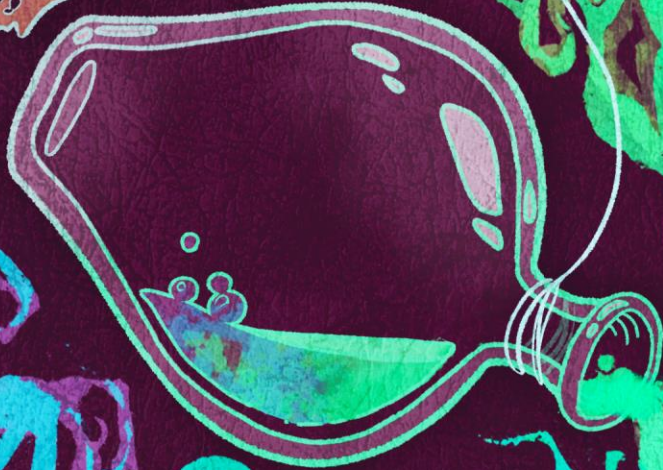


SCHUSTERMAN-BENSON  
LIBRARY PRESENTS



# SPOOKY STORIES

2022





Schusterman-Benson Library

*presents*

Spooky Stories

•2022•



First Edition: February 2023

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 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.



## RESIDENT HORROR

Sam Saint Laurent, 11

Brooklyn Orphanage

Brooklyn, MI

October 31

Trick-or-treating hours

Every evening, ghostly howls are broadcasted into my tiny, drab room in the Brooklyn Orphanage. When I learned I was being transferred here, I was thrilled. I had never been to New York before.

No one told me I was going to Brooklyn, Michigan until I was standing in the run-down entry hall, listening to the clanks of the pipes that hadn't been replaced since the Nixon administration. The only personal item I was allowed was my small dog, Sadie. I'd had her since I was seven, just before my parents died in the crash, five years ago. I had lived with my grandparents, until they both passed away, too. My aunt and uncle lived in Thailand, so it's not like I could go stay with them.

I was not a favorite of Ma Wheeler, the strict and somewhat abusive caretaker of the orphanage. Then again, nobody was really a favorite of hers. Not that we wanted to be. She was built like an ox, with arms like German sausages. Although she was menacing, she was easily fooled, so I was always playing pranks on her. It was the only way I could survive.

At about six-thirty on a foggy, moonless night, Ma Wheeler barged into my room. Or at least tried to: she couldn't fit through the doorway of my cramped quarters.

"You're staying here tonight, Jack," she snarled from out in the hallway.

"What?!" I exclaimed. Halloween had always been my favorite holiday.

"I didn't appreciate that little stunt with the mashed potatoes," she growled. "Be glad this is your only punishment."

Yesterday, I had swapped Ma Wheeler's deodorant with the ivory white mashed potatoes from Ian Mackey's (the somewhat dangerous orphanage bully) plate. She didn't enjoy having to be at the ER for an hour while they dealt with Ian's vengeful stomach cramps.

"We'll be back at nine," she said, and slammed the door with such force that the



top hinge disconnected from the doorframe. Sadie growled from my lap.

“It’s okay, girl,” I soothed as the sounds of happy children wafted into my room like the mist outside. I arranged my pillow comfortably and sunk down into it, staring up at the yellowed ceiling. I thought of my mom’s angelic face, and her beautiful long hair. Everyone in town had said she was a once-in-a-lifetime beauty. Unfortunately, because of the accident, the casket had been closed.

\* \* \* \* \*

At around seven, I went to the cafeteria for some dinner, Sadie yipping at my heels. The dirty, prison-like building was even more scary with everyone gone. I had to flick on all the hall lights as I made my trek, which seemed to spark as they came to life. Ma Wheeler had always made us eat *healthy*, a code word for *vegetarian*. Our breakfasts normally consisted of limp kale, eggs, kale, toast, and more kale. On a good day, lunch was veggie burgers. If it wasn’t...I just skipped it all together.

As for dinner, I was now raiding the kitchen for anything that didn’t taste or look like mold. I found a box of Twinkies that were seemingly left over from the seventies, but I scarfed one down anyway and continued my search, the ghostly howls now a benign background noise.

After much effort, I came up empty-handed, and tried to return to the Twinkies, but they had mysteriously vanished. A chill shot up my spine as the ghostly, ever-present caterwauling suddenly got louder.

Another noise, like distant, grumbling thunder suddenly began somewhere on the south side of the currently abandoned orphanage. It sounded like a mental patient was banging away on one of those square, metal ventilation pipes. Sadie bolted from between my legs and disappeared through the maze of kitchen shelving.

“Sadie, come back!”

I ran after her in a panic, dodging sharp-edged shelves as the incessant banging got louder and louder. When I got to the end, Sadie was nowhere to be seen. I desperately scanned the perimeter of the dirty, concrete room, searching for any sign of my beloved Sadie.

Suddenly, cans of old soup on a shelf a few feet away exploded as green flames ripped across their metal surface. I dove for cover as a tidal wave of cream-of-mushroom gushed towards me. I tore away, desperate to get back to the relative safety

of my room, but the kitchen storage had now become a confusing labyrinth where shelves of food formed towering walls, and every time I turned a corner, the passage mysteriously shape-shifted and warped. As I sprinted in desperation, I saw the floor of the exit hallway...on the ceiling. Up was down, and down was up.

I felt sick to my stomach from the distortion.

The wall where I had been just moments before suddenly collapsed, and the wave of viscous soup gushed through, nearly swallowing me whole. It formed a barrier, pushing forward while wet, fungal tentacles shot out of it, destroying the rickety shelving in its path.

A passageway like a vertical cave entrance suddenly opened up in the dusty floor. I leapt desperately into it, going into brief free fall before thudding to the hard ground. I looked back to the passage and saw the soup flooding the entire kitchen before the hole closed up with a *squelch*, cutting me off from everything I knew.

This new, mysterious room was dark and chilly. I stumbled forward with my arms outstretched and bumped into a heavy-duty hook, and realized I was inside a frigid meat locker. Then I saw some shapes materializing in the gloom. They were silhouettes of human skeletons hanging from their necks. My legs spasmed, and I had to steady myself on one of the gristly meat hooks, taking deep breaths. It was unnerving in the extreme, but at least they were already dead.

I discovered a heavy metal door, wrenched it open, and started planning the rest of my escape. But when the primal, paranormal howling started up again, I knew deep in my heart I would never be free.

\* \* \* \* \*

A clammy something suddenly smacked into my face, knocking me to the floor. I imagined some buff zombie was attacking me, and an amorphous blob had wrapped me up in its tentacles, which felt surprisingly similar to damp bedsheets.

Something clicked in my brain. I *was* wrapped up in my bedsheets. I jerked my head up and saw Ian Mackey, the orphanage bully, cracking his knuckles. He had slapped me so hard that I had fallen right out of bed.

And then I realized my whole death-defying adventure down to the kitchen had been just a dream. I could jump for joy and do every dance move I knew, but I was currently way too groggy for anything that strenuous.

“What gives?” I groaned. I had no idea how long I had been asleep for.

“It’s midnight, Shrimp,” he answered menacingly. “You were thrashing around in your bed, and you punctured my wall,” he chided, thumbing his meaty appendage.

Indeed. A foot-shaped hole could be seen in the paper-thin divider of our residences.

“I had a fitful night,” I said sheepishly.

“Don’t let it happen again,” he snarled as he exited my room, leaving my door slightly ajar. Sadie snuggled up against me, her fur warm and cozy, and I began to drift off again right there on the floor.

Before I could conk out, the distant sound of banging pipes began again in earnest. The ghostly howls started up too, and this time, I knew they were real. Sadie bolted from my room as the crashing and whooshing was amplified. I scrambled out after her, wanting desperately to not have to chase her through the dark and maze-like orphanage.

I pushed open my door and hit the hall. Sadie was gone. A huge shiver wove its way up my spine. I steeled my courage and glanced to the end of the long, dark hallway. A shape suddenly materialized in the doorway at the other end. The figure was tall with long hair. I cautiously made my way forward.

“Ma Wheeler? That you?” I squeaked.

There was no answer, but the shape, a mere shadow at this point, beckoned me forward.

“Ian?! Come on. This isn’t funny,” I reprimanded, unconvincingly.

I was halfway down the hall. There was now enough light coming through the stairwell to tell who it was. There, standing in the doorway was my mom, smiling sweetly, but her once delicate features were still mangled from the crash. She beckoned me with a crushed and bloodied hand. I knew I shouldn’t go, but losing her had been too great a loss. I was desperate to see her again. She motioned to me again and I could smell her, a mixture of daises and something more sinister. Something that belonged in the trash.

“Mommy!?” I cried out. Every fiber in my body told me to stay put. My hand shot out and instinctively tried to claw the wall.

But I couldn’t help it. I started to run towards her. Her mangled and once beautiful face.



## SPOOKY SCARY SKELETONS

Audrey Huckaby, 11

Oscar looked out the window of the classroom. *Only ten more minutes*, he thought, watching a squirrel run up a tree. Today was Halloween and he was more than ready to grab a basket and fill it with candy. He was going to go trick or treating with his friends Amelia, Kloe, Blair, and Dyllan, he had that down, but not what he was going to be. Amelia was going to be a black cat, Kloe and Blair were going to go as a devil and an angel, and Dyllan was going as a dragon. The bell rang. *Oh well, I guess I'll let Amelia decide, she's gotta have at least one idea in her mind.*

Arriving at the door of Amelia's house he rang the doorbell. No answer, he looked through the window and saw Dyllan running to the door.

"Hey, sorry, Amelia's busy with something," he said, opening the door for him.

"It's ok."

Walking into the foyer he saw pumpkins on the shoe cabinet alongside the photos of her family, and of her artwork. Amelia was very talented in art and had taught Oscar how to do it, but their artwork was different nonetheless. In the kitchen, Kloe sat in a chair while Amelia put face paint on her.

"Hey Amelia, do you have an idea of what kind of costume I should wear?" he asked.

"Hmmm...how about a skeleton?" Amelia said, not looking up.

"Where will you get a skeleton costume this late into the night? Basically all the costumes everywhere are sold out!" he asked frantically

"The closet under the stairs," she responded calmly. *Oh boy*, he thought, *this is gonna be a long night.*

Now Oscar was sitting in a chair in Amelia's kitchen wearing a skeleton costume that Amelia seemed to pull out of nowhere.

"I told you it would fit," Amelia said with pride.

"Yeah but it's just about as comfortable as an itchy sweater," he complained.

"Beauty is pain, now shut it and let me do your makeup," she prompted. Oscar sat still as Amelia poked and prodded at his face with a makeup brush. In the background, he could see Kloe and Blair messing around with Amelia's cat Noodles. Amelia had said

that she named him when she was four, but now she was sixteen, and her cat's name didn't match his old, crumpled body. Not to say Amelia didn't take care of him well, it's just that the cat had already outlived his species' estimated lifespan, and had outlived two of his coexisting cats, both being killed by coyotes.

When everyone was ready, they looked like a strange marriage of monsters, a blue and purple devil (because Kloe insisted on wearing her favorite colors), a semi-biblically accurate angel, a black cat, and a skeleton, and boy did Amelia do a good job at that makeup. Blair looked as if she had more than two eyes, and Oscar himself looked more dead than alive. It was freaky how Amelia put all her heart into the makeup and costumes. *I guess Halloween really is her favorite holiday.*

When they finally stepped out of the door it was 8:48 pm, past dark, and everyone was hyped up. Amelia brought matching jackets for everyone, each matching their costume's color themes. Amelia herself wore a black, puffy jacket with pink details and a pink silhouette of a cat on the back. Oscar couldn't think of anything Amelia couldn't make a theme for an outfit. Blair and Kloe were her willing dress-up dolls, each loving to dress up with her wherever they would go. Oscar and Dyllan, on the other hand, were her friends from summer camp when they were all about 8 years old, and they would roleplay as warriors on the playgrounds outside.

This night was more peaceful than other nights but had the crisp smell of pumpkins in the air and a festive feel of Halloween. Across the street Dyllan was already walking up to the door, he had been going ahead from everyone all day. Oscar watched as a ghost decoration popped out at him as the door opened, making him jump.

"AHH!" Dyllan screamed. Oscar laughed, so did Amelia, and then Kloe and Blair looked up from their baskets and giggled. The house was the old man James', a jolly old man who loved celebration holidays.

"Happy Halloween, kid," he said to Dyllan by the time everyone had gotten to his porch.

Hours passed and they had gotten through a total of 26 houses, and Amelia was now holding Oscar's candy bag for him because of how heavy it was while sucking on a lollipop. They all walked together while talking about decorations in the yards and how nice everyone has been.

"Remember the decorations at that one house?"

“It was a shame they weren’t home.”

“What costumes do you think Melody and her friends wore this year?” Melody was Amelia’s sister, and she also invited friends to their house to get ready, but they left about an hour before Oscar got there.

“Melody would have been tormenting me if she was still there!” Oscar joked.

“Yeah right,” Amelia said sarcastically.

“I’m not joking!” he exaggerated.

“No, I would’ve been tormenting you if I wasn’t in costume!” Blair grinned.

“Hey, do you guys wanna go to that fair tonight?” Dyllan suggested.

“There’s a fair?” asked Kloe.

“Yeah, it’s for ages 8-18!” he said.

“Sure! I’ll drive us,” Amelia stated, and with that, they were headed back to her house.

They walked into the festival, orange and purple lights glimmering as animatronic props chatter and flail their limbs. The first stall they went to was a frozen treat and drink stand, with potion bottle cups.

“Can I have a chocolate milkshake?” Amelia asked the server.

“Make that two!” Kloe added.

“Sure!” the server responded, “and anything for you three?”

“A water,” Blair said.

“Yeah can I have one too?” Dyllan added.

“Me too!” Oscar replied, directing his attention away from an animatronic prop next to the stand.

“Coming right up!” the lady said, and after a while they were walking around again.

“Oooh, laser tag!” Amelia said with excitement.

“I don’t think you know this but I can’t do laser tag with these prosthetic wings on.” Blair said.

“Oh, right,” Amelia said with a grin.

The show started as they arrived at the stage. People in costumes danced on stage to classic Halloween songs like ‘This is Halloween’, ‘Thriller’, ‘Ghostbusters’, and ‘Spooky Scary Skeletons.’ After the show ended, they walked back to Amelia’s car, worn



out, but still full of energy.

“Do you want to go to the haunted mansion on the hill?” Amelia asked with a joyful tone.

“Sure, but isn’t that illegal?” Dyllan asked.

“No, you’ve got it all wrong, it’s an attraction, it was just built at the end of this neighborhood.”

“Oh ok!” Oscar said, they headed up the hill and walked into the mansion. Suddenly, the door slammed behind them, trapping them in the horror attraction.

Blair jumped with a scream, Kloe covered her ears.

“Quiet down, you almost burst my eardrums!” she exaggerated.

“Did not!” Blair snapped.

“Calm down you two, you act like you’re going to die if we don’t find a way out!” Amelia teased.

“BECAUSE WE WILL!!” Blair escalated.

“No we won’t,” Amelia said coldly.

“Look, a door!” Oscar interrupted.

“Room number one,” Amelia read.

“Hey maybe this is the first room in the escape room!” Oscar repeated.

“Oh my goodness really?! I thought it was the last!” Kloe said sarcastically.

“Stop fighting and get in the room,” Amelia said, shoving them into the dim room.

“Well, I guess there’s no going back now!” Blair said.

Amelia stepped into the room, and instantly a wave of regret shot across her face.

“Ok, has anyone else besides me done an escape room before?” Amelia asked the group.

“Nope!” Blair said.

“Yeah same,” Kloe repeated.

Amelia looked at Oscar. “You?” she asked.

“Uhhh, no,” he said.

“Ok so basically, look anywhere you think could hide a clue, but do not rip anything off the walls, do not break anything, and for the love of god do not hurt yourself trying to find something,” Amelia said sternly. Kloe started touching the walls.

“What are you doing?” Oscar said blankly staring at her.

“I’m doing an Anna move,” she responded.

“A what move?” he said.

“An Anna move, you know, Anna, from Frozen?” she questioned.

“How is that an Anna move?” he asked.

“In Frozen 2 she touches anything trying to find a secret compartment.” she added.

“OH YEAH,” Blair said, getting up to look. She pulled out books from the shelf, revealing a lever.

“That quickly?” Oscar said, surprised. Blair pulled the lever, but the door did not open.

“Darn it!” Oscar said, defeated.

“If you really want to get out, how about you get up and help!” Dyllan said, moving a large vase on the ground.

“Oh,” he gasped. Behind was a lever, when he pulled it the door opened, and they were off to the next room.

As they walked into the next room, they saw a coffin leaning up against the wall, red flowers in vases, and fake bats on the ceiling. Without a word, Amelia walked up to the coffin and opened it, inside was a note, it read:

*‘They hide in caves dark and grim, their eyes red as the velvet trim.*

*Find a key in this room, for what awaits you is a po-’*

The ink faded into a stain of fake blood.

“Well that’s a great help,” Kloe complained. Amelia looked up at the bats, they had red eyes.

“I think I just found our lead.” She reached up and touched a bat, the wings opened, showing nothing.

“Everyone, touch the bats!” she commanded, and as she said everyone opened the bat’s wings. Once all of them were open, they stood there confused, except Blair. She got on her hands and knees and touched bats hanging from the furniture. She touched a bat behind the coffin, hanging from a shelf, and on the inside of the bat’s wing was a key, taped on.

“FOUND IT!” she exclaimed, interrupting the other’s planning,

“WHERE?!” Dyllan asked frantically.

“In a bat’s wings hanging from the shelf.”

She walked up to the door and opened it. The next room was glowing, potions on

shelves, and a cauldron in the middle, undoubtedly, it was a witch-themed room.

Blair held the door for the others, partly because she wanted to be polite, mostly because she was too scared to go into the room first. On the counter, a small piece of paper laid next to a bottle of mysterious liquid, it read:

*‘They hide in caves dark and grim, their eyes red as the velvet trim.*

*Find a key in this room, for what awaits you is a pointed hat and a broom.’*

It was a rewritten version of the previous note, continuing the riddle.

“Well that just confirms it, this is a witch-themed room,” Kloe said, flipping over the note. On the back was another note, it read:

*‘Mix and stir, experiment and fail,*

*If you get the potion right, only then may you prevail.’*

Blair picked up the bottle closed with a cork. On the side it had a list of ingredients which read out more like a riddle:

*‘fresh and green, keep your breath clean, dangerous with three (wear gloves if needed), crunchy and common, may they fall, for they can hide all that glows.’*

“It’s...another riddle?” Oscar said.

“No, it’s still a list of ingredients, it’s just complicated to decipher,” Amelia corrected. Everyone looked at the shelves. Peppers, mint, dead leaves, fireflies, and...poison ivy?

Kloe picked up the mint. “It’s obviously mint first,” she said.

“Then the poison ivy,” Amelia said, putting on rubber gloves.

“Then leaves,” Oscar said.

“And fireflies,” Dyllan said.

Blair grabbed the big spoon and stirred the mixture together. A note was propped under the cauldron.

