trade with each other. The stories drew a picture of the horrors of the burning trails of wagons snaking through the woods between the cities. This was much worse. The silent devastation was picked out in the thin moonlight. No fires burned but everything was wrecked. Wagons turned over on their sides, boards splintered, and the lights were all extinguished.

I flinched back as I saw movement. Figures were moving among the caravan, those same jagged patterns in the dark around them. They were looking for survivors. This raid was different. I had to get out of here.

"Masters help me," I breathed as I stepped out onto the road.

I started inching towards the trees. The tree line was only a few feet from the road. If I could just get a few more steps, I would be free.

The foliage crunched as I stepped into the tree line.

"Typical, just my luck," I muttered as the figures turned toward me.

I ran. The shadows were already chasing me as I crashed into the woods. Stumbling over roots and branches whipping at my face. They were faster, there was nothing I could do.

One of the patterns crashed into the ward, it held but the circle dimmed considerably. I didn't know the Masters' craft, but I could tell the ward wouldn't take much more of this. I glanced at the bell as I ran, it was tarnished and dented. It sputtered as it deflected another of the shady patterns.

Visions began to leak into my brain. The trees were replaced by the wreckage of my life, arrayed infinitely in a field that stretched to eternity. All the people I knew were hollowed out corpses behind me. My home was lying demolished. I closed my eyes, and ran through it all past the torturous scenes and illusory carnage. Then, a root caught my foot. I went down.

The patterns surrounded me. Time seemed to slow, I knew I was finished. There was a strange beauty in the way they moved, destroying my ward. Then they were through, I was enthralled. A pressure began to build behind my eyes. Something was pressing against them, trying to escape from my head. Then a thin string of silvery light slipped from both of my eyes, melding into the pattern. Once it was in place, the pain started.

It was agonizing, it felt like my entire being was being dragged out into this creature. The pressure on my eyes built. I fell to my knees.

Just as I felt like my eyes were about to collapse, I heard... ringing? The patterns retreated, thrown back as a silvery ward erupted around me.

The ward was a work of art, complicated lines wove together to form the thick circle that now stood between me and the patterns. I whirled around. A person stood there. The moonlight glinted off of a silver circlet sitting on top of his dark hair, and the bells strung up in tiny hollows carved into the staff he carried. He was a Ward Master. I was going to survive the night!

The patterns resumed their onslaught, but this ward was having none of that. They sparked and howled against the barrier, but it didn't yield.

Once I was sure I was safe, I collapsed. The stress caught up to me. I could see the Master coming towards me. He checked my pulse and grimaced, but then quickly smiled at me.

"Hey there," he sounded calm even though his face said otherwise, "You survived. You're fine now. That mad dash has to have been the greatest thing

I've seen in a while."

He reached up to his staff, and tapped a bell made of a dull crystal. Euphoria washed through my brain, numbing the pain from the last few hours. I relaxed enough to regain my rationality, and realized I was lying in front of a Ward Master.

I got to my feet and tried to bow, managing to stutter, "Ehm, thank you for my life Silver One."

He flushed at the honorific, "Ah no, please just call me Xander, and you owe me nothing. Nobody would have left you out there."

"Okay... Xander," using a Ward Master's given name felt odd, we were brought up to show them the utmost respect, "Well, why are you out here?"

"My caravan was attacked, it seems the Seekers coordinated to disrupt some major supply lines," he glanced around furtively, "and I happened to hear you trying to escape the shades."

"Anyway," he continued, "there's a small shelter over that way." He pointed west.

"Is that where we're going?" I asked.

"Yes? Why else would I have mentioned it?"

"Oh, let's go then."

Xander grinned, and we set off.

"So," I asked as we walked, "Did you use gleam on me?"

He raised an eyebrow, "Yes, I did. I wouldn't get used to it though. I'm not going to do it again unless I have to, the stuff's addictive."

"So, do you think you can handle the abominations?" I nodded at the patterns that hovered outside of the ward.

"Yes," he began, "I can stop them from coming in the ward, if that's what you mean. Can I make them go away? Probably not, they're likely going to accompany us until we get into the safe house."

I tried to think of more to ask, "What was the pattern doing to me back there?"

"Was it pulling things out of your eyes?"

“Yes.”

“It was feeding,” Xander explained, “They pull your conscious mind, some people call it the soul, out through your eyes and consume it. That’s why victims of the shades have hollow sockets.”

I felt a bit sick knowing how close I had come to death. We walked on in silence for a bit. There was more foliage on the ground here. People didn’t walk this part of the woods as much. No one cleared the residue away.

“By the way,” Xander asked, “I never caught your name.”

“Oh, it’s Aiden,” I said.

“Aiden, Aiden, Aiden,” he repeated.

I gave him a look.

“I’m terrible at names,” Xander explained, “I’ll remember it better if I repeat it out loud a lot.”

We stepped into a small clearing, Xander still muttering my name under his breath, and the moon gave me my first look at my saviour. I was vaguely surprised that he wasn’t much older than me, maybe nineteen? He had to be in his early twenties. He had dark hair like me, but he allowed his hair to fall around his ears whereas mine was shorter. He walked with a halting, quiet, pace. He kept glancing at the patterns, and then looking back at the ground.

“So, how far is the safe house?”

“Not long now. We should be there any-,” he stiffened. We stopped.

One of the figures from the caravan, a Seeker, stepped into view. Their dark robes and hood were still obscuring their face.

Xander raised his staff, and I raised my bell for all the good it would do. I chastised myself for not thinking to bring a knife or something. Who am I kidding? I would have just hurt myself.

Patterns swirled around the Seeker, he raised his hand and the ward was assaulted with a renewed vigour. The patterns forcing their harsh lines through the barrier.

“Can you deal with this, Xander?” my voice cracked a bit.

“Um,” he said.

I took that as my answer.

“Okay Aiden, here’s the plan,” Xander whispered to me, “I’m going to distract them, then we are going to run that way. We’re almost at the safe house.”

Xander didn’t wait for an answer. The ward dissolved, reforming as a quarter circle in front of the Silver One. The line pushed out violently, slamming patterns and people alike back into the forest. They disappeared into the woods.

We bolted. The shadows quickly came after us. I could feel them behind Xander, trying to trip him up so they could subject him to that feeding.

We ran for a long while, I thought my organs were going to rupture. I was so tired when I saw the house.

We entered, gasping for breath, and I slammed the door. We were in a mud room. It was nice, all things considered. Under different circumstances, I might have admired the decoration, but now was not the time.

Xander scrambled to the center of the building.

“Uh oh,” he called back.

“What?” I yelled, my nerves were long past frayed.

He came back into the room, face grim.

“Seekers got here first,” he said calmly, “the ward is broken beyond my ability to fix at the moment.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

He hesitated, then turned to face the door with his staff out.

A pattern had materialized on the door, its jagged lines spreading through the room. I shrank away from the lines, but Xander stood his ground. It was hopeless. The tendril speared through his right eye, going deep into his brain. The bells on Xander’s staff started to ring, moving on their own in an eerie melody, and his right eye sparked alight with a glowing silver iris. The iris telescoped in, clamping down on the pattern, holding it fast. The pattern shuddered, struggling to get away from him. Xander grit his teeth, and his staff’s melodies became faster and more complex. At the crescendo, Xander

finally won the contest, something shifted and the pattern changed.

The pattern stopped moving, looping curls replacing jagged lines. The pattern shuddered and began to move again. I backed up, terrified, as he took the very thing that the Silvers were sworn to fight, the thing they vowed was against everything they stood for. He took that, and he made it a part of himself. Xander turned towards me, apology shining in his unaffected eye, but the other eye was swirling with the looping patterns filling the room. I shivered at the other eye's inhuman gaze. Then, the door burst open.

Xander whirled around, and looking past him I saw The Seeker standing there framed in the moonlight. The jagged patterns following them inside. The two faced off, sending their patterns around the room, Xander's patterns wrapping around the jagged lines, even as they speared the curls.

The Seeker started, before an amalgamation of Xander's curling tendrils wrapped around them. They slipped around the figure's neck, pushing back their hood. The Seeker was a young man with a mop of blonde hair and a crooked nose. His mahogany eyes were wide with terror.

Xander's pattern took a more secure hold around The Seeker's neck, and began to strangle him. He struggled, bruises appearing around his neck visible through the translucent curls. After a few seconds, Xander jerked his hand to the left, and The Seeker's neck broke in a clean snap.

The body fell to the floor, the other pattern assimilating into Xander's. Xander turned slowly on his heel and gave me a pained smile, his silver iris glowing ever brighter.

Reaching behind him, he dismissed the patterns. They roared out into the night without hesitation. Using the bells on his staff, Xander reignited the wards around them, and sparked a dim ambient light in the room.

I was confused, but I felt a little hopeful. I might live through this trek after all.

THE VOICE

Kamilla Bird, 17

Men-flesh.

The palpable scent of sweat and raw meat aroused my mind. I hadn't been sleeping.

You can't sleep.

I grunted. The voice was right.

It was always right.

A loud cheer echoed through the trees and into my silent coven. A sanctuary not a noise had disturbed for twelve years. Not until today. Why did the men-flesh shout and gurgle laughter like a sweet, unending vat of wine? There was nothing to celebrate. All that existed was shadows. Endless darkness.

And me.

I stood and began to wander through the empty halls. Decorative webs spanned the rafters, setting the room in a perfect shadowy gloom. The long unattended furniture was covered in a cozy blanket of dust. What was left of it, at least.

You like destroying things.

Yes. Very much.

I wandered most of the moonlight hours in that cold hall. Sharp men-flesh voices tore through my skull. I howled in agony as their excitement drove spikes through my terrible self.

You like being terrible. Terrible is right. Terrible is good.

Yes. Terrible was good. Just like murder was good. Just like ripping things to shreds was good. I fell to the floor as another wave of incomprehensible happiness flooded my lair.

This needs to stop.

But how?

Find the source. Get rid of it. Block a spring with a boulder, the river no longer flows.

Find the source. Get rid of it.

I turned around, my thick cloak and hide doing nothing to block the numbing cold. The cold ran deep. It never ended. I remembered to duck under the looming stone archways. I didn't enjoy breaking stone with my head.

You don't enjoy anything.

I slipped out the demolished front entrance and into the summer night air. The warm air must be pleasant to those men-flesh. I raised my lip in disgust. It's why they must be awake. Living and breathing and filling the world with their intolerable noises. I made quick work of the hill. Bending to rest my forefront and back claws against the ground, I dug them deep to rip into the earth. I felt dirt groan and give way beneath my razor paws, and I used its misery to propel me up the hill and to the mead hall. I could scarcely take another breath, the stench of men-flesh was so overpowering. A loud chant of a valiant knight saving his people rang out, and I trembled at its somber power.

I had no place here. I would leave. Their joy was too much. I couldn't grasp it. I clutched my lumpy head between my long claws.

No. You will stay.

I stayed. I crept silently under the sills, bending my long form double to avoid being seen through the horribly cheery windows. I waited.

Keep waiting.

The cheery light diminished. The last murmurs died. The soft breathing began.

Now.

It was time. I stalked through the uneven glade toward the front gates of the mead hall. I gripped the door knocker and paused.

You don't use those. Not anymore. This place belongs to you.

You deserve it.

The voice echoed my doubts and solidified my resolve. This place was mine. I wouldn't knock. I stepped away and lowered my shoulder, ready to ram the door.

Silence is better.

The voice was right. I changed tactics and slowly pushed on the heavy oak door. It was left unlocked. I gleefully rejoiced at the simpleness of men-flesh. Their lack of thinking most wonderfully benefited me time and time again. My claws clacked on the stone floor. I approached the men-flesh closest to the door. His vomitous stench overpowered the rest. I would be rid of this one first. His ugly form moved visibly in the darkness as he breathed loudly in sleep, though not as loud as me. My hisses, gasps, groans, and whispers were the things that belonged to me. And only me. I grabbed his ankle. This woke the wonderfully fragile creature, and he cried out.

Silence him.

I swung him in the air, revolted as his human perfume filled my wide nostrils. I reached out, ready to snap him between my jaws...

Something grated across my arm. The frigid steel sliced my shoulder, and I dropped the human and lunged away. Hot fury filled my mind.

Get rid of the men-flesh.

I lashed with my claws at the huge figure before me. I was not daunted by him, although this men-flesh was the largest I had ever seen. He matched me in stature, though no one would best me in a fight.

A fight to the death.

Yes. I would kill him.

I knocked him down with an easy backhand blow. The men-flesh dropped his weapon. Good. A ragged, triumphant roar ripped through my throat. The men-flesh scrambled to his feet and drew another sharp sword. I would take that from him, too. I reached for his weapon, determined to detach it from his body with his limbs. He was faster.

Impossible.

He shoved the dagger in my heart. I couldn't move. The metal shard sticking from my chest burned. It felt... warm. I stumbled away. He lumbered after me. I ran.

Stay.

Out the door down the hill.

Turn around. Go back!

I leapt the stream and continued to the cliff. There were hidden places there. Dark places.

Weakling! You are proving the men-flesh stronger.

I reached the cliff face. At the top was a cave. If I jumped, I would make it. My legs shook, and I lunged for the outcropping. My claws stuck into a crevice. With trembling arms, I hoisted myself over the edge.

You will never make it.

I dragged myself in, deeper and deeper. I was slowing down.

Turn around. Wipe the men-flesh from the earth. They are the wicked ones. They don't deserve to survive.

I collapsed on the rocky cave floor. Sharp stones pressed into my body. It didn't matter. I didn't feel them.

You feel nothing.

Then why was I grasped with the sensation of falling? A great force tugged my lids down. I resisted. I needed to fight. Needed to shed the blood of all men-flesh. Needed to keep destroying, tearing, ripping. I lurched and spasmed, trying to stand.

You are weak... too weak...

I struggled to inhale. A feeble whisper of air reached my mouth. With the next exhale, the air was gone.

And so are you.

HELLY THE DRINKER:
PROMISE HER ANYTHING BUT GIVING HER BLOOD

Hayden Reed, 16

Helly Dabria, a five-year-old girl, who had red wavy hair and brown eyes, wore a gray dress with a purple collar and an undercollar that's pink. She wears an orange flower with a pink skull in the center of her hair. The skull has green eye sockets and green ethmoids. She lives in a small town with her 60-year-old grandmother that has cancer after getting taken from her father. Her mother died giving birth which was weird because she was healthy and her father blamed her for it.

Her father used to come every week to pay his child support to her grandmother. He would bring her a new toy every time he would come just to bribe her to say he's a good father to the caseworker. He's the wealthiest man in town and the mayor. The people around him that know about her were bought to say nothing to the town about her being his child. She would wonder why he doesn't care more about her, but she pretends to be alright.

Every time she walks around the market she can hear all their whispers about her saying "she's so weird" or "look it's the creep". People dislike her because they think she's creepy and crazy, but she's just misunderstood. The kids picked on her for liking monsters and magic in addition to the supernatural.

Helly was at the hospital 'cause her grandmother went in two weeks ago. A few of the staff were nice to her, fed her, and let her stay. Most of the staff was nice to her; they were her mother's friends. The mayor was announcing that he was going to have a son with the woman on his right on TV in her grandmother's hospital room.

Helly's grandma was getting worse by the week. At the end of the week, the doctor unplugged the machines she was plugged into and walked out. Helly followed the doctor quietly out of the room and around the corner without him knowing. She watched as the mayor's new wife gave the doctor a

million dollars in cash. Helly crawled closer without trying to be seen to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“First, the mother, second the grandma, and now next is his other child,” said the woman.

“Do you want me to kill her?” asked the doctor.

“NO, I have something special for her,” she responded.

‘So she found out I was his child,’ Helly thought. Helly’s life took a downfall after that. The kids threw stones and rocks at her. After her Grandmother’s passing, she started living in the abandoned house that used to hold so many memories of her past. Before her grandma passed she gave her a box of different vials that she keeps in the pockets of her dress but a crystal-shaped one stays around her neck.

It was her grandmother’s favorite. Her father and his new wife walk past the house every day. This morning her father came to the house just to beat and cut her almost to death. Tonight she saw thousands of flickering lights from her bed. She got up to look out of the window.

She was terrified of what she saw. Most of the town except her mother’s friends were outside with torches. Shouting things she couldn’t hear. A middle-aged bald man came up to the front and set the front corners of the house on fire. She stares at the people that have wronged her.