*‘Pour the mixture in the bottle, and stick it through the door,’* it said.

“How are we supposed to stick it through the door?!” Amelia asked.

“I don’t know, just put it through.”

They put the paper through and got out of the room, into another dark room. Suddenly, confetti popped and the lights turned on.

Amelia yelped in surprise, as cheerful voices rang out, “CONGRATULATIONS ON FINISHING THE ESCAPE ROOM!!!!”

Standing there was her sister and her friends, all dressed in spooky costumes.



“What are you doing here?” Amelia asked her sister.

“I just wanted to support you, sister,” Melody said with a sinister grin.

“Yeah right,” Kloe said. Amelia, Melody, and Kloe had grown up together, and had gone trick-or-treating several times in the past.

“Let’s get out of here,” Oscar said with a creeped-out face. The floor and ceiling were covered in cobwebs, and Oscar was more than scared of spiders.

“Ok, you big baby,” Blair said teasingly, grabbing his arm and shoving him out of the door, into the rain.

“Uh yeah, that’s why we came to get you, it’s raining cats and dogs,” Melody said, and they walked home in the rain, umbrellas in hand, and had a good rest of their night.

The end :)

## HELL'S ERRAND

Rock Spears, 11

### PART 1

“Will you be okay?” Nick asked. “It’s been a week now.”

“I’ll be fine, Nick,” said his mother in a sick voice. As she lie in bed, a hot towel lay on her forehead.

“Will you go get some bread for dinner and pick up your brother from soccer?” asked Nick’s mom.

“Okay!” said Nick. He put on his hat and left. Once he got on the road, he realized something: it was very quiet. He arrived at the bakery, and went inside.

“What do you want, whippersnapper?” asked the baker man.

“I need some bread,” replied Nick.

“We ain’t sellin’ anything,” said the man.

“But this is an open bakery and you’re a baker,” replied Nick.

“Well then, let’s see if I can bake a cake as fast as I can!” said the baker man. “Now scam!” Suddenly, the baker transformed into a giant one-eyed flying cat with sharp claws.

“Aaaahh!!” screamed Nick. He ran out of the bakery. The monster followed.

Nick ran and ran, but couldn’t get away. He escaped into a vent. The monster tried to get in, but Nick closed it SHUT! Nick grabbed a sharp stick from the ground and poked out the monster’s eye.

“Aaaa!” screamed the cat, and it was loud. The cat exploded, only dropping bread.

“Huh,” said Nick. “I knew he had it.” Suddenly Nick heard a noise from the vents.  
*Thump! Thump! Thump!*

Nick’s heart was racing, he knew this was the end...

“Nick?” called a confused and echoey voice.

“Tyler?” asked Nick. His brother came into view. “Tyler!” said Nick excitedly. He hugged his brother tightly.

“Dad needs our help!” said Tyler.

“What?” asked Nick. “What happened?”

“Well, he has gone crazy, and I can’t calm him down.”

“Where is he?” asked Nick.

“He’s down here,” said Tyler.

“How did you even get down here?”

“I was chased by a giant, one-eyed flying cat,” replied Nick. “How did you get down here?”

“I got attacked by giant cockroaches, so I ran to Dad’s work, and he got away together, and then he got bit by a giant bat, and that’s when he started acting crazy! So I took him down here, but then he started chasing me, so I ran away and that’s how I found you. Also, why are there so many weird creatu-” THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

“Uh-oh!” said Nick, “is that...?”

“Him,” finished Tyler. Suddenly, Nick’s dad appeared. He wasn’t exactly...human, though. His eyes had been replaced with dark shades of nothingness, and four spider legs had come out of his sides. Giant wings also came from his waist.

“Raaaar!” called Nick’s dad.

“Run!” screamed Tyler. They ran for their lives, trying to avoid sewer water in the process. They were running so fast they almost forgot what they were running from. They turned around. No Dad. Then it struck them. They both realized it at the same time. So they did it: they looked up.

## PART 2

There, right above them, was Nick’s dad, soaring through the air.

“Run!” shouted Tyler. They ran and ran, not looking back. But Nick’s dad was right on their heels. He swooped down and grabbed Tyler.

“NO!” screamed Nick.

“Go without me!” shouted Tyler. “GO!”

Without hesitation, Nick ran and ran. He reached a ladder, climbed up, and ran! Nick was on the surface now. He had luckily popped up right next to his house.

“Tyler!” screamed Nick. He sobbed away, knowing that Tyler was...dead.

Nick took a large stone and placed it in the ground. He walked home, knowing Tyler had a place to rest. He opened the door.

“Honey, where have you been?” asked Mom.

“I...he’s...Tyler’s dead!” blurted Nick.

“Wha...” Mom couldn’t finish; she was already breaking into tears.

“So is Dad,” said Nick.

“Oh well!” said Nick’s mom. “At least you will join him.” Mom got out of bed, took a knife from under her bed and ran towards Nick.

“Aaaa!” screamed Nick. He ran for the door, but it was locked.

“Welcome to hell!” screamed Nick’s mom. Then, she stabbed Nick in the heart. Everything went blank for a moment, but then, he awoke. All thought ripped away except one. The thing Nick wouldn’t do in a million years:

Kill.

## THE CANDY ZOMBIE

Hunter Keele, 10

There once was someone named Mason who had a sweet tooth. When Mason learned that there was going to be a candy-eating contest, he was excited and signed up for it. It was the day before Halloween and the day of the contest. In total there were five people entered in the contest, but only four people participated. One person had stage fright and fainted when he saw all of the people watching.

The four people sat down in front of their plates. The referee said, "Ready, set, eat!" The contestants started gobbling their candy down.

Eventually one of them threw up. When they did the referee yelled, "Gross! If you're going to puke, do it somewhere else. You're disqualified!"

A few minutes later someone passed out and the referee yelled, "Gross! If you're going to pass out, do it somewhere else. You're disqualified!"

So, it was just down to Mason and someone else. Let's just name the person that wasn't Mason, Not-Mason.

Not-Mason ended up eating nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine pieces of candy. Mason was determined to eat ten thousand pieces of candy so he started on his sweet quest. Mason eventually got to nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine pieces, and he was just putting the ten thousandth piece in his mouth when his body started changing. His skin turned green and he started moaning.

He wasn't Mason anymore; he was now a zombie. The referee yelled, "Gross! If you're going to turn into a zombie, do it somewhere else. You're disqualified!"

Then the zombie started walking towards the other contestants. It looked like he was about to eat their brains, but it was worse! He went to their leftover candy and ate all of it! He wasn't a normal zombie; he was a candy zombie! After he ate all of the candy his stomach growled, "*still hungry need candy!*" By then everyone left screaming and running (if you're wondering how the candy turned Mason into a candy zombie, then here's how: you know that old saying you are what you eat after you eat ten thousand pieces of it? I totally didn't make that saying up. Well, that's what happened.)

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, a thirteen-year-old boy named Michael was



opening a package he had just received in the mail. What was in the package, you ask? It was his Halloween costume his mom and dad ordered. The costume was his favorite fictional character: Obi-Wan Kenobi!

Just as Michael finished opening it, his dad said, “Michael, it’s time for bed.”

Michael got ready and got in bed. He couldn’t stop thinking that the next day would be Halloween and he was excited.

Michael awoke at twelve o’clock during the night and went downstairs. He went into the kitchen and grabbed a bowl of candy his parents were going to put out for Halloween. He needed his midnight snack, but when he looked in the bowl it was empty! Michael said, “Who stole the candy?!”

Then he noticed someone outside. The person outside just walked out of one of Michael’s neighbor’s houses and he was carrying a motherload of candy.

“Hey!” shouted Michael, “that guy just stole the neighborhood’s candy!” The guy outside was zombie-looking; he was the candy zombie!

Michael put on his coat and went outside. He started following the candy zombie, hiding every time the candy zombie looked his way. They ended up in the middle of nowhere. The candy zombie started eating all of the candy and then whenever there were only a few nutty fudge bars, which had been in the candy bowl at Michael’s house. (If you’re wondering what a nutty fudge bar is, it’s peanuts dipped in peanut butter, then dipped in chocolate and it’s shaped like a candy bar.) Just as the candy zombie was about to put a nutty fudge bar in his mouth, Michael jumped out of the bush he was hiding in and yelled, “That’s my candy!”

Then the candy zombie got mad; He started attacking Michael and then the zombie said, “me usually only eat candy but me guess me could eat brain on special occasion.”

After the zombie said that, he tried to eat Michael’s brain. At that point Michael was screaming for help but nobody could hear him. Just as the candy zombie was about to bite down on Michael’s head, a red car pulled up. His dad was driving and his mom was in the passenger seat. Michael’s mom came out. She took out her purse and slapped the zombie. The zombie got knocked out. She said, “Michael, what are you doing out here at two in the morning?”

Michael got in the car and they all drove home. Michael asked, “Mom, dad, how did you find me?”

“We tracked your phone.”

Then everything went back to normal. On Halloween, Michael got the motherload of candy but he couldn't eat it because he was grounded, so his dad ate them. “Trust me—*munch munch*—this hurts—*gobble gobble*—me more than it hurts you.”

That's the story, I hope you enjoyed it!

The End

## MELODY OF THE MISSING

Mariana Hamor, 11

Melody woke up with a start. She knew it was Halloween but why would she be hearing the doorbell go off already? She looked outside her window. It was dark still, no other houses had lights or kids with huge smiles ready for candy. She got up, walked over to the light switch, and turned on the lights.

She gripped her phone and turned it over to see the time. A shiver went down her spine. There was no time on her phone. She ran towards her clock. The clock was broken. She bit her lip.

“AGH!” she screamed, as something wet fell on her head. She trembled and looked up to see a rainbow-colored liquid dripping down onto her pink cat-shaped carpet. She opened her door, ran out of her room, and walked into the kitchen towards the door. She looked out the peephole.

A tall dark figure with a strange box with a ribbon was outside the house. She slowly backed away and bumped into something. She turned around and a glowing ball of light appeared behind her. She opened her mouth as if she was screaming but then heard it whispering something. Her mouth slowly closed, and as she got closer to it, she could hear the whispers clearer.

“You forgot his birthday, why did you forget?”

She was confused as the glowing ball gave her a fluffy rabbit doll, then it disappeared. She saw that animal balloons were flying out of the basement and onto the kitchen ceiling. She was afraid to go down into the basement, because in all of the horror stories she had read, basements were never a good thing. But she made up her mind and decided to go down the basement stairs.

The basement was filled with chairs, tables, balloons, and creatures that Melody couldn't explain. Some creatures had long limbs, extra limbs, some were monochrome humanoids, orbs, supernaturals, and the list could go on.

But in a chair was a unique entity. There was a short dark figure with an orange and blue birthday hat and an orange scarf. It was sitting in front of a cake dripping the same rainbow-colored liquid. The entity turned its head towards Melody and so did the

others.

She realized they all were holding dolls. Some cats, dogs, and the same fluffy rabbit doll. Melody wondered why they had dolls stuffed in their hands, why a birthday in her basement, and why they are here.

The entities started to drop their dolls on the floor. Melody thought that was what she was supposed to do too, so she dropped her doll to the floor. The orange entity stood up and started arranging the dolls in a circle, then the basement floorboards started to break. A gigantic hole opened up the ground, then black tentacles with the same rainbow liquid aggressively grabbed Melody's legs and pulled her down into the rainbow abyss.

"A 14 year old girl went missing on Halloween night. Melody Luckworth, last seen entering her house after school. If you see Melody, take her into the police office so we can investigate." The tv turned off.

"I really don't understand why they couldn't see what happened through the windows. Maybe I should go tell the police? I'm Melody's neighbor after all." *Me, Eve Winglen, saving my neighbor Melody Luckworth. Then I can become the world's best detective!*

Eve ran out of her room knocking over a glass shaped like a cat containing milk. She just looked at the milk all over the carpet and shook her head slowly and sighed, she grabbed a soft furry dog bag and ran to the office room.

"Eveeeeeee, whatcha doing?" her big sister yelled.

"Investigating stuffs," Eve yelled back as she got to the doors of the office room.

"Alrighty Ev-yeye," replied Eve's big sister while walking away. Once Eve opened the office door, she noticed Melody's cat was on top of the supplies table. As Eve got closer the cat flinched. She yanked the supplies drawer open. The cat hopped away and Eve was pleased to see the drawer had everything she needed. She grabbed: a notebook, a pencil, a small pink folder (for clues), a test tube (for samples), and a furry rainbow pen.

She pushed all of the materials into her bag and ran out the office door into the hall. She took two turns and made a left towards her doorway. She paused to put on her light blue boots. She ran as fast as she could, heading straight ahead to Melody's

house. Once she was at the steps, she smelled a sweet smell. Like a freshly baked cake right out of the oven.

Eve knew that somebody missing wouldn't have made a freshly baked cake. "Melody wouldn't mind if I went into her house to investigate, right?" She took one step towards the front door, and she knew something was very very wrong. She took a dive into the doorway and went into the kitchen. A baked cake was on the table, it had blue icing and on top it had blueberries arranged in a circle. "This might be a trap to lure people in."

But then she realized there was a rainbow liquid puddled up on the floor. She got a test tube and scooped up the liquid and put it in her pocket. She got closer to the cake and turned it around, a piece of the cake was already cut, ready to be eaten. She got closer to inspect the piece of cake, everything seemed fine with the cake so Eve took a bite.

The cake tasted like berries mixed with meat and a bit of apple, as Eve chewed she felt unsettled by the flavoring of the cake. She stopped chewing and ran over to the garbage can to spit it out.

"BLEGH, that cake wasn't as tasty as I thought, it tasted so bad!" She got away from the garbage can and ran to Melody's bedroom. The door was closed, she put her hand on the handle and yanked it open.

Pools of a rainbow liquid pushed out of the door, like an ocean. Eve's eyes were wide open and she screamed as the rainbow liquid flooded the entire house, pushing Eve toward the basement. She gripped tight onto the wall but then the waves of the aggressive sea of rainbow stopped. All of the rainbow sea started to be draining through the basement...

Eve looked down into the basement in shock. Balloons of all kinds started to fly out of the basement, all different colors. But then she heard something, like footsteps coming up the stairs, but that was because it *was* footsteps coming up the stairs!

Eve panicked and she looked for a place to hide. She ran to Melody's bedroom, took off her shoes and hid, then the thing came into the room. She heard heavy breathing in every direction but then it stopped, it was like it disappeared.

She got out of the covers and walked towards the door. She looked at the stairs leading to the guest rooms and other rooms. There was a black orb just sitting there.



Eve slowly went up there, the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up and she started to worry. “What have I gotten myself into?” She realized the orb was not a threat and proceeded to go up the stairs. Once she got to the top she froze.

Dolls were everywhere in every direction all facing her, some porcelain, vintage, some were rag dolls, however they were all sitting in the same morning light. She took one step back and realized there were no stairs behind her, it was a wall. She turned to face the dolls but they all disappeared. All that was left was a tiny blue ribbon and a note that read,

*Come back down to the basement to find your true great wishes.*

*- Dolls from the basement*

That terrified Eve. “Why does she have that many dolls in the basement?” she thought. She ran around the second floor searching for the stairs and went to different rooms, and they all looked normal. Just the blinds were closed, she opened the blinds to see whatever was happening outside.

She was terrified to see there was nothing outside, only a bunch of stairs leading to different rooms. She flung the window open and jumped onto a stairway and ran down the stairs. She was back in Melody’s house, back downstairs, with the half-eaten cake and to the unsettling place of horror, she decided not to go down into the basement just yet.

Then at the speed of light came down a bunch of missing posters of kids she didn’t know of. She grabbed one of the posters and read: Piyine Vie.

She wondered if she could sort them by last name to figure out what was going on. Her mother taught her a trick—say the first and last letter of each name to see if that makes sense.

She read out loud: “Penelope Johns, what have you done?”

When she finished reading she was shocked. Who was Penelope Johns? She stared at the ceiling then looked at her pocket, and worms started to crawl out.

“EEK! Gross, worms!” Once the worms got out of her pocket she got her test tube.

“I’m really thirsty and it looks like it would taste really good if I drank it. Who knows, this rainbow liquid could be really good.” She popped open the test tube of rainbow liquid and took a sip.

The rainbow liquid tasted sour and sweet. It had a slimy texture and Eve’s thirst

was better now, she closed the test tube and put it back in her pocket.

“That was refreshing,” she said. Eve looked down to see the missing papers were gone and her hands were white and trembling. She wasn’t afraid of what could happen to her, she just felt happy and safe.

Eve started to call Melody’s house her home. Eve felt safe in Melody’s house. Then Eve’s sight started to have a rainbow tint. It got worse and worse, there were moving rainbows everywhere and Eve didn’t care, she didn’t have to. She just got up and stared at the basement. Dolls looked back up at her and Eve took off into the basement, to never be seen again.

*November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022*

“Jessie, wait up! We are gonna miss camp activities!”

“Telling ghost stories at night? No, no, I don’t like them. Since when do you like ghost stories, Melody?” yelled Jessie.

“Well, I like them now!” cried Melody.

“Ugh, fine I’ll come over there,” replied Jessie. Melody and Jessie walked back into the top cabin Bosal, pink, where cabin Oak, blue, was under. Melody unlocked the door to see Beatrice and Victoria putting on their makeup.

“It’s nice to see you’re back again, Jessie,” said Victoria sarcastically. “Oh! And Melody, you’re back! Me and Beatrice were waiting for you! We made strawberry jelly sandwiches for all of us! Even for Jessie.”

Victoria walked into the kitchen’s cabin and grabbed a plate of strawberry jelly sandwiches arranged in a heart shape, she handed each sandwich to everyone.

“These sandwiches look so good, it reminds me of what Eve used to make me and Melody.”

“Who’s Eve? Oh...that missing girl, you have an idea where she is?” Victoria said.

“I have no idea, the last time I saw her was when I came over to her house to hang out,” replied Melody.

“Oh I forgot! I’m supposed to prepare the s’mores for tonight! Oh goodness, Jessie, can you fetch me the marshmallow bag?” Victoria asked. Jessie grabbed a bag of yellow star-shaped marshmallows.

“Will these do?” asked Melody.

“Yes, those marshmallows will do, star s’mores tonight! Those will look adorable. Beatrice? Can you make a fire outside so we can make star s’mores?” Victoria asked.

“Okay! I got you!” Beatrice yelled back.

“Now Melody, bring the crackers, chocolate, and some scary campfire stories outside and we’re ready for the night.” Victoria grabbed the bag of star-shaped marshmallows and walked outside where a campfire stood. Everyone followed.

“So, who’s going first?” Jessie said.

“I don’t know. I don’t have any good horror stories in mind,” Beatrice replied.

“I have one! It’s super scary!” Victoria said excitedly, “it was a dark and stormy night, I couldn’t sleep, and it was already 10. I got up from my bed because I heard noises in the kitchen...I walked cautiously towards the sound, my wretched sister! She was wearing the most horrid of pajamas; pickle-pattern shorts and a blue pizza top! And worst of all...she was cooking the food I hate! Ravioli. I screamed and ran away back into my bedroom and shut the door, I jumped into my bed and slept through the night tossing and turning.”