Her father was looking up at her and his new wife happened to be smiling. She signed the words ‘I will get my revenge’ in sign language. All the kids in town were required to learn sign language. After she had signed it, she got her vials and ran down the stairs. Going through the trapdoor at the bottom of the stairs on the floor that leads to the forest.

She opened the door and went through the tunnel and ran through the forest until she fainted from the cuts, bruises, and burns. She died from the lack of food and blood with the help of the beatings. Her body was cold from the wind. A woman in her twenties picked her up and took her to this cabin that is secretive. She laid her on the bed and went to get the first-aid kit.

Helly was in a place of darkness with a light at the end of it. She walked

towards the light then heard a voice. It declared, "Helly darling, you're not done yet. You still have the stuff to take care of. Your job is not complete, so I give you the taste for the sweet red liquid called blood my child," and then silence. She woke up and the woman was cleaning the dirt off her. "Who are you?" Helly requested.

She responded with "Willow." Later that night they got ready to go. They got to the tree line by Helly's old town. Helly knocked on the door of the house closest to the forest. Someone opened the door and walked out with a bottle of beer.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I need help; I'm bleeding. Can I come in?" Helly vocalized. He uttered a yes in a perverted way turning to walk back into the house. You can tell what he was thinking by just looking at him and the way he answered. Helly looked back at Willow and nodded.

Willow went around and picked the lock on the back door, and went to check upstairs if he was alone. Helly followed the guy through the house to the kitchen. "I'm thirsty," rejoined Helly as she struck a hard strike to the middle of the upper abdomen just below the chest at the solar plexus (celiac plexus) of the guy. It forced the air out of his lungs with a hard loud gasp, by causing the diaphragm to spasm. The gasping makes him freeze up for 2-3 seconds. As he tried to hit her, she grabbed his wrist and pressed hard against the pressure point.

She hit a left strike to the lower right rib cage at the liver. He curled up into a ball, pressing his forehead on the ground, gasping in pain, unable to get up for a minute. She hit his larynx (windpipe) so he couldn't talk. She grabbed his head and twisted. He fell to the ground.

She sank her vampire-like teeth into his neck drinking almost all the blood. She filled one of her vials up with the rest of it. After her drink, Helly went through the back door and met up with Willow.

"Was he alone?" she asked.

Willow answered "No, there was a teenage kid asleep. He's dead now."

Helly nodded and waved her hand for Willow to follow. Over the week's multiple murders similar to each other have been happening. A few of the murder victims have all the blood drained from their body and the other people that were with the victims at the time have flowers stabbed in their throats. The town has been in fear of being killed, and they don't know who is next. The mayor has ordered a town meeting, everyone that survived or isn't dead yet was there.

"I called you here today to talk about the murders," the mayor said. The room was filled with around thirty to fifty people. "The victims were killed in two different ways. So we can confirm that there are two murderers," the mayor told them. They look at each other with concern.

"Have there been sightings of anything suspicious?" questioned the new wife. One said that they saw a little redhead girl in a gray dress enter one of the victims' homes before the murder. Everyone was thinking the same thing, that there was only one person who it could be. Helly. All the facts add up, the first one was that before she died she said she would get revenge, the second is the murders of some of the people that wronged her, and the third was the sighting the mayor thought.

Later that night the mayor was working late. While the new wife was washing dishes, she kept hearing noises like stuff moving or stuff dropping, but they were here and there. She heard footsteps run past her, she dropped the dish in her hand and turned around. No one there then pattering little feet. She went to investigate and that is something you should never do. Helly was behind her in minutes kicking her in both of the backs of the knees.

She went tumbling down, hitting the flood of blood coming from her belly. Helly bent down to suck her blood and when she was done, she used the baby's blood to write a message on the wall. Once the mayor got home he dropped stuff in his hands as he stared at the scene before him. His wife lay on the floor dead and his baby that was supposed to be born will never see the light of day. He fell to his knees crying.

'Never seen him do that before,' thought Helly. He looked up and saw the

message that read 'Father do you like my present?'

He screamed, "Where are you?" He heard giggling from all around him. She appeared in front of him but not too close.

"You never really liked me now, did you, father? You married the woman who killed my mother and grandmother. You got her pregnant and treated him like family when he wasn't even born yet." Helly said.

"Helly you don't have to do this," her father said trying to convince her to stop.

"SHUT UP" she raised her voice. Hearing her yelling, Willow showed up beside her. The other killer, he thought. "You don't know what it's like to be lonely, beaten, and almost burned by people from your town. Now I'm thirsty," she shouted with anger.

Her eyes glowed a blood red. Willow said in a calm voice "It's time to promise her blood." That's when Willow stabbed a bundle of flowers in his throat. Coughing up blood he looked in her eyes as Helly sank her teeth into his wrist and drank all his blood. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as she finished her drink.

THE GAME

Mallory Haake, 15

The night was cold, the air stale. The wind howled past you, your heartbeat speeding up as you walked onwards through the maze-like forest. It had seemed like you had been walking for hours on end... Your mind was foggy as you looked around, pointing your flashlight in the directions you were facing. You had troubles remembering how you had gotten where you were... Only remembering the man in the mask...

The man... The mask... Who was he..? What did he even want with you..? Why were you walking through a forest..? Your stomach rumbled, interrupting your thoughts. You ignored your craving for food, trekking onwards. Your fight or flight instinct kicked in, and only one thought played in your mind on repeat. *Get out.*

Pushing onwards, you looked around for anything that would be of use. A glint shined out, while you waved your flashlight around, catching the glint from the corner of your eye. You walked over to the item that had caught your attention, unsure of what it could be...

You bent down, getting a closer look as to what was laying on the ground in front of you. You slowly picked up what seemed to be a silver bracelet. Observing the bracelet, you noticed text inscribed in it, possibly a name, with a dark red stain...

Blood.

You quickly dropped the bracelet, your breathing hitched, as you looked around. Your heartbeat had sped up dramatically. You looked around, trying to steady your breathing. While you were quickly checking your surroundings, you noticed words written out in blood on the tree... Curious, you got closer... Realizing what the words wrote out...*LOOK BEHIND YOU...*

Your body froze up, heart beating louder than it had before... This couldn't be real right..? There's no possibility that someone could be behind you right now...

Could there..?

You slowly turned around... Turning your body slowly... You let out a sigh of relief. There was no one there. You chuckled to yourself for being so silly, you had actually thought there would be someone standing there. You turned back around to examine more. Lost in your own little world of curiosity, you had missed the sound of a twig on the ground snapping... You continued to search for anything of use. Until you heard footsteps behind you...

You stopped dead in your tracks. You silently prayed that whatever had made that noise behind you, was a cute little creature just trying to find its way back home just like you.

Slowly turning around, once more, you kept your eyes locked on the ground... Your flashlight beamed, towards where the sound came from. Your eyes widening in fear... The light of your flashlight shined down on two heavy footprints... You knew for a fact that they weren't yours, the size of the footprints was way too big for your size feet... So whose were they..?

All of a sudden, you felt a hand cover your mouth, another one gripping around your waist, fear making you drop your flashlight. Panic rushed through you, as you struggled to get out of the figure's arms screaming, hoping someone could somehow hear you... No one heard you.

You continued to fight for your life, as you felt a sharp object get placed under your chin. You stopped struggling in an instant, knowing that if you hadn't you would be good as gone. You stood there panting, tilting your head back, attempting to keep your chin away from the knife as far as possible. The two of you stood there silently, for what was deemed as forever. That was until the figure spoke...

"I'm going to be honest... I didn't think you would walk this far off from your drop-off zone." The deep voice said from behind you. You stood there silently. Listening. Not daring to say a word. You slightly trembled under the man's grasp. The man, chuckled deeply, "Oh you poor thing. Too terrified to speak? Well, I guess that just makes it easier on my life."

You refused to make an expression, or show any emotions. You

continued to stare off into the trees in front of you. The man started to become frustrated with you, growling a little bit, before continuing, “I’m surprised that didn’t arise any emotion... That line usually stirs up questions in my *victims*.”

Victims..? Your heart started to race, as your mind started to run with millions of thoughts. Were you going to die tonight..? Was this how it was all going to end..? Would you even be able to see the sunrise one more time..? Your thoughts were once more interrupted by the man speaking.

“Ah, I can see your brain turning. You’re scared, aren’t you? No need to answer that, it’s blatantly obvious. Now... You’re probably wondering why you’re here...” He paused, for a dramatic effect, before continuing. “Well, I’m about to answer that. You see here, I like to play *games*. But no one ever seems to like my favorite type of game to play... So instead, I’ve had to come up with a solution... If no one wants to play my game... Then why not make them...”

You were confused by his words. Games..? What games? You were in a forest... What games can you even do in a forest anyway..? Unless... The man chuckled, “I can see you thinking again... And yes, you’re correct. My game is indeed... Hunting. But not just any *ordinary* hunting, like what those wimpy hunters, do. That is if you can even call them hunters. Only real hunters like me, like to go for a bigger game... *Humans*.”

You gulped, your chin slightly touching the sharp reminder that the man holding you captive, could easily end you right there and then... You attempted to speak, being careful of the knife, your voice hoarse. “So...” You started off carefully. “What are the rules to this game...”

“Ah, well I’m pleased you asked. Because actually, there aren’t any rules to this little game. It’s just a game of hiding and chasing... And if you can successfully make it to sunrise *alive*, then I’ll let you go free... However, if I catch you before sunrise well then...” He trailed off making the knife at your throat dig in a little deeper. “I think you can fill in that blank.”

You slightly whimpered at his words, cowering in fear, your body slightly shaking. You could feel the man loosen his grip on the knife until it was completely away from your chin. You stood there for a second, confused before you were pushed to the hard forest ground. You hissed as pain shot through the palms of your hands. You inspected your scraped palms before your attention was turned back to the man, as he started to speak again, getting a good look at him. Your eyes widened in fear as you realized who it was... The person who brought you here...the masked man.

“Oh you poor little thing,” he taunted. “You’re scared to death aren’t you? Good. Makes it more fun to hunt you.”

You felt your eyes burn, as tears started to form in your eyes. You forced yourself to not let your tears fall. You let out a steady breath, in an attempt to calm your rising heart rate. “C-Could I at least get some food t-to eat... T-That way it’ll be more fun for you i-if I’m able to r-run.” You stumbled over your words, trying to make sense of them.

The masked man stood there menacingly, looking at you in silence... You shook slightly under his masked gaze. Without saying a word, he put his hand into his pocket, pulling out a granola bar. Throwing it at you, you barely caught it.

Your stomach growled while opening the packaging. You devoured the granola bar almost as fast as you had gotten it. You couldn’t see it, but the masked man was smirking, knowing that he’ll win the game. He always wins.

“You have...” The man checked the watch wrapped tightly around his wrist. “One hour to hide, and get as far away as possible. I will be waiting patiently for my timer to go off before hunting. By the time I’ve started, sunrise will be in approximately eight hours. The only thing you have to do is... Well, not die.” The man chuckled to himself, before starting to walk off, “Your time starts now.”

You quickly scrambled to your feet, watching the man who brought you here walk off coolly. How could someone do this? How could anyone live with the guilt of killing *innocent* people? You snapped out of your daze, you were

wasting precious time thinking. You turned in the other direction the man was walking in, breaking out into a swift run. You were not going to die tonight... You hoped...

You had been running for only god knows how long. You were out of breath, your lungs burned, needing more air. You stopped, bending over, trying to catch your breath. Looking around the area, observing, you barely noticed a fairly tall tree. Smaller trees were blocking it, almost making it invisible. You smiled to yourself, jogging over to the tall tree, beginning to climb it. You stayed near the middle of the tree, where all the branches began to branch out from the base. You sighed to yourself, leaning back. You were content with your hiding spot and that feeling of content made your eyes heavier... You started drifting off into a deep sleep, believing you were safe... Little did you know, somewhere out there in the woods, the timer of the masked man went off...

You woke up briefly to the sound of crunching leaves. Your breathing hitched as you looked below you, down at the ground. There he was. He found you. You watched as he walked around the area for a little bit, before squatting down closer to the ground, almost looking as if he was... Observing the dirt..? The man quickly stood up, gripping the rifle that hung from his holster. You held your breath, closing your eyes, listening to the sound of the man cocking his rifle.

“I know you’re there, little one,” The man taunted. You gulped back your fear, staying completely still, not risking making any noise. “Come out, come out where ever you are...” The man continued in the same taunting tone.

You continued to watch as the man slowly walked off a little bit, but still in your line of sight. You stayed there... Watching... Until the masked man turned abruptly and shot the tree you were sitting in.

BANG!

The sound spooked you, making you fall backward. In the moment of

falling backward, you reached out grabbing one of the branches, catching yourself. You quietly sighed in relief, thinking you went unnoticed. Oh, how you were wrong...

The man started to walk towards the tree you were in. Your breath caught in your throat once more. You saw him pause right in front of the tree, before cocking his rifle one more time. Even though you couldn't see it, you could tell there was a smug look on the man's face. He knew he had won at that moment... That was until you fell on him.

When he cocked his gun, your fight or flight instincts kicked in. It was now or never. You jumped out of the tree, towards where he was standing, tackling the man to the ground. Catching him off guard, his rifle flew out of his hands as he fell to the ground. Noticing this, you quickly got off of him, crawling quickly for the rifle. Only a couple of feet away from the rifle, you started to reach out for it... That was until two hands grabbed your ankle... Pulling you farther away from your only chance of getting a weapon to protect yourself.

You kicked your leg trying to get free from the man's grasp, but you were too tired and weak. The man laughed at your attempts of pushing away, as he kept dragging you. You clawed at the ground, hoping to somehow stop yourself from being dragged away further... But it was no use. You hissed as the front of your body continued to get scraped up by the forest floor as you were being dragged. Finally, the grasp on your ankle disappeared. You turned around to see the masked man pulling out something from his pocket... A dagger.

You quickly turned on your back, scooting away from the man in fear. You could hear your heartbeat in your ears. The man slowly started walking forwards, the dagger in hand. You continued to scoot back until your back hit a tree... This was it...

You were going to die... That was unless you could think of a last-minute escape.

You quickly looked around, noticing a sharp stick next to you. Your hand gripped around the stick, waiting for the masked man to get closer. The

man squatted down in front of you, placing the dagger in front of your neck. Your breathing quickened, as the grip on your stick tightened.

“I caught you.” You could almost practically hear the smile in the man’s voice. He thought he had won.

“Or did you.” You stabbed his arm that was holding the dagger with your stick. He stumbled backward, giving you enough time to stand up and start running for your life. You hear the wildlife continuing on peacefully as you run. Oh, how you wished that you were one of those animals right now... But you weren’t. You sighed to yourself, continuing to push your legs to the limits... You were not going to die tonight if you could prevent it.

The wind fought against you as you continued to push through it. You could hear the man’s voice call out from somewhere behind you, “There’s no point in running! I’m only going to get you eventually!” You knew the man was right, there really was no point in running, but you weren’t just about to give up...

You swerved around the trees that abruptly showed up in front of you due to the darkness. You continued on running not daring to look back. You jumped over fallen down trees, ran around protruding roots, and ducked below the low-hanging branches in your path. You kept at this until you heard a rush of water somewhere near you. You started running towards the sound, knowing you were getting closer as the sound of the water got louder.

Finally, you reached the area that the sound of water was coming from. You had ended up at a river. You started to run once more, heading down the side of the river, following it. You hoped that the river would bring you somewhere you could receive help, but your hope was quickly drowned when you were stopped by the drop off of the river. A waterfall. A dead end. You really were going to die, weren’t you? Your thought was reassured when you heard footsteps behind you.

You turned around, to see the masked man, holding his rifle one more. You figured he had grabbed it once you had taken a run for it. He cocked his gun before taunting, “Well, well, well. Look who we have here... It looks like the

little birdie has got itself stuck in a cage...” The man cackled at his own words. You just rolled your eyes. You quickly turned back around, seemingly looking as if you were surrendering, but you were observing the drop of the waterfall.

You turned back around, sighing, “Well, I guess this is game over then huh?”

“Well, it does seem to look like it little birdie.”

“Can I at least see what you look like without your mask? I’m going to be dying anyway.” You reasoned with the man.

The man stood there thinking about your point before nodding, proceeding to take off his mask, knowing you weren’t going to remember it for long. He threw you his mask, showing his face, a confident, cruel smirk playing at his lips. You could tell he wasn’t mentally stable by taking a good look at him. His eyes had a crazed look glazed over them, scars littered his face, and his unkempt hair gave the lack of his mental stability away.

You grasped his mask in your hands, “I suppose this is goodbye.”