“That wasn’t a scary story, Victoria,” said Beatrice.

“I agree with Beatrice,” replied Jessie.

“Hey, let me tell my story!” said Melody. “Melody of the missing. In 1945 there was a big house on Brook Street that belonged to a young girl named Penelope Johns. Penelope loved to collect dolls, it was her favorite hobby. One day Penelope got very sick with a cold, each day she would stay the same, the strange thing is, that she would never get worse or better, she would just be the same.

“Then one night she got up from her bed and went to her basement to play with her dolls, the dolls were facing her from all directions when she went down. A porcelain doll fell off the shelf and onto the floor with a crash, this startled Penelope and she snatched a bottle of glue and pasted the doll pieces together. While she glued the doll together, it was bleeding a type of rainbow-pigmented liquid. Penelope was shocked, she couldn’t believe what she was seeing, a doll bleeding wasn’t the best sight Penelope saw during her life but it was interesting for sure.

“Penelope started to feel sick, then she felt weak inside, and she fell, but there was no ground. There was a rainbow abyss. For years, children who moved into this big house would always disappear, it was like somebody was taking them. The weird thing

was that after each disappearance there would always be a fresh baked cake on the kitchen table. The end”

“Oh my god!” said Victoria.

“That’s horrible!” said Beatrice.

“Wait, don’t you live in the big house on Brook Street, Melody?” asked Jessie suspiciously. Melody only grinned.

A crash came in from inside the cabin, Victoria got up with Beatrice to investigate, while Jessie went to the bathroom, and Melody sat there with a big wide grin. When the girls came back they found Melody gone and only a doll sat in her place. It was bleeding out a thin rainbow liquid. The girls felt sick and frightened, then they fell over only to find that the ground was gone.

“I’ve got a story to tell you, and it doesn’t have a good ending,” said Penelope Johns.

## THE HALLOWEEN PUPPY

Kennedy Davis, 10

### Chapter 1

#### THE BEGINNING

I awoke to the sound of barking. “I can bark too,” I said sleepily.

“Yes, you sure can,” said my mother, her long rough tongue smoothing my messy fur. “Your new family is coming today.”

Her words made me forget the barking of my littermates and the other dogs in the Happy Hounds Animal Shelter. I wanted to meet my new family of course, but I was a little nervous about leaving my family and friends.

One thing I do want to leave: Grumpy Face. Who is Grumpy Face, you ask? Grumpy Face is a cat, a—*DING!*

The door jingled. A man with a beard strode in. Silence. He tapped his leather shoe and called, “Betty, come see the puppies.”

No answer. He sighed and walked over to talk to the woman standing behind the counter. I was watching the man’s leather shoes, when a flash of black caught my attention. A little girl about 10 years old stood in the doorway wearing a black shirt with a strange orange thing in the middle with a face and—wait, a FACE? Then, my mother spoke.

“It’s a pumpkin.”

I looked up at her. Did she read my mind? I looked back out at the lobby and jumped back with surprise. The girl was right outside our cage, admiring my sisters and brothers as they looked back at her with shining eyes. Then she saw me.

“Hello, little one!” she said. I looked at Mother. The girl smelled like bacon. I was starting to like this strange girl just a little.

“I would like to play with the puppy!” she said to the lady. I then noticed that I was being lifted out of my cage carefully. It was the lady behind the desk. She wasn’t behind the desk anymore. Lady-not-at-the-front-desk, the bearded dude, and Betty went outside to the new playpen. I knew this would be great fun.



## Chapter 2

PLAYTIME WITH BETTY

“YEAH,” Betty said. She was throwing a tennis ball for me. She called this game, ‘Go Get It!’ I liked our new game. I liked this new girl. She liked me. I was happy, so I flopped over on my back and smiled up at her. Betty showed me the ball, and I quickly got to my feet and wagged up at her. She threw the ball, and I darted after it, my ears pinned back. That’s how fast I was! I jumped up to catch the ball out of the air, and then trotted proudly back to Betty with my prize.

She threw her arms around me and whispered, “Good boy, Buddy! You’re such a good boy.” What was that? Buddy? Catchy, but I had no name. Then it hit me that that might be my new name. I barked proudly. I am Buddy.

Suddenly, the man said, “Um, what date is it? Oh, I remember! It’s the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, and speaking of...we need to head home to finish decorating for Halloween, Betty. You can throw the ball one more time, okay?”

Betty looked sad. “Ok...get it!” She threw the ball, very hard this time, and I flew after it. I was determined to get the ball for Betty.

Uh oh. The ball went over the fence and down the street! I took a running start, and leaped over the fence. I ran down the street in the direction that the ball went. A woman in front of me was hanging up some sheets to dry. I whizzed by her, but hit the biggest sheet and tumbled over. Once I gained my footing, I looked around me.

Was this heaven? It was white all over. I bit it. A hole ripped out of the sheet. I could see through! Looking through my little hole, I stumbled down the street, and saw some kids playing baseball. Yay, more kids to play with! I ran toward them. They pointed and shouted, “Ghost!”

I turned to see where they were pointing, and saw nothing. Why did they leave? I just wanted to play.

## Chapter 3

ALONE

I trotted down the street and thought about all the things I missed—Mother, my brothers and sisters, Betty, even Grumpy Face. I never thought I would come to that. I sighed, and lay down, my head on my paws.

Thump! Thump! Thump! I perked up, and looked all around. A boy! Not Betty, but still a kid. I jumped on him just as he was bending down to inspect the sheet with me under it.

“Woah!” he screamed, “it’s a ghost!”

He ran. No, come back! Why do people keep running? I turned again to see the ghost. Nope, no ghost. Have those children lost their minds? I scrambled out from under that sheet and ran home—or at least I thought that was the way home. I was lost.

I came to the corner of town and looked at the hustle and bustle— a man selling hats, a band playing a jazzy tune, a group of kids playing hopscotch, and some dogs digging in a trash can. I trotted over to the dogs and said, “Hi there! What’s up, dudes?”

The big dogs looked down at me and sneered. Suddenly, I remembered I was just a little puppy. I stuck my tongue out at them and trotted away proudly, swinging my tail and pretending I didn’t care. But I did care, I needed a friend. I needed a family. But I had no one. I was alone. I sat there as the sun went down.

“Buddy! Oh Buddy, where are you?”

Betty! I saw the girl by the corner and galloped towards her. I loved her so much at that moment. I would never ever leave again, even for a super-tasty ball. I licked her face and rubbed up against her.

“I know, I know, Buddy!” she said, trying not laugh, “I love you too!” Then I saw the orange thing—a pumpkin, if I remember right—but it wasn’t her shirt. She was holding a pumpkin. It was huge and orange and round.

Betty laughed at my puzzled expression. “Buddy, it’s a pumpkin. We are going to carve it to look like a puppy.”

I was even more puzzled at that. Carve a pumpkin? Doesn’t it look fine already? Her father—that’s what I decided to call the bearded dude—walked over to us. He said, “Good! You found the puppy, now we have to hurry. Your mom has a surprise for you. Trust me, you will like it. You can bring the puppy if you want.”

“Oh, Dad!” Betty shouted. “He would love to see our house!” I barked in agreement. I did want to see her house. Then I remembered Mother, my littermates, Happy Hounds Animal Shelter, and I thought how much I would miss them, living at Betty’s house.

## Chapter 4

### REUNITED

Later, in the living room of Betty's big house, I lay on a big purple rug that was too good to pee on, looking at the same pumpkin Betty was holding when she found me, now with a dog's face carved into it.

"Buddy!" That was Betty. I sprung to my feet and ran towards the kitchen, which was where the call came from. I stopped so quickly that I tumbled forward. Right in front of me stood a big dog, surrounded by pups my size. Mother! Brothers! Sisters! OH, YAY! I nuzzled my mother and raced around in circles with my siblings, playing tag.

"You're it!" That was my big brother, Cooper.

I ran towards Abi, my funniest sister. "Boop!" I bopped her on the nose with my paw and then darted away.

"Hey!" said Abi, "I'm gonna get you, Buddy!" She huffed and puffed. Ha! I'm the fastest pup ever! Instead, she went for Cooper, a much easier target. Why? I didn't care. I was with my family again, even Grumpy Face. We made a new game. I ran after her while she ran away, screeching and yowling in anger.

I grew bigger. So did Betty.

I was happy here.

## Chapter 5

### THE END

The next year at Halloween, Betty ate lots of candy. I ate a lot of doggie treats and so did my siblings. Oh, did I forget to mention that Mother and my littermates live with me now? Anyway, I told Betty about my ghost adventure. She laughed when I crawled underneath a sheet to show her my ghost costume.

"Oh, Buddy!" I liked hearing her voice. I liked her. No, I loved her! I would never leave her again. Or my siblings. Or my mother. I belong here.

I am loved.

## USMAN AND THE MAGIC CAR

Usman Vasani, 8

### Chapter 1- Eid Day

It was Eid day. Eid is the biggest holiday in our family. I was very excited. I had fasted the entire month. Eid also meant we were going to get presents. We woke up early on Eid day. Mom made us shower the night before, as we had to go to the mosque early in the morning. I wore a green Kurta. A Kurta is a loose collarless shirt worn in many regions of South Asia, and now also worn around the world. My dad was rushing to get us all in the car so we could make it on time for the sermon.

We got to the mosque on time and dad was happy that he found good parking. The sermon started just after we got there. I wasn't paying attention to the speaker as I was busy playing with my sister Fatima. My mom kept reminding us to use inside voices as people were trying to listen to the lecture.

After the lecture, we prayed Eid prayer in congregation. Once the prayer was over, we greeted each other with 'Eid Mubarak', which means Happy Eid. They had some samosas and jalebis for snacks outside the mosque. Samosas are like fritters made from potatoes and green peas. Jalebis are bright orange sweets shaped like pretzels. They contain a sugary syrup. I ate one samosa and a jalebi. It was still morning when we got back home. The best part of the day was yet to come. We had seen packages being delivered over the last few days.

### Chapter 2- Seller from Egypt

Dad made us all wait in the living room as he brought in one by one the packages he had been hiding in the garage. He gave us his keys so we could use them to cut open the boxes. My box was the biggest. When we opened it, it was really dusty, and everybody started to cough. It was a toy car almost like my friend's. My dad assured me that he would clean it as soon as possible.

Dad had ordered our gifts online several days before to make sure they were here in time for Eid. Dad explained to me the challenges he had faced ordering my gift. All the gifts had come in early except mine. Dad had tried emailing the retailer several times

but received no response. He finally contacted eBay and was able to get a phone number for the seller. It was a retailer in Egypt.

Dad stayed up late one night to call the seller, as it would be morning in Egypt. The person on the other end said “Hello.”

“Can I speak with Mr. Karim Al Sisi,” my dad asked.

“My father is not here,” the person said. “I am his son, Jafar. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Yes,” my dad responded. My dad explained to Jafar that he had bought a toy car from Jafar’s father on eBay. He bought it because it looked very unique and had interesting images on it.

“Are you talking about the brown car?” Jafar inquired shakily.

“Yes,” my dad said, “the one with the images on the side.”

Jafar said, “Please forget about that car.”

He offered to refund the money. My dad refused to take the refund and explained to Jafar that he really liked the car because of its unique design and had bought it as an Eid gift for me.

“That car, that car...” Jafar said in a scared voice. “My dad has gone missing since the car...” Jafar said as if trying to say something but held his words back.

“Since the car what?” my dad asked. He was beginning to get upset.

“Please buy something else for your son,” Jafar said.

“I have had it with you!” my father exclaimed, “I paid for that car, and I want you to ship it as soon as possible. Otherwise, I will contact eBay and ask them to shut you down as you cannot fulfill your orders.”

“Please don’t do that,” Jafar requested. “I will ship you the car. You should have it before Eid.”

### Chapter 3- Professor Robert Langdon

That afternoon, Dad spent time cleaning my car. He asked my brother Umar to help him clean the car. As they cleaned the dust, Umar noticed some symbols on the door.

“Look at those,” he told Dad.

“They look like some symbols,” my dad said, as he got closer to examine the markings.

“They are called hieroglyphs,” Umar explained. “Those symbols have a meaning.” Umar had learned about them at school.

“I wonder what those symbols mean,” my dad said curiously.

After he was done cleaning the car, my dad sat down on the laptop with his coffee. He was trying to find out more about those hieroglyphs. He wondered if there was someone local he could go visit to find out what those strange symbols meant. As he was navigating through the web of pages on his screen, he came across the bio of Professor Robert Langdon.

Robert Langdon was a professor of History and Symbology at U.C. Davis. “Just the person I was looking for!” My dad exclaimed. He started writing him an email:

‘Dear Professor Langdon,

My name is Salim Vasani. I came across your profile page during one of my searches and was very impressed with your work on symbols and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

I recently bought my son a toy car from a seller in Egypt. The car looks very old and has some strange symbols on the side. My other son and I believe they are hieroglyphs. I would really appreciate it if you could take a look at the car and tell us what those symbols mean. I live in Sacramento, not too far from the U.C. Davis and can stop by at a time that is convenient for you. Look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

Salim Vasani’

A few hours later dad heard a ping on his phone. It was a reply from Prof. Langdon.

“I would be happy to take a look,” the email said. “I am busy with classes the next couple of days but am free on Monday. You can stop by my lab at U.C. Davis after 3 PM.”

“That sounds great. I will see you then,” my dad replied to confirm the meeting.

On Monday, I tagged along with my dad to go visit Prof. Langdon. Dad parked outside the language arts building. He carried the car to the second floor to room 220 where Prof. Langdon’s lab was. Dad knocked on the door.

“Come in,” said a voice.

“My name is Salim Vasani. I am here to see Professor Langdon,” my dad said.

“I am Robert Langdon,” the old gentleman said. He had a beard and wore thick



glasses. He was wearing a sweater even though it was summer. It was kind of cold inside his lab. There were books all around and some old artifacts.

“And who is this little boy?” the Prof. asked.

“That’s my son Usman,” Dad said. “It is for him that I bought the car.”

“Oh yes, the car. Let’s have a look at it,” said the professor.

He started walking around the car to examine the symbols. “Definitely Egyptian hieroglyphs,” he said. “However, these are not commonly used symbols. I will need to look these symbols up in older textbooks. That will take some time. Can you leave the car with me for a couple of days?” the professor asked.

“Sure,” my dad said. “How about I come back at the same time on Thursday?”

“That would be perfect,” the Prof. responded. “Goodbye little boy,” the Prof. said, waving at me. Dad and I both bid farewell to the Professor.

We went back on Thursday to see the Professor but this time someone else opened the door. It was a much younger person wearing jeans and a t-shirt that read U.C. Davis.

“I am here to see Professor Langdon,” my dad said.

“The professor is not here,” the person replied. “I am Cyrus, his lab assistant.”

“Where is the professor?” my dad inquired.

“I don’t know,” Cyrus said. “I can’t reach his cell phone and his wife who also teaches here doesn’t know where he is either. That is very unusual of him,” Cyrus said with a worried look. “He is very particular about his time and shares all his appointments with me. We are very worried about him. Anyways, is there anything I can help you with?” Cyrus asked.

“We left our car here,” my dad said.

“Oh yes,” Cyrus said. “Professor told me about it. It’s right here,” Cyrus said pointing towards the back of the room. “The professor left a note with the meaning of the symbols. Here you go,” Cyrus said, handing a piece of paper to dad.

“Thanks Cyrus. I hope the Professor is well,” my dad said.

“I hope so too,” Cyrus said.

We left the room with our car and the note that Cyrus gave.

“That’s so odd,” I told Daddy as we walked towards our van. “We just saw the Professor a couple of days ago. He seemed in good health. I wonder what happened to him.”

“I know,” Dad said. “I hope he just decided to take a little break away from work and is well.”

“What was in that note?” I asked Dad.

“Ah yes. Let’s take a look at it,” Dad said.

The note read, “Don’t get near this car. If you get in, you will go places afar. *Karoo Maroo Levitasoo.*”

“Hahaha,” my dad started laughing. “Looks like whoever made this car was joking—or the Professor has a good sense of humor. Anyways, now we know what those symbols mean. Or at least we think we know,” my dad said as he yawned. “It’s been a long day. I am going to sleep now. Let me tuck you in bed, Usman.”

#### Chapter 4- The Magic Car

That night I could not fall asleep as I kept thinking about the car, about Prof. Langdon and the note he had left. I got out of my bed to get a glass of water. All the lights were out. Everybody was sleeping. I walked downstairs to get water from the fridge. I started thinking how everyone else was enjoying their gifts while I had not yet even sat in my car. Dad had asked me not to get in the car until he had figured out all the controls. There was no manual with the car.

“Let me just see how it feels,” I said to myself. I opened the garage door and started walking towards the car. Just then, I heard some footsteps. I turned around to look. It was my older sister Sara.

“What are you doing, Usman?” she asked.

“I am trying my new car,” I said.

“Can I ride with you?” Sara asked.

“Sure,” I said. “But it’s kinda tight inside.” I opened the door and stepped in. Sara sat next to me. The seat was hard but comfortable.

As soon as I closed the door, a voice said, “Welcome Usman.”

“This is so cool,” I thought. “Dad must have programmed it.”

A screen lit up in front of us and showed something that looked like a map. While I

was looking at the map, Sara was touching and pressing different things.

“Stop doing that,” I said. Dad had left the note in the car. I picked it up and started reading it, “Don’t get near this car. If you get in, you will go places afar. *Karoo Maroo Levitasoo.*”

Just as I was saying those words, Sara touched the screen. A voice appeared saying, “Now going to Egypt.” The car started shaking and rising.

“What did you do?” I scolded Sara.

“I don’t know,” Sara said. “I just touched the screen.”

I said, “Get out of the car now, quick.”

“I can’t,” said Sara.

“Why can’t you?” I asked Sara.

“It’s locked,” Sara said. I tried opening and pushing the door without any luck. The car kept rising.

“Now going turbo speed,” the voice said. “Fasten your seatbelt.”

We felt a sharp jolt and suddenly the car was flying in the air.

It was a dark sky all around us. We were very scared. After some time, the car started slowing down. The voice appeared again, “Now approaching Egypt.”

The car began to shake and float down. We could now see the clouds and birds. The car kept going down. We could see tall buildings, lots of cars and people. The car landed on a quiet street and came to a sudden stop. The voice said, “Welcome to Egypt.” We heard a click and the door opened.

## Chapter 5- The Mummy

We both got out. It was very hot. I was thirsty.

“Let’s find something to drink,” I told Sara. We started walking towards a store.

“Look,” Sara said. “They have soda.”

“Soda is bad for you,” I said.

“We can drink it sometimes,” Sara said. I agreed. I was thirsty and that soda looked appealing. I remembered that I had some money that Aunt Pinu had given us for Eid. We went inside the store and got Pepsi. I gave the cashier the \$20 bill I had. The person looked surprised.

“These are dollars,” he said. “I need Egyptian pounds.”

“That is all we have, and we are thirsty,” I said.

“OK. Let me see if I can give you the change in Egyptian pounds,” the cashier said. He took out his calculator and started punching in some numbers. He gave us the change and asked us to be careful with the money.