“It was fun playing with you...” The man evilly smirked, before aiming his rifle at you, taking in the moment. He had won *again*.

You nodded at his words, smiling mentally to yourself. You could tell what he was thinking. He thought he had won... And then you jumped.

The wind rushed past you as you fell closer, and closer to the water below you. You closed your eyes tight, clutching the mask in your hands. You could hear a scream of “NO!” And then your body was engulfed in cold water. You smiled to yourself, as the current took you away, taking you away from the craziness of the night. You smirked. You hadn’t won... But you hadn’t lost either.

You woke up in fright, your heart beating fast. It was all just a dream... But it felt so real... You sighed to yourself, shaking your head before swinging your legs off your bed. You walked towards your bathroom, getting yourself ready for another day. Once you finished what you needed to do, you headed towards your kitchen downstairs.

Entering the kitchen, you contently sighed, thankful that what had happened in your dream wasn't real. You were about to start making breakfast when a knock at your front door sounded out. You started walking towards the noise when something in the corner of your eye stopped you. Your heart stopped, as you slowly started walking towards the object laying on top of the living room couch. Your eyes widened, realizing what the object was, and what it had meant...

It was the mask... Your dream was real... It had actually happened... Another knock rang out. You shook your head, you were safe now. Whether it was all a dream or not. Making your way to the front door, you opened it. You gasped. You quickly closed your front door, pressing your back to it, closing your eyes. You shook your head in disbelief as the familiar emotion of fear returned to you...

He was here... The masked man unmasked... And he looked as ready as ever to get rid of the person who had escaped his grasp...

The End

THE SHADOWS TOLD ME SO

Stella Sacra, 15

I just finished my shift at the hospital. A 20 hour shift will do some crazy things to you. Everywhere I look, I see these tall dark figures. Every single time my eyes move they are there, but they aren't just shadows, they talk. They are telling me to stay away from my husband, my house; my child. I'm confused; scared. I ignore the tall dark figures and leave the hospital. As I open the door of my car, a sharp stabbing pain goes straight to my head. I drop my keys and nearly fall to the ground. I've never felt pain worse. I couldn't be sick. My symptoms didn't add up. I had just figured, after the 20 hour shift I was a little out of sorts. The figure emerged from the night and once again told me not to go home. I decided to ignore the deep voices. I picked up my keys and got into the car. On the way home, everything seemed to be fine, nothing unusual led me to believe something was wrong. I pulled up to the house and heard the deep voice tell me to turn around, get back to the car, and drive away. Once again, I ignored the voice. I unlocked the door and walked in. The vibe of the house was different. It was eerie. I flipped on a light, and there I saw my child on the ground covered in blood. I let out a piercing scream. My husband came in, also covered in blood.

"Honey, you're home," he said. I backed up towards the door slowly with a horrified look on my face. I grabbed the doorknob.

"Leaving so soon? You just got home from work, you must be tired. Come on, let's go to bed." He was acting as if everything was okay, as if our son wasn't laying dead on the floor, as if he didn't just murder our child. I couldn't run, he would try and kill me if I ran. I need to play along, act as if nothing is wrong. I let go of the door knob and stepped forward. My husband smiled. He was happy I stepped away from the door. I heard the voices of the dark figures again.

"Turn around. Leave. Run."

It was unsettling, but I couldn't just run. I was paralyzed with fear, but I made myself move.

“How was your day honey?” I said, my breath shaking.

“Productive.” He said with a half smile and a long breath.

“Good, good. I’m glad.” I had wondered if he even knew what he did. It was a risk, but I asked him how our kid was. “How is Ben?” He looked very confused when I asked. Had I messed it all up? Was I about to die? I guess we are about to find out. I was on the verge of tears.

“He’s fine. He is asleep right now.” He said as if he were aggravated.

“Oh good.” Either he had no idea that he just committed murder, or he is just playing along. I couldn’t tell. I couldn’t take this anymore. I had to leave.

“Honey, I’m gonna go for a walk. I need some fresh air.” I said.

“No! You can’t.” He twitched. At that point, I knew, that he knew, that I knew. He was just playing along. Tricking me. Luring me into his trap. I thought maybe I could get him to confess, to admit that he was a murderer. I stealthily started recording a voice memo on my phone. Before I could ask him why he did it, the voices came back.

“Now! Get out! You are going to die!” They were louder than they had been. It hurt my ears and my head so bad I dropped my phone, revealing the voice memo app open. My husband looked up at me and twisted his head just a bit.

“You were recording me? Now, why would you do that?” He definitely knew why. I had to run. I couldn’t get out of this now. I ran towards the door. My husband grabbed the knife he had used to kill our son that was laying on the counter uncleaned. He leapt to the door, faster than I’ve ever seen someone move. I grabbed the door knob and twisted slightly, then it hit me. Not a thought, not an emotion, but the knife. It hit my back. I let out a piercing scream. My husband quickly covered my mouth with his hand. The knife left my back and re entered my side. The pain was suffocating. I thought maybe, hopefully someone heard the first part of my yelp. Once again, the knife left my body, and went back in, this time on my other side. I started fading away, but I tried to stay strong, to stay alive. I stayed hopeful that

someone heard me, the police would be on their way soon. The knife was pulled out aggressively. I acted as if I had no strength left. My husband got up, and looked at me for a moment. I could tell he felt no remorse. Why had he done this? What was the reason behind killing your family? I wanted to ask, but that wasn't an option. As I waited on the floor, dying, listening to see if I could hear police sirens, my hope started drifting away. My husband bent down once more. He flipped me over and saw I was still alive. He planted the knife in my stomach, then my chest, and one more time in my throat. I had never felt something more painful. I let out a small noise containing a tone of pain. I was drifting away slowly. Before closing my eyes I saw that tall dark figure.

“I told you.” It said in a deep voice. The last thing I heard was the distant sound of police sirens. It was too late for me, or Ben, but at least my painful scream saved his next victim.

SLASHER HOUSE

Gavin Kirby, 15

Me and the boys thought it would be a good idea, you know fun and thrilling, but it did not play out the way we had hoped. Now they are now all dead. This is the story of Halloween 2021.

Brad was real small, but man could that guy fight. He was heading to the Marines, we had always called him Captain America cause we pictured him turning into a stud like in the movie. He was dressing up as Chucky the doll for Halloween. Lukas was the musclehead of the 5 of us. He always said the dumbest things and was probably the funniest person I'd known except for me, but the timing he had on his jokes were just too perfect. He was dressing up as Freddy Krueger. Jess had the most knowledge in the group, it felt like he knew everything. He wasn't up for much childish ideas anymore so I was surprised when he wanted to go trick or treating with us. He was going as Leatherface. And then there was Grey. We were all sophomores in high school, but Grey went online, so we never saw him unless we hung out with him which wasn't often because he had never wanted to hang out or he was grounded. But this time he did. He was going as Scream.

The Wednesday before Halloween, we went to Spirit Halloween to get our costumes. I was going as Michael Myers. Jess was the only one who could drive at the time, so we had to ride with him. He picked all of us up in his mom's car. If Lukas or Brad were in the front seat I would pull them from the seat because it was either me or Grey riding shotgun. He had always picked me up first and dropped me off last because I lived closest to him. That day seemed pretty normal all for except this one house we passed on the way home. We took the same route every day and never noticed it. I lived at that place for only a year so I was confused about how it just appeared. "Hey has that always been there?" Jess asked.

"I've never noticed it." I said confusingly. I feel like I would of noticed a creepy house in the middle of a field at the of the street, I would've been able to

see it from my house, and the thing about the house was it had looked worn and beat down like it had been there for centuries.

The next day, when I got home that night I asked the old man who lived next to me about the house, he had lived in the neighborhood basically since it was built. I figured he would know about it. He looked like he saw a ghost when I asked him about it. He invited me inside to talk, I was hesitant and came up with a poor excuse, I couldn't remember what it was, but it was something about it's getting dark. He looked me dead in the eye and said, "They say a witch lived there." he paused to look at the house, "I never thought I'd see it again."

"What do you mean?"

"Back in 1971, almost 50 years ago, that house showed up. I was a just a boy, about your age. I went in there with some friends and I was the only one who came out." he said saddened thinking about it. I stood there not knowing what to say with a lump in my throat. Finally, I asked about what had happened. He just looked at me and said, "We all went crazy, it was a blood bath, we just turned on each other and I was the only one who had survived." With nothing to say I told him thank you and sorry, I turned and walked away. The man was old but he wasn't crazy. He had yelled something at me but I didn't hear him.