As we were leaving the market, we heard loud construction noises.

“Where is that sound coming from?” Sara said.

“Let’s check it out,” I said. We started following the sound. What we saw was breathtaking. There was this huge triangle-shaped building soaring high in the sky.

“That’s a pyramid,” I said. I had read about pyramids in school. We decided to go closer. The construction people were repairing one of the walls that had been damaged.

“Do you want to go inside?” Sara asked.

“But how?” I asked.

“Follow me,” said Sara. “Do you see that opening?” Sara said, pointing towards a gap that the construction guys were working at. “That’s our ticket in.”

There were a lot of people there. Suddenly we heard a loud siren. As soon as the siren went off, the construction people stopped working and started walking towards a nearby restaurant.

“This must be their lunch break,” Sara said.

“This is our chance,” I told Sara.

We both ran towards the opening. There was dust and debris everywhere. We started walking deeper, frequently looking back to ensure nobody was behind us.

“Let’s go there,” Sara said, pointing towards a sign that said, “Do not enter.”

“It says do not enter,” I told Sara.

“Don’t be such a scaredy cat,” Sara said. It looked like a narrow passage. We kept walking until we saw a bright light.

“What’s that?” I asked Sara. We came closer and noticed it was a big door made out of gold. It was shining. As we got closer, the door opened automatically. Just as we were arguing if we should go inside, we felt a strong wind and were dragged inside the door. It felt like someone was pulling us inside. As soon as we got inside, the golden door closed behind us. I was scared.

All around us there was gold and diamonds and all kinds of treasure. In the middle of the room there was a colorful coffin.

“Let’s see what’s inside,” Sara said.

“I have read about these things,” I told Sara. “There could be a mummy inside.”

“Don’t be silly Usman, mummies are not real,” Sara said. She opened the coffin door. We saw a body inside all wrapped in bandages.

“See, it’s just a dead Pharaoh,” Sara said. As she was turning away, the thing grabbed Sara’s arm.

“Mum—Muh—MUMMY!” we both screamed.

The mummy sat up in the grave.

“Welcome, Usman,” the mummy said. “I have been waiting for you for over a thousand years. Thank you for resurrecting me. I just need some of your blood now to become mortal again.”

“Run, Usman!” Sara screamed as she managed to release her arm from the Mummy. The Mummy got up and stepped out of the coffin.

“Give me blood, Usman,” the mummy kept saying. We started running but we couldn’t find a way out. The big gold door was shut closed. The mummy kept getting closer. He grabbed Sara.

“Help me, Usman!” Sara screamed. I kept hitting the mummy, but it did not affect him. I found a big vase lying nearby. I picked it up and hit the mummy on the head. He let Sara go and now started coming after me. Sara found a dagger and she stabbed the mummy in the back. That did not do any damage to the mummy. He just kept getting madder. “Give me blood,” the mummy kept saying as it got close to me.

We needed to find a way to kill it. As I was running from the mummy, I stumbled over a pot and accidentally knocked it. The mummy made a big cry as if it was in pain. I noticed the mummy was looking at the pot. I figured there was some connection between the pot and the mummy. I kicked the pot and the mummy cried again.

“Looks like the mummy’s life is connected to that pot,” Sara said. I started kicking the pot even harder. The mummy kept crying in pain.

“Let’s break that pot,” Sara said. We tried picking up the pot, but it was too heavy. We picked whatever we could find and started hitting the pot with it. Sara noticed a big set of steps.

“Let’s roll this pot over there, towards the top of the stairs,” Sara said, “and then drop it from the top.”

We started rolling the pot. The mummy was getting really mad and started running after us.

“Hurry, Usman,” Sara kept saying as we rolled the pot. We were able to get the pot to the top of the stairs.

“Let’s drop it down the stairs now,” Sara said. “At the count of three. One, two three!” With all our might we pushed the pot down the stairs. The pot fell with a huge thud and broke into pieces.

“No!” the mummy screamed. He fell down and started to scream. His body caught fire and soon he turned to ashes. The mummy was dead but before dying, his last words were, “I will be back, Usman!”

Sara and I hugged each other. Suddenly, the earth under us started shaking. The walls started to collapse. The roof was falling on us.

“This whole place is going to crash,” I told Sara. “We need to find a way out of here.”

“Look,” Sara said, pointing to a small ray of light. “It looks like a window. We need to find a way to get up there.”

We started climbing on the fallen rocks until we got to the window.

“Let me help you get up there,” Sara said as she joined her two hands, making a step for me to climb. I jumped up.

“Give me your hand,” I told Sara as I helped her climb up to the window. We slowly started crawling down the walls of the pyramid. Just as we reached the bottom, the whole pyramid crashed.

“We need to get out of here,” Sara said. We started running to look for the car. We started tracing our steps back. It was getting dark. We were looking for a blue store with a large Pepsi sign.

“There,” Sara said pointing towards the end of the street. It was our brown car. We ran towards it. I got in first and Sara sat next to me.

“Welcome back, Usman,” the car said. The screen lit up again. I scrolled through the map until I found Home. I clicked on Home, but nothing happened. Sara reminded me that we had to read the note at the same time. I took out the note and started reading, “Don’t get near this car. If you get in, you will go places afar. *Karoo Maroo*

*Levitasoo.*” As I reached those final words, I clicked on Home.

The car started rising and flying again. Within minutes, we were back in our garage. We quietly stepped inside the house. The lights were still out. It was almost morning. We went to our rooms without making any noise and went to sleep. What a night it had been. We had been to Egypt, saw the pyramids and fought a mummy. What other adventures did this car hold for us?



## HALLOWEEN DISASTER!

Eli Finley, 8

### CHAPTER ONE: HALLOWEEN NIGHT

One Halloween night, three kids were having a rough Halloween: Jack, Lily, and Bill.

“Man!” said Bill. “This is the worst Halloween ever!”

“I’ll say,” said Lily.

“Yeah!” said Jack.

“Look at me, I look like an old man in this zombie costume! I’ve been keeping track of why this Halloween is so bad,” said Bill.

“Can you tell us, Bill!?” said Jack and Lily.

“NO!!” said Bill.

“Why not?” said Jack.

“Cuz there’s more than 100,000 things!!!” said Bill.

“What!?” said Lily.

“I’m kidding!” said Bill.

But there are more than 20 things, that’s for sure! And all three kids, Jack, Lily, and Bill, sat very madly. But wait, there’s more.

### CHAPTER TWO: THE HAUNTED HOUSE

“Well, at least we got some candy,” said Lily.

“Ya mean no candy!” said Jack.

**BOOM!!!**

“What’s that?” said Lily. The three kids ran as fast as they could to see what that *boom* was. And they ended up at an old haunted house. It creeped Lily out so much that she wanted to keep running.

“Well,” said Bill. “Here goes nothing.” Bill opened the door and a *giant spider* came out! It was bigger than all of them!

**“RUN!!!”**

“Wait a minute, there’s a *ghost!!* Run for your lives!” said Bill.

They ran as fast as they could. And there were *skeletons!!*

“Run Bill!! Run Jack!!!” Lily said.

### CHAPTER THREE: IN THE GRAVEYARD

The three kids, Lily, Jack, and Bill, ended up in a graveyard with the *most* gravestones.

#### **BOOM!!!!**

It was that *boom* again! Jack didn't want to follow the *boom*, but it was too late! Lily and Bill already took off. Then *zombies* came out of the gravestones. So, Jack caught up with the other two, and all three began to run.

“***Ughhhhhhhh!***” moaned the zombies.

“Guys, to the pumpkin patch!!” said Lily.

### CHAPTER FOUR: THE PUMPKIN PATCH

The three kids hid behind three Jack-O-Lanterns and waited for *hours* so they got up but they weren't the only things that got up...the *jack-o-lanterns* jumped up straight at them!!

*Lightning* struck all the *monsters* they'd been through. The *lightning* brought all the *monsters* together to make ***the ultimate monster!!!*** It had a giant ghost body, you could see the bones, it had eight eyes and eight arms, and it had a freaky laugh. It was about to take a bite out of Jack, Lily and Bill until...

“Hey Bill!” said Jack.

“Yeah?” said Bill.

“Guess what time it is,” said Jack.

“Three-o-clock?” said Bill.

“No, daylight ‘*savings*’ time,” said Jack.

And suddenly the sun came up and the monster was gone.

“This Halloween wasn't so bad,” said Bill.

The end.

## STRANGERS ARE FRIENDS

Deangelo Orndorff, 11

### CHAPTER 1

Hi! My name is Ash. I'm an 11-year-old girl who has been homeschooled my whole life. This is my first year in public school and I didn't last long.

Today was my first day of 6th grade. Just a normal day, nothing wrong. I get out of bed and head downstairs to eat the breakfast Mom made. My mother sets bacon and waffles in front of me. Of course, she made my favorite for my first day of school. Mom said, "Eat up! You don't want to be hungry on your first day of school, do you?"

I replied, "Why can't I be homeschooled this year too?"

"Well, I hate to have a daughter who doesn't have friends or anyone to play with in her free time," my mom said. I sighed and got up and headed to school with my new Monster backpack.

Once I made it to school I was amazed; it was huge! I got greeted by a teacher.

"You must be Ash! Our new student!"

I nodded in embarrassment. I hate it when older people talk about me in front of kids my age. It's just embarrassing. I followed her to the front office. The secretary said, "Here are your classes this year," and handed me a paper of my classes. I take them and head to my first class in room 203; Computers.

Standing in front of the classroom, I take a deep breath and head in. I was then instantly greeted by my teacher Mrs. Ballina. She showed me to my seat. There was a table with chairs around it. I wonder to myself, whispering, "Who am I sitting next to?"

Once I sat down at the round table, three other boys sat down in their seats. I noticed I'm the only girl sitting here. I'm pretty sure my face was as red as a tomato. One of them said, "Great! Now there's gonna be a girl sitting with us." The other boy next to him said, "What's wrong with a girl? She's perfectly fine sitting there. Are you scared of her nonexistent cooties?"

The first boy then said, "W-WHAT?! NO OF COURSE NOT!"

Whenever class started Mrs. Ballina said, "All of you need to go to a computer over there," while pointing at the computers to the left of the room. "...and then start a

Google document and write a paragraph about how you think your first day will go.”

We all head to the computers. I picked computer number 3. I sat down and turned it on. She told me to type the password acd.098 on the computer and it'll get me in.

When I typed the password on the computer, it turns on with a nice tune. I clicked on the button that had a Google sign and it took me to the search bar. Then all of a sudden, the computer went black. Once it turned back on there was a texting app opened. I tried to close it out but it wouldn't. As I was about to raise my hand to call the teacher a message appeared on my screen. It said, “Hello Ash.”

I was scared. The other user was named Cooper238. I typed “Uh, hello.” back to him. My teacher then saw my screen and walked up and said, “Ash, why aren't you on your Google document writing stuff down in it?”

Just as she said it, the app closed, and Google Docs opened and the document was called “My First Day.” She then said, “Oh! I'm sorry I thought you were on something else.”

Once I finished typing the document the app appeared again. There was a new text saying, “I saved ya didn't I?”

I typed back, “Who are you and how did you switch the computer to the docs and this app?”

They didn't reply back.

Whenever class finished I started walking home when suddenly someone grabbed my shoulder. I turned to see one of the boys from my computer class right there. He said, “Hey! I'm sorry my friend was being rude today. My home is the same way. Want to talk for a little?”

I said, “Sure, why not.”

We continued walking. He then asked, “What did you write down on the document?”

I answered, “Well the main thing I wrote is for me to make a friend.”

He then exclaimed, “Well I can be your friend!” He held out his hand for me to shake it. “I'm Joshie.”

I shake his hand saying “I'm Ash.”

He then said, “I know, the teacher yelled at you when she thought she saw you on something else.”

I then said, “Hahah...y-yeah.”

Once I made it home I said bye to Joshie. When I walked in my house I was instantly greeted by Katrina, my mother. “How was school sweetheart? Was it fun? Scary? Just give me all the details!”

I then told her everything. I told her about Joshie and the computers. The only thing I didn’t tell her is about the weird hacker that hacked my computer.

For dinner Bill, my dad, made spaghetti. Once I finished I said good night to my mom and dad and then headed to bed. Once I got upstairs and in my room I got a book out and started reading on my bed. I read about the haunted woods in our town. It was scary. Soon, I fell asleep while reading.

## CHAPTER 2

I woke up suddenly and looked at the clock; it was midnight. A bright light flashed and at the end of my bed was a computer that was turned on. The same messaging app was open! Words from Cooper238 started to show up.

“How was your sleep?” he wrote.

I instantly got up and typed “LEAVE ME ALONE!”

I tried to turn off the computer, but it wouldn’t. I grabbed the lava lamp next to my bed and smashed it against the screen. It shut off and made a hissing noise. I sighed in relief but then an arm struck out at me from the cracked screen. Screaming, I ran out of my room and headed for my parents’ room. “Mom! Dad! Come here!” I screamed.

Bursting into their room, I turned on their lamp and was petrified that they weren’t there.

I then ran downstairs and outside. I looked up at my window and there was a tall figure standing there. I started running down the street towards the school. As my breath quickens, and my hope to make it to the school grounds grew, I stumbled and face planted into the ground. Struggling to get up, I see my mom running from my house into the woods.

I screamed “Hey Mom! Stop!” but she didn’t hear me. Exhausted, dizzy, and terrified, I got up and ran into the woods.

As I was running, I remembered I went to bed with my phone in my pocket! I pulled it out and tried to call 911 but it wouldn’t go through; it flashed *no signal*. I screamed in anger and went to throw my phone, but then the messaging app turned on.

Cooper238 wrote “C’mon. Stop running. I want to have some fun :)”

I smashed my phone on the ground and ran deeper into the woods.

All of a sudden, I heard a voice; it was Joshie’s voice! I ran towards it but then all I saw was my phone and a recording of his voice playing. I crashed to the ground pounding it with my fists. Tears fell from my eyes. I heard footsteps behind me. I grabbed a big branch, quickly turned around, and hit them as hard as I could in the head. I looked down and saw who I hit.

It was Joshie...trembling in fear I drop to my knees and check for a pulse. There’s none. He is dead...I killed Joshie! I ran as far as I could then something like a bat hit me.

I woke up in a very dark room. All I see is black. Then a phone turned on in front of me. Someone’s holding the phone. The messaging app is open. The last thing I saw was Cooper238 saying “I’ve found you.”

### CHAPTER 3

I woke up to my daughter Ash screaming. Jumping out of bed I quickly glanced at the clock; it was midnight. I then heard a crash and ran out of my room into the hallway. Then suddenly Ash just ran right through me! Like I didn’t exist! I tried to stop her while screaming “Ash! What’s happening? What’s wrong?!” I followed her into my room. She seems to be looking for me. Why can’t she see me? Ash ran downstairs and outside so I quickly ran into her room to see what happened and saw a broken computer. I looked out Ash’s window and saw her in the street. She was also looking at me. I was so surprised I couldn’t move!

“What is she doing?” I said out loud to myself. Then she just ran down the street. I quickly got outside and she was gone. I pulled out my phone and called 911 but there was no service. I grabbed a bat and headed into the forest thinking maybe someone was chasing her.

It’s been ten long minutes since we were at the house. Then through the trees, the sound of crying echoed toward me. I ran up and saw Ash and a dead kid behind her. I screamed in terror, but Ash just ran away again! I couldn’t keep up. Another 5 minutes passed by when a shed appeared. The light was off but she could be in there. As I carefully approached it a shuffling sound came from inside the shed. I open the door

to see a kid shoving a phone in my child's face! He had a bashed-in head, leaves stuck in his hair, and he was dirty. Right then he disappeared, and I ran to take my daughter to the ER.

#### EPILOGUE

She has been there for weeks now. She hasn't woken up. Finally, one day her phone rang. It was a message from a person named Ash239.

"Huh?" I thought. This person must be crazy.

It reads, "Help me! I'm still here! HELP!"



## THE MARBURN WOODS

Erin Kim & Sophie Qin, 11

The Marburn Woods were something of a legend in the sleepy little town of Arnibest. Locals whispered about the haunting ghouls and ghosts that roamed the trees freely. However, Marie and her friends Caleb, Bianca, and Rain did not believe any of it. On a sunny Saturday afternoon in their dressed-up wooden treehouse, the Plaza de Armas, they decided they would traverse the woods themselves to see if it really was haunted.

“I don’t believe any of it. Just whispering and rumors,” Rain declared in the baritone that so contrasted his small 10-year-old body.

“For once, I actually agree with Ray,” Bianca grinned in the mischievous way that so complimented her tallness (she was 5’5 and only 11) and her eyebrows wiggled challengingly. Rain shot her a glare, which was a bit difficult, seeing as he had to strain his neck to see her head.

“Don’t call me ‘Ray’,” he muttered icily and dramatically in that way of his.

“Come on, guys, enough bickering!” Caleb chimed in. “Where’s the logic? It’s obvious that this is distracting us from our mission,” he exclaimed pompously.

“You’re a know-it-all, Caleb,” Marie rolled her eyes. “But you’re correct. Bickering is a distraction. We’ve got a mission to complete here: to see if the Marburn Woods are really haunted!”

Marie stepped across the large, flat rock that sloped against the hill of the forest. Marie could see why people thought this place was haunted. It had a sinisterly placid feeling as if it was alive and a hunter waiting to strike. A chilling breeze blew through the trees and the dead orange leaves of autumn blew in the wind.

“Ugh, I wish I had brought a jacket,” complained Rain.

“Too bad. You’ll just have to cope.” Marie remarked slowly. “The cold is the least of your worries right now, especially if there are really supernatural stuff and things in here. I, for one, have a bad feeling about going deeper in here.”

She stepped into a patch of leaves resting on the forest floor, and she felt something slither and rustle around her boot. She quickly pulled her foot out and shook it off,

giving it no further thought and stepping forward. Caleb gasped and froze behind Marie. Exasperated, Marie turned back to him. “What is it, Caleb?”

Bianca also froze. Her mouth dropped open. “In the leaves,” she uttered in fear. “There’s... AAAH!” Bianca screamed.

She stumbled into the leaves and horribly, supernaturally, was pulled into the leaves! She screamed, crying out and scrambling in the leaves, as a human-like hand with long, scaly fingers pulled her in.

“Bianca! Bianca!” Rain yelled. Caleb dove forward and grabbed Bianca’s hand. Caleb lost his footing and yelled as he was becoming dragged in with Bianca. Screams carried through the forest as Rain grabbed Caleb’s left foot. Bianca’s tears glistened on the leaves as the only thing Marie could see of her was her eyes- she closed them and went under. Rain screamed and pulled. Caleb’s head was going under, and his arms flailed and struggled. Desperate, Marie grabbed Rain’s legs and began pulling with all her might. Rain gasped as the surprise from having his ankle grabbed confused him, and he let go of Caleb’s shoe for a split second, and that was enough. Caleb was gone. Rain sat up and sobbed. His face buried in his hands, he didn’t see the human-like hand creeping up his spine. Marie’s jaw dropped. “RAIN, WATCH OU-”

Rain had been pulled back-first into the leaves.