I was laying in bed that night, tossing and turning, wondering what he was talking about, witches hadn't been around in like 300 years. He had startled me to the bone. It was all I could think about. My mother was asleep. I had lived with her because she and my dad were divorced, and I was a huge mama's boy. But anyway she was asleep, so I decided to go check the house out. On the way there I saw the old man sleeping in his rocking chair on the porch. He crept me out, everything he did, how he slept, how he talked, and especially how he looked. He had a few hairs on his head and his eyes had this crazy look to them like they were always wide open. When I was younger, my brother had told me he killed his son because he kept sneaking out, so the old man buried him alive. I grew out of that but something deep down told it was

true.

When I reached the house I just stared at it. Most of the windows were smashed and all the bushes had no leaves, the tree was the strangest thing about the house. There was a hole in it and it looked so beautiful, all the leaves were there and green. But it wasn't evergreen and it was late October yet not a single leaf was missing. I felt its bark, and the smell it gave off was like lavender. I felt a calm sensation. I went home and fell asleep with ease.

Friday and Saturday went by quickly and we had finally arrived at Halloween night. It had been a fun night so far. We all went about two blocks over to go trick or treating, then came back to my house to carve pumpkins and watch football. We all wanted to go to a haunted house except Brad, he was scared very easily. We forced him to go. The haunted house changed themes every year this year it was westside grim, so we figured it would be a whole bunch of cowboy zombies. It had been a pretty thrilling experience, but not enough. So, Jess and I told the others about the house at the end of the street. They were down for going to take a look around but Brad was trying to get out of it because he said he was tired and wanted to go home, but once again we forced him to go.

We walked there from my house. There he was again, the old man on his porch but this time he was standing, surveying like a hawk. I waved, and he gave me a crazy eye and yelled to have a spooky evening. I tried to shake it from my head but couldn't. We arrived and went into the house, as we entered the house we notice a terrible odor all over the place. Everyone wanted to explore, except Brad he seemed very disturbed. He was always looking out the windows, he never really looked around. Grey was messing around and fell, landed face-first on the floor, and made a hole in it. We all started laughing at him until he said, "Hey something is down there, it was big, I saw it move." We all tried pushing each other out of the way to see, except Brad, me being the biggest I made it through easily. I couldn't see much because it was too dark, so I used my flashlight on my phone. Still, it looked like a bottomless pit. So we looked around for something to pry the wood planks off of the floor. Brad and

Lukas went upstairs. We looked through the kitchen and all of the closets. The house was built with a garage but we couldn't find the door to it. We tried to get outside to get in through the garage door but the front door wouldn't budge and we were trapped. We had thought it was Brad and Lukas pulling a prank until we heard some clattering upstairs. But when I heard someone give out a terrified scream like out of a horror movie, my stomach dropped and I couldn't move, I was paralyzed.

We all ran upstairs to find Brad gushing blood from his chest and Lukas was nowhere to be seen. We dialed 911 but had no reception. He tried to get out some final words. We watched his blood-pouring lips sound out, "Freddy is alive." We had no clue what he meant. Jess did his best to stop the bleeding, but the effort was all for naught. Brad had finally bled out, we took his body and laid him on the bed. We looked for Lukas for a solid 30 minutes, the house wasn't that big so there weren't many places he could be. We gave up and went downstairs to continue to try to pry open the boards with our hands. Whatever was going on, we knew something under the house would show us the purpose of all of this. But still, what was Brad talking about, "Freddy is alive"?

After finally pulling back at least a solid 3 squared feet in the floor, we could see that there was a floor about 20 feet down, that jump could break a bone, but Lukas was usually the one to have the guts to do it, but he wasn't there. So instead we tried to find a ladder of some kind. Jess tried to figure out the landscape of the house to try to find the wall to the garage. Grey also found a hammer in a kitchen drawer, so when Jess found the wall, then Grey started to hammer away. Grey had finally made a hole in the wall and saw a light turn off and someone move. He yelled out for Lukas, no response. We continued to try to break down the wall, maybe he was just seeing things, but I had to know, after everything, I had to know.

There had finally become a big enough hole to fit through. I went first, then Grey, and finally Jess. In the room, the floor was carpet and there was a table, lamp, and posters on the wall. The only entries to the room were the garage door and a door that led to what seemed like the kitchen, it must have

been painted over or something. We had started turning the garage upside down looking for clues but didn't find a thing. Jess thought we should pull back the carpet, so we did and it paid off. There was a trapdoor.

The trapdoor had led down to the basement. The space seemed bigger than the house. There was nothing, not a table, not a chair, the only thing we found was some potato sacks and a gas can. Grey said he heard something but neither I nor Jess heard it. He said it sounded like a muffled song. We thought he was just hearing echoes.

I was walking around making sure we hadn't missed anything but then I ran into something. It looked like thin air, when I touched it, I felt a fabric. I grabbed it and pulled it, it was like a human-sized box they used for magic shows to make someone disappear. There was some kind of crank at the bottom, I turned it, and then all a sudden I was upstairs looking at Brad's dead body again, the box came with me. I was again in shock.

I ran all the way back to the basement, to find Grey dead on the basement floor. It looked like his head had been chopped off by a chainsaw. Jess was nowhere to be seen. I started to piece everything together. Brad, the cuts in his chest, Grey, chainsaw marks in his neck and then I remembered, Brad's last words, "*Freddy is alive.*"

I thought I was going crazy but nothing could explain it, their costumes are coming to life. The only thing I couldn't figure out was what had made them come alive, there had to be some kind of cursed object or maybe they had just gone completely insane.

There I was all by myself in a dark basement. I could only think about making it through the night. The door was locked so I couldn't get out that way, I tried the garage door but no luck. The only thing I could do was walk around and find something to do. I went up to the room where Brad's body is to try to find something of interest. And there it was just sitting there the chainsaw, No Jess and still no Lukas but there it was, with thick dark blood still dripping from the chain. The thing was, it looked plastic, I even touched it to make sure, just plastic. I turned around and saw Jess's body hanging there

on the wall, his chest slit open but he was still alive somehow singing that song “*One, two, Freddy’s coming for you, three, four, he’s at your door, five, six, grab your crucifix, seven, eight, ya better stay awake, nine, ten, never sleep again.*” He was gone, they were all gone and at that moment something clicked, it had always been there but it really set a fire in my soul. I grabbed my knife and went downstairs. I did the only thing that felt right. I stood and waited, no words, no movements, no thoughts, just me waiting to kill.

After about an hour of waiting, just standing there. Finally there it was, the scratching of those knives on the wall, I turn and see him, the last one left. Lukas was somewhere in there but I didn’t care at that point. When I get out of here I could just call it self-defense. It seems I’ve always wanted to kill someone, this is my chance, with a get out of free jail card, I figured why not. But I wanted this guy to suffer. We started taking swings at each other, we had stabbed each other at least 5 times each. But I had thought to myself, he is nothing without the knives, I grabbed the glove to remove them from his hand, but his skin burned me. At this point I felt no pain, all I wanted to do was kill no matter what it took. I removed his glove which seemed to lift the curse but I had to make sure he was dead. I lifted him off the ground by his neck and slammed him through the floor and we took a 20 feet fall; which wasn’t as bad as I’d thought it would have been.

I got up and he didn’t move, he was still alive so I had to finish him. I grabbed the potato sacks and put them over his head and started pouring the gas, mainly on his face to waterboard him. Then I grabbed a box of matches I had in my pocket, lit one, and dropped it, burning him alive. I stood there and watched with no expression on my face and once again; no words, no movements, no thoughts. Just standing there, watching my last friend burn.

The End

WITCHES AND FAMILIARS

Dorian Glanz, 16

Salem, October 1692

“They know, Mary. We can’t hide anymore.”

“They don’t truly know.”

“Mary, if we do not take action tonight, we will be hanged by sunrise tomorrow.”

“Then what do you suggest we do? Run, as women?”

“We can protect each other.”

“*What* are you suggesting?”

“We can put ourselves into objects, then once the hangings are done, the objects can be broken, and we may return.”

“Julia, we have known each other for so long, and we know each other’s powers well, you know I can not cast people into objects.”