Marie just stared at where her friends had been mere seconds ago.

*There is-*

*no way-*

*that this-*

*this-*

*t-*

*t-this*

*just happened,*

Marie thought.

Her heart raced and she could feel it and hear it.

*Pound. Pound.*

“What do I do?” She wondered aloud. Should she go run for help or go in and follow them?

*Well, Marie thought grimly. I’d rather be dead with my friends than my friends be*

*dead because of me if help doesn't come fast enough.*

Marie took a deep breath, stood on top of the leaves, closed her eyes, and let it come.

When she awoke, she was lying on top of a hard, brown surface. She opened her eyes. A strange creature with four eyes, two in their typical spot and two on top of them, pale human-like skin, and shockingly thin arms stared at her. Marie sat up immediately.

“Morerrhras fudahras forehras thehehras Byarafol! Thehehras forthehras onenerrhas todaiaddahras! Byarafol wiluhras bebihras plesedhras!” the thing said. Another one stepped forward, this time with five dull eyes.

“Translation: More food for the Byarafol. The fourth one today. The Byarafol will be pleased.”

Marie gasped furiously. “Tell me where I am! Tell me!”

The thing with five eyes smiled placidly. “You are in Kharhunes, the capital city of the Supernatural Kingdom. We are the Nelrinusz, servants of the Supernatural Kingdom. I am Haraanusz. This is Makiaanusz,” it said, motioning to its four-eyed friend. “We are the Catchers.”

Marie’s eyes whipped around. In the city, there seemed to be endless buildings and skyscrapers made of the same hard, brown material she was sitting on.

“Where are my friends?!” Marie asked.

Haraanusz smiled. “The other humans that came earlier, one after the other? We introduced them to Kharhunes and sent them to the Byarafol. Our bescorsasae, ah, security guard in your language, Bmarsisaanusz, took them. They were awfully uncooperative, I must say.”

Marie started. “WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU PLANNING TO DO WITH US?!”

Haraanusz put its hands up. “Calm down. We are only going to take you to the Byarafol, to be eaten!”

Marie slapped Haraanusz. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, EAT?!”

Haraanusz looked shocked, a red slap mark quickly forming on her cheek...

“I’m sorry, human, but it is time. The Byarafol will be angry if you are not delivered in time. Oh, look, Bmarsisaanusz is here! Perfect!”

A large, chunky, rather blocky-looking four-eyed alien just like Haraanusz and

Makiaanusz approached them.

“Prazezahras thehehras Byarafol,” he muttered in greeting.

“Prazezhras thehehras Byarafol,” Haraanusz and Makiaanusz chimed in together.

“Anudirihras icichras redidihras forthehras yuyuhras,” Makiaanusz spoke calmly. Bmarsisaanusz grabbed Marie’s shoulders and dragged her away. Marie screeched as her feet lugged against the ground, kicking up dirty dirt.

“LET ME GO! LET ME GO!”

Bmarsisaanusz frowned, and simply continued. Marie struggled but was unable to free herself until they reached the buildings of Kharhunes. She saw a huge, towering building much grander than any others. It was clearly the palace or establishment of the Byarafol, whatever that was. Two Nelrinusz guards with helmets on guarded the vast entrance. Bmarsisaanusz spoke briefly to them in their language and they stepped aside, dust flying in their wake. The dark entrance was foreboding and unfriendly. Bmarsisaanusz put Marie upright and walked her inside.

Inside was a singular brown throne, elaborate and towering. A ghostlike figure, its head bowed in the shadows, sat slouchily on the throne. Although it seemed derelict and placid, it gave off an aura of power so great that Marie shuddered. *This must be the Byarafol*, Marie thought. Suddenly, something caught her eye. A cage sat to the left of the throne, and inside...

Were Marie’s three friends, out cold. At the sight of this, Marie screamed.

“Let them out! Let them be free! Uncage them! Uncage them!”

The ghost thing on the throne looked up. It had no eyes or nose, only a black hole for a mouth with five sharp teeth inside, sharp like glass. The thing smiled, its black gums shining rather dully.

“Ah,” it said, quietly and dangerously. “The last child. Now, the servants can finally prepare my feast.”

Marie’s eyes flashed angrily.

“I...

will...

not...

let...

YOU...

EAT US!”

The thing smiled again. “To resist the Byarafol is to be brave. You are a bold one, feast.” It spoke deeply in a baritone in the Nelrinusz’s language. “Maikehras hurahras comemehras tutuhtras mimihtras.”

Bmarsisanusz bowed his head and made Marie walk forward with a sharp kick to the shin and a motion forward.

“Ow, fine,” Marie grumbled. She walked forward until she was two feet away from the throne. The thing came forward and stepped onto the floor. It reached a scaly hand and long fingers towards Marie’s eyelids.

“Get- away- from me!” Marie stuttered, still being restrained by Bmarsisaanusz. Its index finger and ring finger swiped her eyelids shut.

“No...”

Marie passed out.

When she woke up and opened her eyes a little, she noticed the cage had been moved to some sort of kitchen with a fire burning heartily beyond some tables. She was surrounded by her friends. Caleb looked ill. Rain had tear stains on his cheeks. Bianca had red eyes. Marie sat up, elbows on the ground. She looked around and saw the bars of the cage her friends had been in.

“No, no, no!” Marie panicked and stood up, hitting her head on the low metal ceiling.

“Marie...” Bianca said. Caleb slumped. Rain coughed. “We’re going to be eaten by that stupid old ghost. Just fuel for him, he said.”

Rain laughed hollowly. “We’re doomed. All because we fell into this stupid Supernatural underground Kingdom with their stupid Nelrinusz and their stupid Byarafol. Because of that stupid bunch of leaves.”

Marie frowned. “No. We will not give up hope. We will form a plan to escape. C’mon guys, don’t give up! We have a chance.”

“We don’t know what to do. We can’t come up with a plan,” Bianca said. “Even Caleb. The Byarafol has made us pass out so many times. It dulls your brain functions. Caleb got the worst of it, smartypants as he is.”

Caleb mumbled something about being tired.

“Look at what they’ve done to him! We can’t just take this!” Marie yelled. “WE HAVE

TO COME UP WITH A PLAN!"

"Well, do you have any ideas?" Rain muttered.

Marie smiled. "Actually..."

"Yes."

A Nelrinusz servant opened the cage door. "It is time for the feast. You will be roasted over an open fire. Do not resist."

Marie looked at the servant. Rain said quietly, "Do you think this is an acceptable way to operate?"

The servant was startled. Bianca chimed in. "Do you think capturing people to feed them to your king is okay?"

Lastly, Marie said, "Look what they've done to our friend, Caleb. They've dulled his brain functions. They are preventing him from getting the medical help he needs and deserves. Do you really think that's okay? That it's alright? Is serfdom nice and fun? Is it well-paying?"

The Nelrinusz was caught off guard. "Well, no... But I am bound to the Byarafol. Serfdom is my life."

Marie smiled. "Well, what if we could give you a better life? What if we could free you from your serfdom?"

The servant's mouth was open. "You couldn't..."

Rain chimed in. "Yes, we couldn't. But not without you and your people's help. If you draw the people to rebel against the guards, we will hold the Byarafol off. Are you in?" The servant grinned.

"Yes."

In the cage, the four friends and the serf (whose name, they found out, was Csarsimaanusz) made elaborate plans for what seemed like hours. Csarsimaanusz became a wonderful friend and ally to all of them very soon. Csarsimaanusz recruited the other servants in charge of the cage, who spread the message and disguised it as an urgent memo about new weapons. Soon, Csarsimaanusz reported, 100% of Nelrinusz servants were in on the plan.

"My people will gladly hold off against the devoted guards. They are too loyal to

recruit. Untrained though we are, we have hearts full of fire and determination. We will fight to the death, if necessary.” Csarsimaanusz smiled boldly.

“Thank you,” Bianca said. “We couldn’t do this without you.”

Rain smiled at Bianca and Marie cleared her throat, looking worriedly at Caleb, who had recovered quite a bit but still was not 100%. He leaned on Csarsimaanusz. Marie smiled nervously.

“I think we are ready. The plans are made, and we must not wait anymore. The Byarafol must be getting suspicious about how long it is taking to ‘subdue’ us. Send out the signal to fight and unlock the cage please, Csar (Csarsimaanusz’ self-given nickname).”

Csar smiled anxiously. He opened the door to the cage and whispered something in the ear of the servant standing by the door. The other servant nodded, and whispered something in the next servant’s ear, and so on. The friends emerged from the cage, ready to fight. Seven serfs encircled them protectively and left the kitchen, Csar in the front.

“Fifty of the strongest Nelrinusz have been dispatched to take the guards. There are few guards, but they are all skilled. Two hundred more of us have been dispatched to take Kharhunes and incite them to rebellion against the Byarafol. So far, of the population of 5 million, 1 million have been incited. They are inciting the other 4 million, and progress is quick. They are eager to fight the cruel king who has ruled over them for so long. You will need weapons to fight the Byarafol- hold him off for about 5 minutes and the civilians will be able to bring backup and ammunition. By then our fifty best soldiers will have defeated the guards, so it will be no problem for the civilians to breach the palace. So, good luck, my friends. May you be the downfall of the Byarafol.”

Csar nodded at them and the circle dispersed as they entered the throne room.

“What is the meaning of this?” the Byarafol growled. “Why is my feast here?”

The Byarafol stood up. Caleb had regained his strength, luckily, and had crept sneakily behind the throne. He crawled up behind the Byarafol and punched him in the back of the head. The Byarafol cried out and looked behind him, but by the time he turned around, Caleb had dived between his legs and kicked him swiftly between the legs, while Bianca crept up and punched him as hard as she could in the chest.

The Byarafol turned forward as Rain slid under him and grabbed his ankles while Caleb cleared out and proceeded to kick him as hard as he could, literally everywhere. Marie punched him in the face as Bianca restrained his arms and she and Rain dragged him across the floor. The dirt clouded his vision and Marie stomped on his ribcage and Rain stomped on his legs. Caleb and Bianca teamed up to slap him across the face multiple times in a frenzy. The Byarafol yelled and manage to free himself from the friends' bombardment. He lifted up Caleb and threw him on the floor, slapped Bianca across the face, kicked Rain in the stomach, and elbowed Marie in the nose, giving her a bloody nose. Bianca retaliated by grabbing his shins and punching them as hard as she could, then sliding under his legs and kicking his lower back.

It was a tough and bloody battle, and after what seemed like forever the reinforcements arrived, Csar in the front, screaming and rallying the civilians. The civilians brought bats, rolling pins, metal pipes, and other blunt weapons. The hundreds of reinforcements utterly overwhelmed the Byarafol, and they quite literally ran him over, grabbed him, and stuffed him into the cage he had imprisoned the four friends in just hours ago.

The Byarafol screeched with rage, and the people screeched in a victorious battle cry. The war was won.

Marie, Caleb, Rain, and Bianca, who were all still bloody and bruised, and Csarsimaanusz were lifted up on the Nelrinusz' and civilians' shoulders and were hailed as heroes. The people voted unanimously to have Csarsimaanusz as the next leader- the next Jessemier, they called him. Csar blushed gratefully.

"Jessemier was the supernatural revolutionary who separated our world from humans' and founded the Supernatural Kingdom. They call me Jessemier, even though I am just a servant," he said to the four friends.

Csar called out to the people, "MY FRIENDS! I may not be Jessemier, but I will lead you well. Call me... CSARSIMA-MIER!"

The people broke out in cheering in applause as they chanted "Csarsima-mier! Csarsima-mier! Csarsima-mier, our leader!"

Csar smiled radiantly.

Hours later, at Csar's crowning ceremony as King of the Supernatural Kingdom, the



four friends and Csar gathered together.

“Csar,” Marie began sadly, “We must leave. Although we love the Supernatural Kingdom with all our hearts, we must return to our world, to the Marburn Woods, to Arnibest and our Plaza de Armas.”

Csar nodded gravely, but with a smile on his face. “I know. I have been waiting for this ever since the Battle of Kharhunes... I am sorry. I will remember you all forever- or at least until I die. I will have statues erected in your honor.”

Bianca smiled and Rain patted her shoulder, which was quite a ways up. Caleb, though, said, “Will you show us the exit, and how to get out of the exit, please?”

Csar smiled. “Yes, yes I will.”

They returned to the landing place where all their troubles and tribulations started, barely a day ago.

“I will lift you all into the hole. But after that, you are on your own,” Csar said.

“Thank you,” Caleb said.

“Yes, thank you,” said Bianca.

“We owe you our lives,” Rain said. Marie smiled at Csar. “We cannot thank you enough.”

Csar smiled.

“So, who wants to go first?”

When the four returned from their journey, they silently trekked back from the Marburn Woods into their own home.

“Well,” said Caleb slowly, “I guess it was haunted. In a way.”

“Do you think we should tell anyone?” asked Marie.

“No,” Rain said.

“No one will believe us. Let’s keep it to ourselves,” finished Bianca. Rain smiled.

“Perfectly fine with me- what about you guys?”

They agreed unanimously.

And so their great adventure of the Marburn Woods ended.



## JUMP

Aoping Ren, 12

“Make sure she gets her usual snack after her dinner, or she won’t be able to hit the hay.”

Jack writes the final procedure onto his weathered notepad, making sure to bold it so his eyes could see it. Marigold’s mother stares back at him expectantly, her hands on her hips. “You got that, Jack? That is one of the most important things that you have to do.”

Jack goes over his sloppy font thrice, smudging his paper with his left hand. “Yes ma’am, snack after dinner, no more than two almond cookies.”

A sudden commotion rings out in the huge living room and Jack jumps up from the couch. The worried mother looks up at Marigold’s room and yells, “What’s going on there, dear?” Shuffling is then heard, and Marigold’s two pigtails pop out of the pink door.

“Jump knocked down my books AGAIN!!”

Jack feels some of his neck hairs stick up and says worriedly, “who’s Jump?”

The mother picks up her purse from the coffee table and starts to open the front door. “Oh, it’s just Gold’s stuffed animal. Don’t worry about that old thing, she just likes to mess with people like you.”

*People like me?* Jack ponders if there were babysitters before him, who wanted to come here because of the high pay. After all, who wouldn’t want to come here, they were the biggest house in the whole neighborhood. His thoughts are broken when Mrs. Puffins slams the door right in his face, not bothering to say goodbye. Jack shakes his head to clear the ringing in his ears and hurries up the stairs.

“Marigold, what would you like for supper?” As he reaches the top of the stairwell, he turns the shiny knob of her pastel door to find her splayed out picking up some comic books. Her head bobs to the beat of the music on the stereo, which is by her windowsill. A stuffed monkey sits right next to it, moving slightly in the breeze. She glances up at Jack and stares at him with green-blue eyes.

“I want chicken noodle soup.” Her tone is so serious that it took Jack a moment to

process what she'd just said.

"Sure," he mumbles and goes back down just as quickly as he went up. After spending a few minutes looking for carrots in the massive fridge, he manages to whip up the meal she asked for. Jack ladles the hot broth into a wooden bowl just as he hears a loud crash. Instead of Marigold shouting something, there is only silence afterward. Slightly concerned, Jack rushes up to find Marigold lying unconscious and twitching on the hard wooden floor. The music goes oddly static as if someone switched it off. *Mrs. Puffins never told me she had seizures!?* Remembering his lesson in health class, he pulls a pillow from her queen-sized bed and rolls her to her side. He checks her heart rate and almost faints when he finds that there was no pulse. Jack prepares to do CPR just as Marigold's eyes flit open.

"What in the world are you doing?" She lifts her head from the pillow, wiping drool from her mouth.

Jack finds himself yelling back, "You almost died and that's the first thing you say?" He takes a deep breath and tries to collect himself. He couldn't bear to imagine what would've happened if he hadn't gotten to Marigold on time.

"Sorry about that, it's just that I was taken by surprise."

Marigold's eyes soften and she waves her hands dismissively. "Of course, you would be, mommy never believes me when I tell her." She gets up with shaky limbs and says, "It's just Jump, he likes to surprise me once in a while."

*What?* Jack lifts his gaze to the windowsill, but the monkey isn't there. He whips around just in time to see Marigold pick up the monkey right next to her on the floor. *Was it there before? How did I not notice it?*

"Um, do you want me to call your mom or something," Jack says anxiously, not sure what to do. Should he trouble Mrs. Puffins from a business meeting just to tell her about a stupid monkey? *No that'll be dumb, what would I tell her anyway? There's a-*

"Hey, are you okay?" He looks up and sees Marigold turning her head to him as she flips the radio back on. Before he can respond, she says, "Look I get it, it might seem weird that Jump acts out. Just don't run away from me, please?"

Jack feels his stomach flip inside out and realization starts to dawn on him. Taking a deep breath, Jack glances at Jump warily. "Okay, now let's go eat some of that chicken noodle soup."

Jack stares at his bean burrito, still running the scene over in his head. His mother stares at him and finally says, “What’s wrong honey? Do I need to heat your meal?”

“No, I just don’t feel well today.”

His mom pats him on the back and turns to Jack’s father. He had a concerned look on him as well, staring at Jack’s uneaten food. “You were fine going to Marigold’s, how come you’re not now?”

Jack, unable to keep it in him, shouts, “The crazy kid thinks that her stuffed monkey is possessed! There, I said it!”

For a moment, both of his parents’ eyes bore into him. He imagines them wondering how crazy their son could be. Eventually, his dad speaks up. “Jack, we know that. We know that you’re stressed.”

Jack’s stomach couldn’t bear it any longer and he takes a bite of the burrito. The refried beans stick to his teeth, cold and uninviting.

“We know that this is your first time and you’re scared, you should get some sleep,” both say.

Their voices synced for a second, making Jack almost choke.

“Okay.”

Those were the only words that came out of him as he scarfs down his entire burrito and runs upstairs.

“Don’t forget to turn off the lights!”

*Why are mom and dad acting up this late?* Jack takes a few deep breaths and clutches his heaving chest. “Maybe they’re delusional, that could always happen, right?”

Saying those words only confused him even more, not sure if it even made sense. That does it. Jack turns off his lights as his parents told him but takes a flashlight from his backpack and clicks it on. *I’m pulling an all-nighter; I don’t care anymore.* He had done this many times before when he was paranoid and too scared to sleep. Jack climbs onto his bed and pulls his covers to his neck. They cover his developing apple, keeping him in a weak chokehold. There, he takes out an encyclopedia hidden under his pillow. As Jack starts to open the section about Snails, he swears he saw something dart across his window. *It’s just probably an owl.*

The next day at school, Jack finds himself almost drifting off when the bell rings. One of his friends, Cooper, walks up to him in a static way.

“Hey, Jack.”

Jack looks up as he slings his backpack across his right shoulder. “What’s up?” He raises his hands to clap Cooper on the shoulder but Cooper dodges, swinging around it while still looking at him.

“You should go visit Marigold’s house.”

Jack is taken by surprise at his friend’s on-level voice, which doesn’t show any emotion. It was his first time seeing Cooper like this in years.

“Sure man, if you insist,” Jack mumbles and starts running to his bus stop.

A few hours later, he is dropped off at his house. There, his mom is waiting for him, staring off into space. *This day is getting stranger and stranger.* Jack had shrugged off the weird circumstance of Cooper knowing who Marigold is but now this is too much to ignore. His mom was a busybody, always finding stuff she could do in her free time. Yet here she is, standing there motionless in the driveway, not even moving a slight inch. As he gets off the bus, she stares at him with cold eyes.

“Let’s go.”

Jack feels a tingly sensation on his arms and rubs them self-consciously.

“Are you okay, mom? Why are you standing out here on a sunny day?”

He glances at her wet armpits, not sure what to say at her unusual silence. Jack then remembers he forgot his camera. He had wanted to film a project after school at Marigold’s house.

“Be right back mom, I need to get something.” He awkwardly walks around her, but she stops him by grabbing his wrist.

“Mom,” Jack protests. She then cranes her neck at an awkward angle to stare behind him.

“NO. LET’S. GO.” She says the three words slowly, her voice filled with sternness.

“Okay, okay, jeez!” Jack gets in his mother’s white car and his mom slowly follows. While his mom drives to Marigold’s house, Jack takes out his homework to fill the silent drive. He feels helpless as if his destiny was being forced onto him. When the car lurches to a stop, Jack finds himself asking, “What’s wrong with you, mom? Why are

you being like this?”

His mother answers by opening her door and manually dragging him out of the car. After a ‘convincing’ shove, Jack reluctantly walks into Marigold’s house. No one else is there, and Jack suddenly feels trapped. His mother had put him into a stranger’s house without further explanation, what else was he supposed to do? He takes a deep breath and starts to go back out of the door. *Something’s wrong...I just don’t like it.* He felt like the whole situation was off, it didn’t seem normal. He turns the knob to see his mom rushing at him at an alarming speed. She stops inches from his nose, kneeling to give him a threatening stare.

“GO. IN. NOW.”

Jack stumbles backward and yelps in a high-pitched shriek. He then pushes his mother away and starts to sprint. *I can’t believe I’m doing this.* Jack runs with no sense of direction; he is just looking for a place to hide. There are no people in sight, not even his daily neighbors. *Where has everyone gone?!*

He looks behind him and chokes back a scream. Through his bleary eyes, he sees his mom running with her arms stretched out, aiming straight at his neck. *Is she trying to choke me?!* As his mom’s figure gets closer, Jack turns down the street into a dark corner between a house. He forces himself to be silent, muffling his heavy breaths with his hands.

“Hello there Jack.”

Jack whips his head around to find Marigold sitting on one of the dumpster lids. “How’re you doing? I was waiting for you.”

Jack starts to shake as he says, “What are you? How did you know I would come here?”

Marigold smiles sadistically and says, “Why, I’ve come here to give you a little gift.” Jump emerges out of her pigtails as if coming out of thin air. It crawls down her skirt with dangly arms, each barely grazing the fabric. It’s floating. Jack stands, transfixed at the brown monkey. He couldn’t help but feel awed at how it moved, though he knew something bad was about to happen. The monkey floats up to him, arms outstretched, with its dead eyes staring at him. Jack surprises himself by letting the monkey cling to his neck, although it felt uncomfortable. *What am I doing?* Jack looks up at Marigold and asks, “What are you going to do with me?”

Marigold's smile widens to her cheeks, and she says, "Oh, not that much. You probably won't even remember that this happened."

Pants echoed throughout the alley as his mom emerged on four legs. She gets up and Jack winces at her bloodied knees.

"I ARE HAPPY. GOODNIGHT."

With one swift movement, she tackles Jack. He screams as she grabs the monkey, trying to yank it off. But the monkey hangs on, bruising his skin with its scratchy fur. While still conscious, he cranes his neck to Marigold.

"Please! Please help me!"

She swings her legs back and forth, ignoring him. Slowly, her rosy cheeks start melting off her face, as if it was ice cream in the sun. Then her skin, eyes, hair, and everything started to peel off. Eventually, a sleek-haired teenager with a ponytail was staring back at him. Jack feels his mom's weight on his chest and collapses in surprise. Jump's fur presses against his nose, and he lets out a gag in surprise. A sharp pain convulses throughout his entire body, and he jumps.

Elena sits back with her hands behind her back, keening on what Mrs. Griffin says. "Make sure she gets no more than two almond cookies, alright?"

She nods along and gets up from the couch to check up on Marigold. Her two pigtails swing into view as she appears from her bedroom.

"Mom, Jump opened the window AGAIN!!"

Elena's focus stutters for a second at the mention of the name. A cold breeze sweeps across the room when Marigold approaches. Elena turns to Mrs. Griffin expectantly for an explanation. She waves it off and says casually, "Oh, it's just Marigold's stuffed animal, don't worry about Jump."

Elena blinks a few times and turns to Marigold as Mrs. Griffin walks out of the door.

"So, what would you like for dinner, Gold?"



## MY NIGHTS IN A HAUNTED HOTEL

Daisy Vang, 12

It was raining. A red car drove around the streets with three people in it. A twelve year old boy named Nate, his older sister Gia, who was seventeen, and their mother, Sofia. The three were heading to their new house out of state.

“Mom, when will we get there again?” Nate asked.

Sofia kept her eyes on the road. “Just a few more days. For now, try to sleep,” she said.

Nate rolled his eyes and looked out the window. Nothing to see except rain and grass, but there was nothing better to do. He looked for some time, but he then got bored. Just as he was going to take his eyes off from the window, something caught his eye. A dog. A big black dog. It was skin and bones. Nate couldn't see the eyes because of the dark sky. Just then, the dog looked up. His eyes were red, and it seemed as they glowed. Nate gasped and looked away. What was that? *Dogs don't have red eyes, do they?* he wondered.

Hours later, Nate had fallen asleep and woke up when the car stopped suddenly. Nate got up. The rain had stopped, and they were in front of a hotel. It was called:

### **Good Dreams Forever**

“Mom, what are we doing here?” Gia asked. Sofia opened her door and stepped out.

“Gonna stay here for a day. Come on, we'll rent a room,” she replied. As the three walked in, Nate realized the hotel was quite old as the light flickered on and off. The hallway was dull and the floor creaked. They decided to book a room for two.

Once in the room, Sofia got out a blanket and laid it on the sofa. “You two sleep on the bed, alright? I'll sleep on the sofa tonight, okay?” she said.

Nate climbed into the bed and they fell asleep.

A few hours later, Nate woke up hearing heavy footsteps outside of their room.

“What was that?” Nate whispered. He looked at the time, and it was 4:29 A.M. What could be making a sound like that at this time? Just as he was about to get out of bed,

the door to their room opened. He got scared and hid under his sheets leaving a peek just to look. It was dark. Little light shone from the hallway. Then he heard growling. A pitch black figure slowly walked in. It was the dog from before. Nate's eyes widened.

Nate shut his eyes hoping this was all just some kind of dream, and he soon fell asleep. He didn't know what waited for him in the morning.

Nate woke up the next day and looked around. No black dog with red glowing eyes. He sighed. Gia came out from the bathroom brushing her teeth.

"Get ready, we're about to get back on the road," she said, checking her phone. After they had gotten ready, their mom told them she had bad news.

"Guys. So I know you want to get to our new house as soon as we can, but...our car has broken down. Good thing they hire car workers here, but we'll have to stay for a bit longer."

Both Nate and Gia let out a moan. Nate knew Gia wanted to get to their new home as well, but Nate wanted to get out of this place as soon as possible. It gave him the creeps.

"Mom! I need to tell you something!" he said suddenly.

Both Sofia and Gia looked at him.

"Go on," Sofia said.

Nate took a deep breath and said, "Last night I woke up to some weird noises. It was four in the morning, and someone opened our door and something came in. Also a big black dog came in too. It had red eyes that seemed to glow."

The two girls looked at him.

"Nate," Sofia said. "I'm sure it was a dream...come, we'll ask the workers if they know anything."

Nate was shocked! She didn't think he was telling the truth or something?

"No mom, it was really there! Trust me it really really was there. I saw it! I couldn't see the thing, but I could see the dog, and it was growling," Nate said.

Gia shook her head.

"Nate!" she snapped. "Stop whatever you're saying. I don't care at this point, so quit it already."

"Gia, Mom, you guys have to listen. It was really there. We can stay up until four, and see if it comes back," Nate said.

“Nate, I’m done. I’m not listening to any of this,” Gia said, turning to leave. Sofia shook her head.

“We’re doing no such thing as staying up until four. We’re going to go to sleep at the time we always do. Okay? No more talk about this. Come on now, we’ll get breakfast.”

The three walked downstairs and into the cafe. They got some food and sat down. Suddenly someone spoke to them.

“Breakfast good?” a male voice asked.

The three looked, and it was a man with a big black dog with red eyes. Nate screamed a bit, and they all looked at him. Nate looked down.

“Sorry,” he said.

Sofia shook her head.

“I’m sorry Michael, he didn’t mean to do that. And yes, the breakfast is great,” Sofia said.

Nate was confused. How does she know who this man is?

“Nate, Gia, this is Michael. One of my old friends who works here with his guard dog, Maxie. It’s one of the reasons I thought we should get some rest from the road. Some sleep and a trusted friend,” Sofia said.

Gia just nodded as Nate kept his eyes on the dog.

“Why does he need a guard dog? Hotels don’t have them,” Nate said.

Sofia gave him a look. “Maybe this one does,” Sofia said.

Nate was done. He left the table and went back to the room. A while later Sofia came in.

“Nate, I don’t get it. Why and how come you have had a sudden reaction when meeting Michael?” she asked.

Nate was watching tv and switched it off.

“Mom, his dog is the exact same thing I described earlier. Does that not worry you?” he asked, almost raising his voice.

Sofia narrowed her eyes. “Nate... just let that thought go. We’ll stay here one more day, and then we’ll leave. You got that?” she said.

Later that night, Nate stood awake while the two girls slept. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he wasn’t safe. A while later he started to hear the same footsteps. He got out from bed and cracked open the door for a peek. His jaw dropped, and he almost

forgot to breathe. There was Michael with bright red eyes, and a glowing green slime from his mouth dripping onto his shirt. His back was hunched. His back was facing Nate. He turned Nate's way. Nate stepped back and started to run back to his bed. But something stopped him. The dog. The big black dog with red eyes. He had nowhere to go and was stuck. *How did the dog even get in here?* he wondered. Nate looked at where Gia and Sofia were sleeping, but they weren't there. He thought he would be dead in just a couple of seconds. He prayed the rest of his family would move and decide this hotel wasn't safe. Just as the dog seemed ready to attack, Nate heard someone shouting his name.

"Nate! Nate! Wake up!" Gia shouted. Nate woke up startled and looked around. He was still in the car. It seemed they had stopped to wake him up. Gia and Sofia were both with him. In the back.

"Oh, thank goodness you're okay," Sofia said. "I thought you were having a heart attack or something. You scared me!"

Nate shook his head. "It's okay. Sorry I worried you guys. I was having a dream...now can we get on with our drive, I wanna get home!" he said.

Sofia smiled. "Yes, let's do that. Alright guys, seatbelt now. We have to get going," she said.

Nate fell asleep until the car suddenly stopped. Nate woke up and looked around. The car had parked at a hotel. It was called:

**Good Dreams Forever.**

Sofia got out of the car.

"Come on guys. We'll rest here. I have a friend who works here. He also has a dog," Sofia said.

"No—Mom, we can't!" yelled Nate.

## BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT

Brad Lobpries, 13

I woke up to the sound of my alarm clock beeping. It was another of many other Mondays. I dragged myself out of bed and got dressed. I walked out into the kitchen and saw my mom was asleep on the couch with a beer in her hand. I walked to the pantry and got some cereal. This wasn't unusual, my mom was never there for me. My dad left us a long time ago after they got divorced. I sat at the table with my phone and breakfast. No messages. Nothing. I turned off my phone and went to go get my backpack. I never knew why my family couldn't just be normal, and happy. I finished getting ready and tapped my mom on the shoulder.

"Mom? Can you please drive me to school today?" I asked while trying to wake her up.

"No Juno, you can walk," she said while trying to sit up on the couch.

"Please? It's raining outside," I said. She didn't respond. I didn't know what I was hoping for, my mom never drove me. I opened the door to hear the pouring rain outside.

"Bye mom, I love you," I said. She didn't respond. I walked out the door. This was my fault. I'm the reason my dad left. And I'm also the reason my mom was asleep on the couch. I needed to be there for her. There's also no point, she doesn't love you. She probably hates you. You're dragging her life down. Things can change. They also can't. I can't argue with myself anymore, it's not worth it. The cold rainwater dripped down my face, making me shiver. There was always something over my shoulder, whispering in my ear. "You're not enough." Every time it hurts. Many other eccentric thoughts always whisper their way into my head. Like I could see the ropes of life tying everything together, and my rope was cut. Some people had so many ropes tied around them they got tangled. Some people had just the right ropes supporting them, while I had none.

I arrived at school, but I was late again. I walked into my classroom with a late pass, and everyone stared at me with my sopping wet hair walking slowly to the teacher to give her the slip. Needles cut through my head and the sounds of the scraped ached. My eyes opened up in the wall, the air pushed down putting pressure on my forehead. I looked up from my sorrow and walked over to my seat. The eyes seeped back inside

the wall. Nobody bats an eye, and it seemed they didn't even notice it. It's not real, I told myself. I'm okay.

"Can everyone please get out the homework from last night?" the teacher said. I turned over to my backpack to see that my folder was empty. No papers. I shuffled through my bag as the room felt as if it was heating up, I shuffled through paper after paper. I had to stop myself. I had to calm down, or it would happen again. I took deep breaths and slowly the world around me soothed. The teacher got to my desk.

"Juno? Did you do the homework?" I felt the eyes coming back as the room went silent. A silent earthquake shook the floors, but again, I was the only one shaking.

"I'm sorry, but I-I-" I heard kids giggling and the world around me broke again. "I forgot it," I said reluctantly.

"Again, Juno? I gave you extra time, can you tell me why you aren't getting this done?" she said. The eyes broke through the wall and kids' laughter rang in my ear.

"I'm sorry I just-"

"Juno, you're gonna have to turn it in tomorrow for half credit," she said. I sat back in my seat. The teacher finished collecting homework.

"Ok, who is ready to present their project?"

Of course, I had forgotten. I took a few deep breaths to keep the stress inside me. It hurt. I have something wrong with me. I don't experience stress like everyone else. I feel like there's something wrong with me. I have to stay quiet though, nobody else sees what I see. It'll sound like a lunatic if I try to explain what I've been through.

"Juno? Why don't you go first, since you forgot the homework?"

Breathe in, breathe out.

"Ok, can I have a minute to sort out my document?" I said, trying not to react. I opened the document to see nothing. As I closed my eyes I could feel the ground being ripped out from beneath me. I opened my eyes. I was fine. I'm okay. All I have to do is write a paragraph about World War Two, in one minute. I slowly broke out into the hellish world that normal people call being stressed out. I slowly started to hyperventilate. *Don't break out. Everyone's watching you, and so are the spirits.* I could feel the slow break out of my life like someone threw me on a rollercoaster.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Okay, there's nothing in this document. I'll have to make something up. Now.

“Can you share it with me, so it can be on the board?” the teacher asked. I had to make something up quickly.

“Oh, don’t worry I’ve memorized it,” I said.

“Great, why don’t you come up to the front of the room and share with us?”

I gulped. Each step I took to the front of the room shook my soul. My heart raced to keep up. I saw eyes, on the floors and walls. They weren’t real, I told myself. Breathe in, breathe out.

“For my topic, I chose World War II.” I didn’t know what to say. The room went dead silent. I had to say something.

“WWII was a war that happened in the year-” I didn’t know the year. The floor shook, and I could feel the cold stares of the students pierce my skin. Kids started whispering into each other’s ears giggling. Breathe in, breathe out. Nothing worked. The world around me didn’t look like a classroom anymore, it looked like hell. I stood there shaking, nothing I could do. I broke.

I instantly broke out crying and I just wanted the ground to swallow me whole. Everything else around me started shaking and I couldn’t take it anymore. Suddenly, a huge demon burst out of the floor, screeches ringing my ear, but then it stopped. The eyes seeped back into the wall, everything returned to its place. The demon stayed. Typically I would be able to calm down before something like this happened, I’ve never gone this far. I stood there shaking and the demon stared back at me. They started to walk toward me. Slowly, as the demon got closer, everything got colder. I couldn’t react. Kids were laughing at me. I just ran. I left the class. I ran as fast as I could away. And what chased me wasn’t a classroom full of children who cared, but all the stress that’s followed me my whole life. I got to the end of the block, and I remembered.

It’s not real. Breathe in, Breathe out.

## THE GIRL IN THE MIRROR

Holly M. Musgrove, 12

### Chapter 1

“Here it is!” my sister exclaims as we pull up to our “new” abode in her old beat-up red sedan as twilight approaches this chilly autumn eve. It’s a shabby old shack of a place, the generic haunted house on the street. All wood, with countless cracks, every window is broken, and a falling roof shingle tries to kill me but narrowly misses as I climb out of the car, dragging my suitcase behind me. This place will never be home, I think, shivering in my dark green hoodie.

“It’s a great value, only 20 dollars a month,” Cleota, my older sister explains. She digs in her ebony purse for an ornate tarnished silver key, and fiddles the rusty lock open. “Not scary at all,” she tells herself more than me. I’ve never been a fan of broken things, but here’s fine. I can’t think of a better place to stay.

We walk in, and I grope around in the dark until I feel a thin chain, I pull it, and one puny lightbulb turns on, casting eerie shadows as it barely illuminates the meager kitchen, coated in cobwebs, its only appliances are a stove and a toaster.

“I can’t wait to start my new job at the Volterra store tomorrow!” declares Cleota. How can she be so happy? I thought. We’re nearly broke, with no one to help us, since mom and dad are gone, we’re forced to live in this itty bitty town, (if you could even call it a town), it’s hopeless....

I walk into the living room. It has a holey couch and a coffee table, but it’s missing a leg. “I’ll take this bedroom!” Cleota calls. I follow her and see a flat mattress on a creaking bed frame, a small, rickety vanity, and a cupboard of a closet.

“Any other bedrooms?” I ask her.

“I don’t know, Eleanor,” Cleo sighs, annoyed at me, like usual.

I decided to explore the house a little more, but there’s not anything else other than another dusty closet and a claustrophobic bathroom. The whole house looks abandoned, like whoever lived there died; Cleo’s probably paying the rent to a guy who just owns the land for the sake of owning land.

I walk out of the bathroom and start to get a feeling that we shouldn’t be here, when



I find the stairs. I climb up tentatively, each step creaking beneath my feet, praying that the steps won't give way. I get up there, and there's a door. I open it slowly, cautiously, anxiously anticipating horrors behind it, but it's just an attic littered with wooden trunks, bookshelves along the walls, a filthy, but fancy framed rectangular mirror, and some blankets in a corner. I swear I hear a whisper, but then the sound disappears. This place is giving me the creeps.

I go back downstairs and get my suitcase, carry it up the stairs, and thunk it on the floor in my room. The rising dust gives a nasty-old-things smell. I unpack my clothes and my few precious sentimental items, and place them on shelves. I layer blankets on the floor for my bed, and I go downstairs on a hunt for pillows when I hear Cleo on the phone.