“Then I will find another route, I have no family, only a husband. You, Mary, have a son who needs you. Bring me back an object of great importance to you, I will cast you into it, and give it to your familiar. He will have someone break the mirror and you will return safely.”

She paused.

“However, he might keep the object and never break it, leaving you forever trapped in the mirror.”

“So you will cast me into a mirror, and we will hope my familiar releases me when the danger of me being hanged for witchcraft is no more?” concluded Mary.

Julia nodded in confirmation.

“Once you are in the mirror, and it is safe for you to return home, your familiar will break it.”

The two women sat across from each other at Mary’s dining room table. The table, old and wooden, hosted four wooden chairs around it, and a gently flickering candle in the middle. The rest of the house was currently empty; her

husband and son were out of the house buying feed from a neighbor. Julia watched Mary, trying to understand what was going through her mind after Julia's proposal. Mary sat straight with her hands folded neatly on the table. She wore her favorite outfit: a tame pink dress and an eggshell white bonnet. As if being called, Mary's familiar flew into the room. He landed roughly on the back of a wooden chair that sat between them. The chair rocked as his weight shifted, and the witches smiled at his presence.

"I do love my familiar," began Mary, while looking at his shiny black feathers, "however, he is a crow, and his nature might get the best of him. I doubt he would break the object," she finished.

"Then go fetch me something fragile, so if he were to drop it, it would break," Julia requested.

Knowing it is the only real hope she has, Mary stood and went to her bedroom. There, on her nightstand, laid a small silver handheld mirror. It was given to her by her son and husband. They worked tirelessly and saved their money for many months to be able to afford something so beautiful. As Mary looked upon it, her heart grew warmer. With the mirror, she turned and made her way back to the dining room.

"Do you have an object?" Asked Julia

"Yes, I have chosen a mirror given to me by my husband and my son."

Mary proceeded to lay the mirror in the middle of the table next to the candle. The women looked at it menacingly. As they looked at each other, they knew they were ready to proceed.

"Cast me into it now. I truly hope to see you, Peter, and Thomas again very soon," Mary said.

With a melancholy sigh, Julia stood.

"Let us begin," she replied.

Boston, Massachusetts, October 2018

Every year, forests are painted by the brilliant colors of autumn. Solemn Maple and Oak trees are annually transformed into wonderful bright colors, the pine trees maintained their steady green, and they smelt like caramel. Crisp October winds bind them all together, and softly their foliage is brushed across the barren forest floor. Below the foliage are paths. They are trickled throughout the forest and wind meticulously through the maze of trees.

At the woods entrance, is an area for the hikers to park their cars. The long limbs of trees watch over the dirt parking lot, and they sway without resistance as the occasional cold breeze pushes and pulls at them. The parking lot is bordered by an old wooden fence, it once saw many cars come and go. Down the road, is the lowly hum of a tan 2008 Ford Explorer. The summers within it are boiling, and the winters are frigid. The CD player is jammed, and the only song that can be played is the forever-stuck “Unwritten” from a Natasha Bedingfield track. The sides of the car are badly scratched, and the back seat doors don’t open at all. Despite the car’s drawbacks, to a young teen, it’s a vessel of freedom. With every window rolled down, the driver’s hair whips insanely, in a fashion without a pattern. Her lips are upturned, and her teeth blared as loud as the music. Her cheeks and nose are an unusual rosy red, and slightly chapped. The cold wind showed no mercy to them. Slowly, her foot began to let off the accelerator, and she shifted her gaze from the road ahead to the thick forest broken apart by the vacant parking lot. She turned down the music and heard the crunching of gravel below her heavy tires. As she parked, she noticed numerous unfamiliar characteristics of the woodland. She noticed the large trunks of the trees that indicated their continuously growing age. She noticed the obnoxious chirping of the many birds, and she noticed the absence of people. These things gave her a great unease. Rapidly, she cast away her anxious thoughts. I’m here to relax, she reminded herself. She then side-stepped out of her car, raised her trunk door, sat as comfortably as she could in the cramped back, and waited for her friend’s arrival.

“Juniper!” shouted her friend Mercedes as she stepped out of her car.

Juniper jumped up from the back of her vehicle; she angrily walked towards her friend.

“Mercedes, what is this place? This forest doesn’t seem like a good area for a nature hike.”

Mercedes downturned her head slightly and laughed, “You said you wanted a peaceful place to hang out.”

Juniper grew slightly agitated but knew it was best to let the small stuff go. Amidst the silence, they could begin to hear another car come down the road. It was Walker, their other friend, unsurprisingly late. He wears his typical black beanie, sweat pants, shirt, and jacket, they all fit just a little too big.

The three friends talked loudly as they trampled down the trail. They spoke of the overload of school work, and the drama between their friends. As they made their way deeper into the woods they marveled at the many lost trinkets sprinkled along the path. Walker was the first to notice, he had spotted a small shiny gear, buried mostly by the leaves and dirt. He had no interest in it and left it without a word, but soon they had all noticed these little objects, and it became apparent something had gathered them.

“Wow, take a look at this!” Juniper exclaimed.

Shiny-eyed, she held up a tiny pocket watch. Its face was cracked, and the hands no longer moved. However, it had what looked like a thin gold lining.

“If I clean this up it might look half decent,” she said as she stuffed it in her pocket.

They made their way down the trail looking for new places to explore. The sound of a creek piqued their interest. Upon arrival, they awed at its peaceful silence. Here, there is an unsettling lack of animals, just like the rest of the forest. The small birds chirp uncomfortably loud as if they compete over one another, and the water, louder than the birds, crashes into and tosses around the pebbles below it. For Walker, the beautiful sight is not satisfying enough. He sat down on the pebble bank and began taking off his shoes. The girls, who liked this idea, followed his lead. Soon they are all wading in the stream. The

small pebbles seemed to massage their feet, a good feeling accompanied by the cold rushing water. With an affection for the water, Juniper began to slide her feet forward. Pebble by pebble, she slowly made her way downstream. As leaves fell into the current she followed them, thinking about the path they would take. Grinning, she turned her head back towards her friends, a surge of astonishment sent through her, she had walked so far, she could barely see her friends. Her mouth opened, and she began to send some sort of signal, but before she could utter a word, the rocks shifted below her, and she was forced onto a dangerous mossy patch. Panicking, she attempted to scramble backward, but the frictionless ground quickly pulled her to the earth. The water took her, and she was pushed downstream.

Juniper grasped her bearings quickly, despite the pain created by the fall. She made her way to the stream's bank and began to make her way back to her friends. Strangely, the birds made no noise now, and the trees seemed to lumber over her heavily. Juniper felt uneasy, the ends of her hair standing up as she felt as though someone was watching her. She turned her head towards the opposite side of the bank and met eyes with a strange-looking woman. The woman's face was so solemn, she appeared to look straight through Juniper. In terror Juniper ran, her legs moved her faster than she has ever gone before. She ran along the bank, from the direction she had fallen.

"Juniper! Juniper!" She heard Mercedes and Walker call. She ran towards their voices.

"Run, run!" she shouted back to them.

Mercedes stopped Juniper, and roughly grasped her shoulders.

"What has gotten into you? Why are you so cut up?" Juniper could barely reply to her.

"There was this woman. She was dressed strangely, like someone from long ago. Her skin didn't look real. It was pale white, and her eyes, they were pale as well."

Her friends' eyes widened, they all began to understand she was describing a spirit. Mercedes began to walk backward as if subconsciously

walking to the forest's entrance. Without time to gather their thoughts, the birds' chirping grew overwhelmingly loud. What is going on? Juniper thought as she began to cover her ears. Walker and Mercedes painfully covered their ears as well. Figures from above began to move quickly. Juniper watched as one of the birds dove down onto Walker. Its talons tore his skin, and to his demise, several more followed. The other birds dove down, one after the other, attacking not just Walker, but all of them. Among the birds is a large crow, he created the most mayhem. Becoming lost in the frenzy of birds they began to call out towards one another.

“Just run!” Walker shouted.

As they ran the birds followed them; they could not outrun them, and their pain caused them to be slowed. Walker, overcome by the many birds around him, could not keep pace with the makeup of the forest floor. A sharp rock jutted irregularly out of the ground, and he fell harshly onto a bed of jagged rocks.

“Walker!” Juniper shouted while going to him.