"Yeah, we're living in this old town that's known for a lot of paranormal ghost activity," she says, walking around with her phone. Ghosts. Ha! Just those who want an internet story.

"Yes, like almost everyone moved away 'cause they got scared. Mm-hmm. Oh and all the houses were built in, like, the 1800's, so our house is falling apart a little.

"Oh, you went to that concert with your sister? How fun! I wish I could've gone with you and Lindsey. That would've been the best!"

What about me? Can't Cleo go to a concert with me?

"Well, talk to you later Angie!!" Cleo hangs up. "What do you want, Eleanor?" she exasperatedly barks at me.

"Are there any spare pillows?" I ask.

"I don't know," she responds. "Somewhere."

They're not in the downstairs closet, so I head back upstairs and pull out a trunk to dig through. This first one has books, papers, and some old and fuzzy black and white photographs, and the clothes in them must be from the 1800s.

The first photo is of a little girl, not more than 3 years old, with shoulder-length dark brown hair wearing a poofy little dress, and she's laughing. Did she die here? Did she move away? No, her family can't have moved, all this stuff is left behind...

I stared at that happy girl for a while, then I stopped, and made sure I'm not hallucinating. The girl is fading away before my eyes like disappearing ink. Soon, she's not there at all, and only the sofa she was sitting on remains. I panic, and throw the

photograph across the room with a little yelp.

I hear someone whispering again, and I turn around to the grimy, dusty old mirror, where the sound must be coming from. A soft, young, very pale face appears, on a short body, wearing a long, old fashioned, dirty, pale pink pleated dress, with many creases. Her dark hair is pulled back in a half-up hairdo, decorated with a pink hair ribbon. I can't see myself in the mirror, just her, and she's nowhere in the room in real life, I looked around and checked. This isn't right, this can't be happening, I think, freaking out.

"Hello," she says, sweetly and softly, but I scream.

## Chapter 2

"Ahhhhhhh!!!"

"Elllaa-noorr! What is wrong-uh?" Cleota whines from the kitchen. I race down the stairs as fast as I can, and I sprint to the kitchen.

"Cleo, Cleo, there's a girl, a girl in my mirror!!" I tell her, as I try to catch my breath.

"A girl. In your mirror. Yeeaahh right," Cleota rolls her eyes. "Ghost house," she then scoffs. "Just a leftover Halloween decoration, not a possessed mirror, El. You're not one of those crazy superstitious people, are you?"

"No I'm not..." I mumble back. I walk back to my room though, and I pick up the dropped photograph, the child reappeared while I left, and I realize it's her, the girl in the mirror. In the mirror she looked about 8 or 9, but this picture definitely matches her, just younger. I boldly gaze into the mirror, studying its elaborate frame, and I only see myself through all the filth. It wasn't anything at all, I tried to convince myself. Not a girl, not a decoration, just nothing. It never happened.

That night I toss and turn on my pile of blankets. It's not uncomfortable, actually quite cozy, despite the cold draft breezing through the attic, but I just can't sleep. I look at the mirror again, expecting her to show up, but nope. I look again, and again, constantly checking as the hours tick by. I can't sleep unless I know who or what I saw.

I glance at the mirror one more time, and it starts to glow green around the edges, and the girl materializes, just as sweet yet freaky as before. I'm petrified again, and I want to scream, but instead I take a deep breath, and ask, "Who on earth are you?"

“My name is Lilith,” she replies. “What’s your name?”

“El-Eleanor,” I stutter.

Lilith smiles, “Welcome to my room, Eleanor. I’d love to play with you! I thought up a lot of frightfully splendid games after all this time alone.”

I don’t want any games with this ghost girl, so I steer the conversation away with, “How long have you been in here?”

“I don’t know. One day I was taking a nap, and when I woke up, I was flying away, but I saw my body sleeping, still in my bed. I flew through some squishy stuff, and finished my nap right here. I saw Mama and Papa come for me, and they picked up my sleeping body. I yelled for them over and over, but they didn’t hear me. Then they started to cry over me. I kept calling, ‘Mama, Papa, I’m over here!’ but no one could hear me. They walked away and only came back to cry more and take stuff out of my room. After a while, I didn’t see them at all. They never came for me. It’s been so lonely, all this time...”

Lilith begins to cry long sniffly sobs. So she died, and her spirit got stuck in this mirror. Oh. My. Gosh.

“I’m sorry Lilith, but I don’t know how to get you out. Maybe I could call Ghostbusters...” I offer.

“Ghost-busters??” Lilith asks, wiping her nose. “What’s that?” Apparently, her brain is stuck in the 19th century. Can’t blame her though.

“Just a silly story,” I explain. “Well, good night now.”

“Oh no, you can’t go to sleep yet,” Lilith says. “Could you bring me my dolly? She’s in the red trunk.” Her voice is like a creepy baby doll, all high like an elf, and breezy like the wind. I don’t know what she can do from inside the mirror, so I’ll just do what she says for now. I drag out the red trunk, the heaviest one, scraping it against the floor and I open it. Right on top in the dead center lay a rag doll, all dusty and slightly moth-eaten, but noticeably stitched by someone with love and care.

“My dolly!” Lilith cries. “Would you please hand her to me?”

I cautiously bring ‘dolly’ closer and closer to the mirror, hovering just above the glass. How will the doll get in? I wonder.

“Just a little closer, don’t be afraid,” Lilith coaxes, so I bring the doll’s face to the glass. “A little farther, Eleanor,” I push Dolly against the mirror, and she slips through

like quicksand jello! In the shock, my right hand falls through with the doll. On the other side, it feels frigid, and numbing. I must be touching Lilith's dress, but I only feel emptiness. My heart races, and I yank and pull and tug as hard as I can on my arm with my free hand. It really is like quicksand; I grunt and groan as I drop the doll and ferociously try harder to withdraw my arm from the mercy of Lilith.

Speaking of Lilith, she's not helping. "Oh, please come in with me! I'm dying for a playdate!"

"I'm nearly 13, I think I'm a bit too old for playdates," I protest, struggling more. Fighting the mirror is like playing tug of war with a dog, they won't let go with those clamping teeth. But with a final "Unnnnggghhh!!" my hand breaks free at last.

I pant in front of the mirror, and catch my breath, clutching my pale hand as it slowly regains color. "Never ask me to come in your mirror again," I ordered her, shaking. Before she can say anything, I grab a sheet off my blanket bed, and drape it over Lilith's mirror as she fades away, clutching Dolly. "Never again." I tell myself.

### Chapter 3

The next morning at breakfast, I'm eating cereal next to Cleota and I describe the events of last night. She just rolls her eyes and says, "Great imagination," sarcastically. That mirror has got to go. After breakfast, I went out in the yard, and searched the shed until I found a sledgehammer, crowbar, and a saw. I took them upstairs, held the sledgehammer up, and swung it at Lilith's mirror, preparing for a shatter, but instead the surface of the mirror rippled like a pond. I tried again but it still rippled.

So next I tried the crowbar. I tried to pry the frame off the wall, but that darn frame must be superglued. The saw didn't work on the wall around it either. That mirror is cursed, and I can't get rid of it, so I drape the sheet over it again. I don't want that scary ghost child in my room, or anywhere. I walk away from the mirror, and the sheet falls off of it. Lilith materializes again, and giggles. "You can't hide from me Eleanor!!" she taunts. Man, her voice is so freaky!

"Stay right here Lilith, BRB," I tell her, before I seize my chance, and run downstairs to fetch Cleota, and make her stare into Lilith's freaky little face.

"I don't see anyone, just you and me El," Cleota claims, while Lilith is sticking her tongue out at me, making silly faces and laughing.

“She’s right there! With the pink dress, and now she’s waving her arms around!” I try to tell her.

“Very funny Eleanor. I have things to be doing,” Cleota stomps off. No one is helping me, so...I’ll just hold out with Lilith til she goes away.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night, I just sat and waited for Lilith to re-materialize. When she assumed her form, I was prepared.

“What do you want from me?” I boldly demanded. “I am not going in your mirror, and you are freaking me out!”

“I’m just so lonely, I’ve had nobody for all this time...” Lilith’s tone turned darker, “But now I have you...” She reaches out. If my hand can go through, can hers come too? The thought scares me, so I grab the sledgehammer again and smack the glass again, causing her to flinch.

“Oh, you can’t hurt me,” Lilith eerily whispers, then she grins with ghoulish delight, and waves her arm. As she waves, one of the bookshelves falls over with a THUD-CRASH, books flying across the room.

I’m pretty convinced that wasn’t a coincidence, so I freaked out again. This kid is spoiled rotten and desperate for attention, to the point of paranormally attempting to cause me harm. I need help, but who am I going to call? Cleota sleeps like a rock, so I’m not surprised she didn’t hear the shelf falling.

Lilith must take pleasure in my suffering, so she knocks down another shelf, closer to me. The crash nearly gives me a heart attack as I jump out of the way in the nick of time. Crash after crash fills my ears, along with Lilith’s cackling as nearly all the furniture and boxes topple over, spilling all the old junk and my possessions to the ground as I scream with terror. The biggest bookshelf, directly behind me, is the only one remaining.

“Don’t you dare, Lilith,” I warn, predicting my fate. “Please, please don’t! I’ll do anything, just don’t hurt me!” I then pleaded, tears beginning to slide down my face. I’m scared, I don’t want to be here, I want to go back home, safe, back to when Mom and Dad were here, when Cleota loved me, and I’d never met Lilith. Maybe I’ll see Mom and Dad again soon...

Lilith raises her arm, wickedly smiling again.

“No,” I beg. “No no no.”

Time is running out. Life becomes slow-motion, Lilith’s hand slowly moves past her face, devilishly smirking at me.

“See you on the other side, Eleanor,” she says. Life speeds up again; I only have time to think, Help me, before a crushing weight knocks me to the ground as I shriek. I only feel pain as the world turns black, cold, and empty.

#### Chapter 4

I feel myself gliding away, far, far away from the pain and fear, and I don’t look back. I gravitate towards the looking glass without trying. There’s something bad there, I just know it, but I can’t explain why. I drift through cold, soothing gel, like Orbeez, as I comfortably relax, gazing out at my room. I don’t feel cold anymore, I don’t feel anything at all.

I look over and see a familiar young girl, dressed in pink with dark hair, smiling sweetly at me. “Hello, Lilith,” I said. What was I afraid of? I don’t remember. It’s not important. As we make up a grand story of a princess, a dragon, a knight and a brave puppy, I tell her how happy I am.

“Isn’t playtime worth dying for?” she asks, grinning ear to ear.

“It is,” I agree.

#### Epilogue

Cleota wakes up to the sound of her much-dreaded alarm clock in the morning. She gets up and dressed, and wanders over to the kitchen for some toast. After she eats, she wonders, *Where is Eleanor? She’s usually up by now.* So Cleota goes upstairs to the attic to find her sister.

Inside Eleanor’s room, she finds the disastrous mess of shelves, and...blood? She gasps and leans over the largest shelf, and sees Eleanor’s body, her distinct dirty blond hair, dressed in her purple nightgown, lying facedown on the floor, dead.

She burst into tears, sobbing over her sister, wishing she had spent more time with her, and showed her how much she cared...

Cleota wiped her tears and turned around to the mirror, which Eleanor thought to be possessed, and began an anguished breakdown. To Cleota’s surprise, she saw that

girl in the pink dress Eleanor talked about, standing next to Eleanor, who's pale, translucent, smiling, and holding the other girl's hand, but she seemed serene, and at peace.

## IN THE BASEMENT

Izabel Baker, 13

It lies down deep in the murky darkness. Waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Filled with anguish for its captor, for its prison. It waits every day, hoping to leave, hoping to escape. Its hatred only swells every day to be greater, its sadness only deepens. The world it lives in is closed off, blocked from light, choked from fresh air. It lives in the basement.

It was making noise again. I could hear it scratching the concrete floor, its unmistakable growl, its cruel roar. It did this every morning, and almost at the same time, when would it stop, when can I live in peace?

How should I have known what to do, other than push it down the stairs? I couldn't recall what it looked like exactly, but I remembered something scary, no, horrifying.

I went to check on it, not really check but just make sure all the chains and locks were good and in place, otherwise it might escape. I was filled with fright, it had climbed the stairs and was banging against the door. It had never done this before, not ever.

Of course though I couldn't just let it do that, I had to take action, that was what mother always said. Or, was it father? I couldn't remember, that was strange. Maybe it was my teacher Mr. Bird who said it, but my memory was a blur and I couldn't recall.

The basement door was in the living room, a bare wooden door with copper-colored door knob. I had put at least six locks on it and I had chains nailed to the wall to secure it even more. Though I was short so I was only in the bottom half.

The living room walls were an icky green, we had a purple couch on the wall and a matching chair adjacent to it.

The cabinet I used to barricade the shaking basement door stopped it, I assumed it must have given up. *A wise decision to leave me alone*, I told myself. That was a quote from a show I used to watch, though I can't remember which.

I checked the calendar, *February 24*. I hadn't been to school for three months. Not since the monster came, not since my parents...left.



I did my chores, went about my daily business, but I could still feel it in my gut. This weird feeling, like the monster sounded hollow almost. It had always been this way. I could hear the scratching, the howling, the growling, but something about it, it was like it was hollow. As if the sound was incomplete, not totally there. The shaking of the door today had seemed kind of fuzzy, it looked like it was shaking but another part of me told me it wasn't, that it had stood still.

How is it possible that now I am confusing myself? The monster was real otherwise, where did my parents go? What else could have happened to them? I shook the thought off, set my broom aside and went outside. I sat on the swinging bench that hung under our porch.

Why had it come like this? Lying down in the darkness, prowling the basement like a hungry animal. It just sat there day after day and now it started to try and get out. I missed my parents a lot too. The monster, it had *stolen* them, I didn't know another word to use. It had taken them into the basement. They hadn't come back out since.

Or had it? I thought I recalled shoving it into the basement, did I forget? No, it definitely took them into the basement. But then why do I recall pushing someone, no, no, *something*. I recall something falling down the steps and it crashing at the bottom, or was it two things? No, because there was only one monster. Ugh, I can't remember.

I might have kept going back and forth in my own thoughts had I not seen the white police car pull through the trees.

I live in a forest, a thick one too, not too far from town but far enough that it's quiet and reserved at my home. But for the life of me, I couldn't understand why a police officer would be at *my* house, I'd never broken the law in my life, not once.

I hid inside the house, locking the door behind me. No, no he will leave it will all be all right he'll never know.

*Know what?* A voice asked in my head. *What is it you don't want him to know?*

"SHUT UP," I yelled aloud, I hadn't realized that the police officer could hear me just beyond the door, just outside.

"Hey, dear, would you mind opening the door? I need to come inside. I need to speak with your parents," he said, he sounded nice. I hadn't seen him but I imagined that he had a nice smile. I hadn't seen any people for a while.

I opened the door, he had short gray hair, a large pot belly, a police uniform, a

chubby face, and best of all a happy bright smile. *Mother and father did too, look where that got them.* The voice in my head spoke again, my smile instantly dropped, turning my face to an expression of weariness.

I couldn't read the man's thoughts, but I bet he felt guilty seeing a little kid's smile fade after seeing him.

"May I come in, please," he asked, he sounded so nice. So, I let him come in, and the door led into the kitchen. It wasn't very clean. I didn't do the dishes often, and I almost never cleaned the countertop. Not since mother and father had been taken into the basement.

"Where are your sweet parents?" he asked, looking around. He hadn't even mentioned the shambles my home was in. I told him to wait in the living room. I lied, telling him they'd be home soon. The basement door stood out, barricaded and chained up. Like a bad secret I didn't want out, and that was what it was.

"They're not home," I told him.

"Really, and they left you all alone," he asked.

"Uhm, yes," I said, my voice was so soft, he was probably straining his ears to hear me.

"Hmm, well why don't we call them, what's their number?" he asked.

"I don't know," I lied. I knew it, but nobody would pick up, their phones were dead, lying on their nightstands. In the same place they had been when they were stolen.

I was shook with fright, below us a great roar came from the basement, ricocheting up the stairs and rumbling in the house. I fell down with fear and the man rushed over to help me up. Strangely though, he seemed completely unfazed, like he hadn't even noticed it. The only thing that had shocked him was my sudden fright.

"Your name is Amelie, isn't it," he asked. I don't know why, but I had to think for a moment, yes it was my name. I nodded. The last person who had spoken my name was my parents as I...as the monster took them down the stairs.

"And your parents are Jamie and James?" he asked.

"I can't remember," I admitted, "but that sounds familiar."

"Well, you see Amelie, you and your parents have been missing for a little over three months. People have been worried. The last time police came, they searched the house and no one was home. Your parents haven't answered any calls, no one's heard of them

for a while. Or you,” he said. He looked worried. *Oh no, I thought, what do I say?*

“Amelie, I need to see what’s behind that door, if it’s your parents then-,” he said, but I cut him off.

“NO, no, I didn’t do it, I swear. It’s not my fault, I’m telling the truth,” I screamed. My voice was shaking, my fists balled.

“Now, there’s no need to be frightened, I never said it was your fault, but if someone’s down there I need to go look,” he said. He pushed the cabinet aside. He easily removed the chains that I hadn’t nailed in that deep. If he could take them out so easily, what had stopped the monster?

“Where is the key?” he asked kindly. I took a step back, I couldn’t tell him no, but my eyes darted over to the key holder on the wall next to the TV.

“Please stop,” I begged him, but he unlocked each lock. I tried to push him aside but at the same time he opened the door. The force knocked him down the stairs and he landed in a heap at the bottom.

*You’ve done it again. Another person, an innocent person who only wanted to help and you threw them to the bottom of the basement. To protect your little secret, the voice said in my head.*

“SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP, I didn’t mean to, it’s not my fault,” I screeched. *But it is, it started with one person, then your parents and now an innocent man, your fault, it said.*

“How could I?” I had almost forgotten.

Not a week before my parents fell down the stairs, a friend had been visiting. I had been playing with a friend, my parents had been out, my friend had fallen down the stairs. I had tripped them by accident and they fell. Their body, unmoving in the darkness. I didn’t want to get in trouble. I had told my parents they had gone home.

When my parents went to go to the basement to do laundry, I couldn’t let them see my secret. I tried pushing them aside but the same thing happened. They tripped over each other and tumbled down the narrow stairs to the bottom.

*Oh, what a terrible daughter you are, look at what you’ve done. What a tragedy.*

“OH, BE QUIET,” I screeched. No, the monster was real, it was, the monster had grabbed the man and pulled him down at the same moment I pushed him aside. It had done the same with my parents, with my friend. It wasn’t my fault. No, it couldn’t

be me. It just couldn't be me, it was the monster. The monster, it was all the monster's fault it was real it wasn't my fault it just couldn't be.

They lie down deep in the murky darkness. Piled at the bottom of the stairs. Still and without motion or emotions. Never to leave, for they cannot move. Their stench only swells every day, their existence only more prominent. The world they live in is closed off, cut from the light, choked from the air. They lie in the basement.