As the girls made their way over to him, the birds escaped to the trees. Lying next to Walker was a cracked handheld mirror. The mirror looked very expensive, similar to something that belonged in a museum. Despite its age and dirty appearance, its silver still sparkled. To Juniper and Mercedes's surprise, Walker slowly stirred, and his expression became eased as he saw the birds had left. His friends sat next to him, offering aid. Suddenly, the mirror next to him began to shake. Its shaking quickly became more violent, and it began to jump off the ground. It jumped higher and higher each time it left the earth. At its peak, it came back to the ground at a quick descent, and landed harshly, shattering into several small fragments. There was a long silence as they looked into each other for answers. Together they gazed from the broken mirror to the woman who now stood in front of them.

“... it's her,” said Juniper.

However, she did not look now as Juniper saw her earlier. She looked healthier, and her face almost appeared to smile. The woman looked down on

them kindly.

“Thank you, I have been trapped in that mirror for countless years. Now I am whole again,” the woman said softly.

She motioned her hand in the air. The crow came down and landed on her shoulder. She then continued.

“This crow, my familiar, was supposed to release me from that mirror, however, he failed.”

Shocked, the teenagers sat unmovingly. Their energy was focused solely on the woman. Juniper, full of questions, managed to muster just one.

“Where will you go now, surely this world is new to you?” Juniper asked.

The woman quietly chuckled. “Frankly, I don’t quite know. However, I am not going to remain here.”

At this, the foliage at the woman’s feet began to shift, and the breeze began to build to an aggressive wind. It picked up the leaves, and they frantically danced around her. The leaves multiplied and encased her. The friends thought it was impossible, but the leaves began to circle her even faster. The flying debris blinded the teens, and they were forced to look away. Quickly, the wind began to settle, and the leaves began to fall downwards. As the teens looked back, they searched for the woman and her crow, but they were no longer there. All there was left to witness was the last leaf slowly floating to the floor.

“Did you pick up that mirror, Walker?” Juniper inquired, trying to grasp what had just happened.

“Yes, I saw you take that pocket watch, so when I saw the mirror I thought I would take it for myself,” replied Walker.

Thinking now of the pocket watch, Juniper moved her hand towards the pocket she had placed it in. As she felt around in the small pocket, she realized it was gone.

“I think it’s time for us to leave.” Said, Mercedes.

As they made their way back to the entrance, they noticed that the chirping of the birds had leveled out. There were no longer any little metal

objects, and the wildlife had come back.

“Look, Juniper!” Mercedes shouted as she pointed in the distance.

Beyond her finger was a small fox chasing after a small brown bunny. Life in the forest had drawn back to a norm.

Their nature hike had been like nothing they had ever experienced before. It bonded them closely and gave them a memory no one would ever believe. They left and separated into each of their cars. As they drove away, the tree limbs waved a seldom goodbye, and the wind whispered a friendly farewell.

Salem, October 1692

Julia sat at the wooden table, Mary’s crow sat across from her. The mirror, which now incases Mary, sat lifelessly. She stared at it. The crow cawed, and Julia was reminded of her mission.

“You know what you must do. Take this mirror somewhere safe, but far. Break it when the hangings are over.”

Julia went over to the door and opened it to provide him with a passage. Understanding, he gripped the mirror in his claws and flew quickly out of the home. As he flew out, Mary’s husband, Peter, and son, Thomas, were revealed walking home. At the sight of her, they hurried in and shut the door behind them.

“Good afternoon Julia! Do we need to go catch that bird? It had Mary’s mirror!” said Thomas.

“There will be no need,” replied Julia, stone-faced.

“Where has Mary gone? Is she here?” asked Peter.

“She is gone,” replied Julia.

Mary’s husband walked closer to her. He was clearly becoming irritable, but behind his strong facade, he was worried.

“Explain yourself, you sound like a witch.” Peter spat out.

Julia beckoned them to the table. She explained her being there, and that she and Mary were in fact guilty of witchcraft. She had only the best

intentions for them both, and she made it very clear. By the end of her explanation, she saw Peter shed a tear.

“So what will become of you now?” Peter asked.

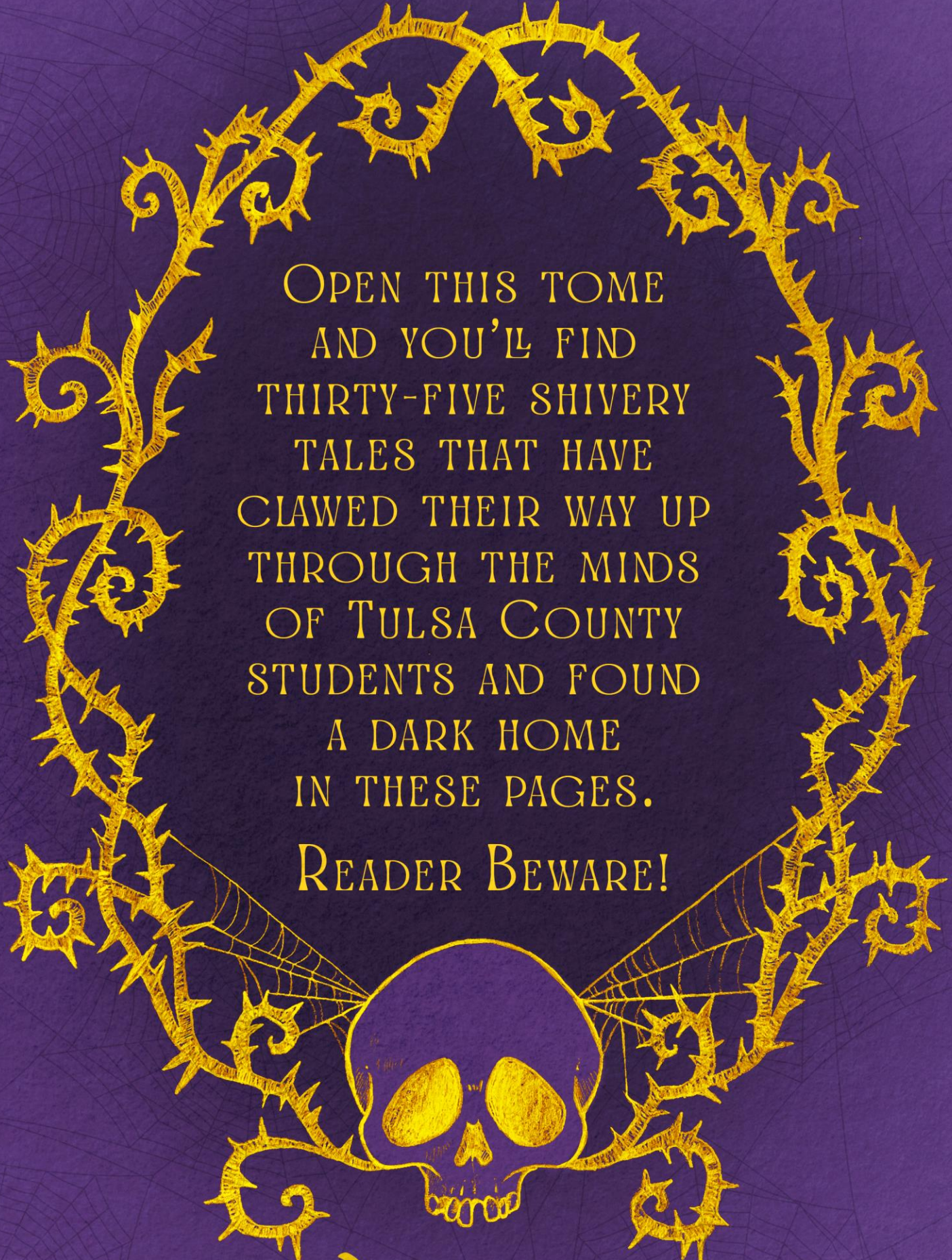
“I will stay here. I do not fear about my future, and I will accept my punishment.”

“We thank you for saving her life,” he replied with a genuine smile.

He stood, and motioned Thomas to join him, Julia followed them. They walked outside and stood just outside the door.

They looked up at the sky and watched as the last images of the crow disappeared from view. A cold breeze moved throughout the home, and it blew out the candles. As they stood outside together, the moonlight illuminated their faces, and they hoped that no matter what happened to Mary, she would find a better life than what awaited her in Salem.





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CLAWED THEIR WAY UP
THROUGH THE MINDS
OF TULSA COUNTY
STUDENTS AND FOUND
A DARK HOME
IN THESE PAGES.

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