## SANGUIS SOMNIUM

Eveline Inman, 13

The bell rang, it was time for lunch. Kaye grabbed their bags and walked calmly to the cafeteria. Kaye had brown medium-length hair, they often got complimented on it. They wore a white shirt with a black hoodie over it and ripped jeans. Their shoes were worn but because of that, they were comfortable.

Kaye finally got to the cafeteria after traveling through the maze that they called school. Kaye took their seat in the center of the room while everyone else was filling the room. It was best to get there before everyone else. Kaye watched and listened to everyone while they passed, their conversations were always interesting.

“Did you hear that another kid was found dead right outside city limits...” one girl said.

“Oh, no I...” The girls moved out of earshot, and a group of boys walked past Kaye.

“You don’t stand a chance!” one said to the shortest of the group.

“You don’t know!” he replied, clearly annoyed. “I’ll just bite his ankles off.”

“Yeah, cuz that’s all you can do...” Once again, another group was out of earshot. Kaye sighed. Lunch was going to be boring again. They scanned the students in the cafeteria. None of them seemed interesting enough to listen in on. Kaye just sat there looking hopelessly at their food. They were left to think about how the last day of school was approaching. May 1<sup>st</sup> was a day most people looked forward to because it was the day back in 2096, 943 years ago, that the isle the town was floating on was founded. Kaye didn’t find this day too appealing because it was still a school day.

“Are you sure your chips are working properly?” Another group of students walked past. Everyone had two chips in their head, one on the right side of their brain and one on the left. This was always scary to Kaye, what secrets were hiding behind them.

“I’m not even hungry,” Kaye said as soon as the room fell silent. Kaye jumped and looked around. The room was a lot darker than it was supposed to be and glass was everywhere along with blood. It was also empty, no one other than Kaye was there, but as soon as this vision appeared, it had disappeared.

“That was weird...” Kaye thought aloud. They were still freaked out by this sudden

change of scenery. Kaye's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden ring. It was the bell that marked the end of lunch.

Math class was as boring as ever. The teacher, Mr. Thomas, had a monotone voice making it impossible not to fall asleep. He was explaining something that sounded like gibberish.

Everyone had to will themselves to stay awake while others just didn't have enough willpower. Kaye was taking notes so they wouldn't forget anything in the future. They had an A and they weren't about to trade it for a nap in class.

Kaye closed their eyes for a moment to try and get their thoughts together. The teacher fell silent along with the snores of some of the students. Kaye opened their eyes to see what had happened, hopefully not what happened in the cafeteria at lunch. Kaye sat there looking at the room. It was the exact same as what happened in the cafeteria.

The window glass was all around the room and blood splatters were visible everywhere, but that isn't what had Kaye holding their breath. What had them holding their breath was the trails of blood from the students' desks to the broken windows. The trails weren't the trails you leave behind when your arm is dripping blood. No, it looked as if the students had been dragged out through the window.

Kaye walked slowly to the window ready to see mangled bodies at the foot of the school.

Kaye looked out the window. The world looked no better than the classroom, there were still trails of blood and some cars looked like they had been thrown to the side by something big. Kaye looked down when suddenly the world came back to normal.

There was no more blood, no more cars thrown to the side, and no more glass shards sprinkled around the room. Kaye breathed a sigh of relief as they turned around. They turned around to see the entire class looking at them.

"Wood..." Mr. Thomas said. "Go take your seat."

"Sorry..." Kaye mumbled under their breath. They quickly took their seat.  
*Embarrassing...*

The final bell finally rang and the normal chatter started up.

"You know that *girl*, Kaye?" People often forgot that Kaye was non-binary because of their feminine appearance.

"Yeah!" The group of girls never often talked about Kaye.

“Didn’t *she* have some weird *episode* today in math?” Once again, the rumors. Kaye just held their breath and walked straight through the group of girls.

“Hey!” One called after Kaye. “Watch it!”

Kaye just ignored them. *If they’re going to say horrible things about me*, Kaye looked back at them, *it’s the least I could do*. Kaye walked to their car parked outside the school. They started the car and was about to pull out of the parking lot when the world became dark, almost like it was night.

“No, not again!” Kaye tried to get out of their car, but the car door wouldn’t budge. They looked out the window only to see the concrete of the parking lot. Was it their car that had been thrown to the side? Kaye looked around the car and curious enough there was no blood anywhere. Kaye realized that the car wasn’t on its side, instead all sides were covered in concrete. Were they *in* concrete? Surely not.

“This will end at some point.” They closed their eyes and sat there. Kaye opened their eyes and it was suddenly blindingly bright. It took time for their eyes to adjust to the darkness, once their eyes adjusted to the light they took off. Once they got home they ignored their mother asking how their day was or what they learned. Instead they ran to their room and flopped onto their bed.

Day after day the visions of a world covered in blood and darkness kept getting longer. And day after day Kaye got used to it. Although it was still terrifying. It was finally the night before the last week of school.

*Hopefully the visions will stop...* Kaye’s thoughts trailed off. The visions only appeared at school and nowhere else. Kaye’s eyelids felt heavy and their bed was much too comfortable to stay awake.

Kaye woke up in the morning. Their eyes weren’t open but they could feel the world around them. Their bed was less comfortable than it had been the day before, but this didn’t bother Kaye. The thing that made their eyes open at the speed of light was the dried substance on their hand.

Kaye looked down at their hand and saw dried blood. It wasn’t the only blood in their room. Kaye looked at the walls and floors of the room, they were covered from the floor to the ceiling with blood. It was splattered on the floor and on the walls. The ceiling looked as if it had bled into the walls. Their room looked much different from what it was supposed to be.

Kaye waits and waits but their room stays the same. It doesn't change. The rooms still have blood on the walls and floors. The bed was still uncomfortable and their hand was still covered in blood. The wait was much too long so Kaye decided to get up and explore. The living room didn't have as much blood as their room. Kaye noticed a trail of blood. Another person had been dragged out or in their house. They followed the trail to their mother's room. Had she been dragged out against her will like the students at school?

"Mom..." Kaye whispered. They didn't want whatever had dragged her away to come back and take them. Kaye then follows the trail the way they came but noticed something they haven't noticed before. The door was open. Kaye slowly walked toward the door. *Whatever is out there can't notice me...* They looked out of the house, careful not to be noticed. The trail didn't stop, it just continued. It continued to the street where so many other trails met.

Kaye stepped out of their house. The concrete was cold under their bare feet. They honestly didn't care to put shoes on.

"A dream..." They whispered a little louder than they did in their mom's room. "This must be a dream!" Kaye refused to believe this was real. There was just no way but everything felt so real. The cold concrete, the dried blood on their hand, the air around them. It was all too real. It felt more like a nightmare than a happy dream. Kaye walked forward slowly. The grass tickled their feet as they dragged their feet. Kaye reached the street. The trail continued for such a long time, Kaye couldn't see the end of it.

"I guess if there is nothing else to do..." Kaye walked and walked. Their feet started to hurt.

"I should've brought shoes with me." Kaye looked to their left to see if there was a place they could *borrow* shoes. There was a home and the door was left open like the rest of the houses.

"I don't think they'll mind." Kaye stumbled to the front door. They fell silent at the sound of something eating. Kaye held their breath and walked in. Holding your breath never really makes you quieter but it gives the illusion. This Kaye knew but it felt much more comfortable to do so.

The hallway Kaye walked into was rather small but there were shoes, torn shoes. It didn't matter what condition they were in as long as they were shoes they were fine.



Kaye slipped their feet into the torn shoes. They made a squishing sound that made Kaye's heart almost pop out of their chest. The house fell silent. The chewing had stopped. They decided to be brave and look through the open door at the end of the hallway. There were random bodies all across the floor. Kay's eyes fell upon one particular body.

Kaye's mother.

They were about to run over to her when footsteps started to sound. Kaye got down.

Their knees were up against their chin. Kaye tried to be as small and quiet as humanly possible. Kaye looked back into the room and saw to their horror a giant monster. It had very little hair and its eyes were glowing a bright yellow. Its skin sagged and was rather wrinkly. It didn't have a nose but it made no noise. You couldn't even hear it breathe out of its mouth if it even did breathe. Its teeth were visible because the beast had no lips to hide them.

It started to walk toward them. Kaye had to find a hiding spot fast. Their eyes landed on a closet across the hall. *Maybe...* Kaye looked back at it. It seemed to be distracted with something stuck in its teeth. Kaye took this opportunity to push off from their hiding spot into the closet.

After a few seconds, it walked past the closet and into the street.

Kaye gave a sigh of relief and walked out of the closet. They hadn't noticed until now but they were shaking so hard. Their heart rate was still high so Kaye sat for a moment to catch their breath. When the shaking had subsided, Kaye stood up and made their way to the front door.

"I can't worry about you just yet, Mom." Kaye looked back through the hallway to the open door. They blinked back tears and continued down the street. The blood kept going for such a long time. Kaye's feet hurt less but the shoes were much too big. It didn't help that the shoes had been torn. It was too late now. They had the shoes and that was that.

Kaye looked up ahead. There was a little square box in the distance. *Is someone in there?!* This gave Kaye hope. They started running to the box. It got bigger and bigger until it was a few feet taller than Kaye. The square structure was black with no blood on it. It looked out of place compared to the barren wasteland around it. Kaye circled it until they found a door. They tried the door handle, it wasn't locked. Kaye opened

the door into a dark room and took a step in.

Kaye fell forward, it felt like something had pushed them. The door slammed behind them. The darkness enveloped Kaye for a long time or what felt like a long time. Finally a light turned on in the center of the room. The inside looked nothing like the outside. It was covered in blood splatters and there was torn tapestry all along the walls. The tapestries showed Kaye's journey. The first time the world turned bloody along with the other times. It showed the shoes, their mother, the monster and finally Kaye covered in blood and deformed in a dark room with tapestries hung around the room.

Kaye couldn't breathe the air in the room. It was too contaminated. Kaye got to their feet, shaking. Kaye walked forward a little bit but tripped on something. They turned around and screamed. Just as the tapestry had shown Kaye was looking at a mangled and bloody body. Kaye scooted away from their dead body.

"That can't be me!" Kaye ran to where the door had been. "It can't be me!" Kaye was sobbing at this point. The door was gone and their body was lying mangled on the floor behind them. Kaye collapsed on the floor. There was no way out, they would be stuck there for the rest of their life. Kaye was defeated.

"A dead *girl* by the name of Kaye Woods has been found miles away from *her* home," the news reporter said, right before Jack's father turned the tv off.

"That's much too dark for this morning," his father turned to look at Jack. "Well, it's time for school. Have all of your things?" Jack nodded in response. He always preferred not to talk, it was just easier to fall into the background that way. Jack's father drove him to school.

They said good-bye to each other and Jack went to his class.

"Lunch time!" some of his classmates called to each other as soon as the bell rang. The other kids rushed past Jack in a hurry to meet up with friends they could only see at lunch. He was always one of the last to the cafeteria because people pushed him out of the way. He didn't mind it though. He had finally made it to the cafeteria and right when he went to sit down the room fell silent and he was the only one left, in a bloody, and messy cafeteria.

## NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE

Anne Paschal, 13

“Not supposed to be here. Not supposed to be here,” uttered over and over again until the words lost meaning in Charlotte’s mouth. “Not supposed to be here.”

Staring into the blinding white walls of the Silver Chase Psychiatric Hospital. Charlotte always hated the color white, stained so easily, so distressing. Why did it all have to be white? It didn’t matter. She had to tell them, tell them what really happened. They never seemed to care though. All these sweet-voiced nurses acted like you were their only care in the world. Then, when you try to tell them the most important thing, they turn around to knock you out cold with what they call ‘special gas’ to calm you down. Why didn’t Nurse Jamie understand? Charlotte was not supposed to be here.

### ONE WEEK EARLIER

Charlotte hated walking home, so many hills, so hot, she never understood the people who raved about walking. In all her 27 years, she had always hated it. She just wanted to get home, she didn’t want to tromp around the globe. She was almost home though, no sense in trying to hitch a ride with a neighbor passing by.

Charlotte’s mind wandered off, thinking about that last bit of work she left on her desk, and Friday’s office party. She didn’t notice the disheveled woman wandering, muttering, and aimlessly swinging her head around the suburban street. Swinging her head until it landed on Charlotte. The woman cocked her head slightly to the left, squinting a bit. Staring.

This woman, Marie Shambrooks, was sent to be put away in the Silver Chase Psychiatric Hospital. In the start of the decline of her mental state, her family tried to keep her at home. They attempted to keep her condition a secret, but when the neighbors found out what Marie had done, it was too horrid to keep undercover. In a fit of insanity, she had murdered her niece. In a dreadful display out in the backyard, with only a dull kitchen knife. The process of this act was drawn out, with Marie being especially meticulous with how she went about it.

Their neighbor could see through their kitchen window exactly what had happened.

It was immediately reported, and after an examination of Marie, an order was put out to have her sent to Silver Chase.

Marie, although out of her mind, was not stupid. She could tell they were taking her away. So she bolted. She ran until she came across the very neighborhood Charlotte lived in. Without a shred of reason left in her shattered, broken mind, Marie snatched Charlotte up by the throat and threw her around a tree, concealing her from any chance of being saved by a passerby. The crazed woman began to speak, clear and concise, but the words she was speaking, the sounds she was making, were completely unfamiliar to Charlotte. After just a few moments of this strange dialect, she scratched Charlotte's jaw with the knife-like sharpness of her index fingernail. Drops of blood dribbled from her chin and onto her t-shirt, the fluid seeping into the cotton, seeming to grow. Marie began bashing Charlotte's head with her bare fists, it only took a couple hits before Charlotte was completely out.

Everything was fuzzy, a shifting version of the world around her. The chill in the air was stinging. It took Charlotte a full minute of groaning and blinking to get even the slightest grasp of what was going on. She searched her surroundings, she recognized this place, a tornado shelter, some houses still had them in this part of town. She opened her mouth to scream, but another voice beat her to it. A terrible screeching, an ear-splitting shriek from someone behind her. As Charlotte tried to turn around to see what awful creature had emitted those sounds, she realized she was tied to a chair.

As Marie sauntered around the chair Charlotte was captive, her wailing slowly diffused into a low groan. Charlotte was paralyzed with terror. Marie inched toward her face, her breath shifting Charlotte's hair away from her face.

Marie's mind flashed back to that day with her niece, it would be so easy to kill this girl in the same way. It would bring Marie so much joy...but no. Marie needed her. She couldn't let the thoughts win this time. No, this was far more important.

Marie waited until the cover of darkness came. Ever since she was a child the night was far more intriguing than the day.

Charlotte had a gag in her mouth, but it didn't matter, she wouldn't dare attempt to scream. Charlotte was perplexed that she was being led back to a seemingly normal suburban neighborhood. Marie led Charlotte to the very same house Marie had lived

in all her life. Marie's sister was the one trying to keep her at home. So, Marie knew that she would be the one to help her.

Marie dragged Charlotte into the house and threw her at the bottom of the stairs. The racket had awakened Marie's sister, Veronica. Veronica was relieved to have her sick sister back in her possession, but less relieved about the tied-up, gagged woman on her floor. As Veronica stared at the situation longer, she realized this was the solution.

Although the two young women looked nothing alike, no one would really be able to dispute Veronica's claims.

"Marie," Veronica snapped, "go up to bed now, you must be very tired." Veronica realized that anything that would happen from now would be up to her. She began by speaking directly to Charlotte.

"I'm so sorry. You were at the wrong place at the wrong time. I hope one day you might understand that I have to do this."

Charlotte could only mumble through her gag.

The next morning, people in salmon pink scrubs came to pick up a crazed woman, they drove the woman to the Silver Chase Psychiatric Hospital in uncomfortable restraints, and checked her into room 324. Never the wiser that Charlotte was not supposed to be there.

## WE AREN'T ALONE

Lynzie Engelbert, 13

*October 1, 2011*

It was an ordinary autumn afternoon in Starville, a small town in Colorado that no one hears about. Familiar Halloween eagerness was in the air, and many citizens had just finished decorating for the new spooky season. A newly perceived cold chill also swept through the streets, and the trees slowly started to pour the colors of a sunset into their leaves. The residents of Starville knew that these were the signs that the weather was changing, and they were content to prepare for it.

It was Saturday, and people were enjoying their weekend in many ways. Some took a stroll through town to see what new adornments decorated the buildings and streets, others met up with friends to go shopping for new autumn garments, and then a few also stayed home with a nice, warm drink and a good book.

Marcus Armstrong enjoyed his weekend by droning on about complete nonsense.

There he stood on one of the wooden benches in Starville's tiny town square, wearing red high-tops and a jean jacket while trying to do the same thing since the night that changed his life: convince the skeptical minds that aliens were real. He had attempted many approaches to persuade the people, like shouting, blogging, and even selling T-shirts with the words 'We Aren't Alone' on them. None of it ever worked out, but it seemed nothing could stop him from trying.

"Do any of you have any proof that what I'm saying is wrong?" Marcus hollered at the people passing by. An older woman with hair starting to gray dared to shout back an answer, "Do you have any proof? I haven't seen one piece of evidence in the seventeen years you have been doing this!"

Marcus clenched his jaw in irritation, but ignored the old lady, "How can any of you deny the existence of these creatures? Why must you insist upon us being alone in this universe?" Most people within earshot disregarded him, but from somewhere in the town square, Marcus swore he heard someone shout "Freak!"

He shook his head, whispering to himself what he said every time he began to doubt his sanity. *You aren't a freak, you aren't wrong, and you're doing the right thing.*

People didn't understand. They didn't see what he saw on October 7 of 1994. They didn't have to run for their lives and have no one else other than themselves come out alive.

They didn't know what Marcus knew.

"Excuse me!" Marcus spotted Sheriff Calvin, the Starville county deputy, striding towards him from the other end of the square, wearing his brown wool coat and cowboy hat. He often tried to calm Marcus down and convince him that he didn't need to do this with his life, but Marcus was just about as stubborn as everyone else was. So the man on the bench didn't dare move. Instead, he did the opposite and stood his ground.

"Four young children had their entire lives ahead of them, and in just a second they were gone. I know what happened to them. I am the only witness! My word is the only word you can trust. I know that aliens abducted them!"

"Okay, son, that's enough." The sheriff stood before Marcus, looking up at him and beckoning toward the ground with his hands. "Get down."

Marcus didn't glance at him. There was always a feeling in his stomach and a voice in his head that told him to keep going when someone tried to stop him. Right now, it was whispering: *shout louder. Defend yourself.*

"I know you think that I'm crazy. 'There goes Marcus again, he's never been the same since that night,' 'Poor Marcus, I hope he gets better,' 'Oh Marcus, when are you going to get a life?' WELL MAYBE IF YOU WOULD JUST LISTEN TO ME, YOU IGNORANT IDIOTS-"

"SON, I SAID GET DOWN!" The sheriff swiftly stepped up onto the bench with Marcus and seized him by the collar of his jean jacket. Marcus did the same thing he always did when he went too far like this: He fought, almost like a little kid trying to escape the wrath of his father. He pushed, kicked, and pulled, but it wasn't any use. Calvin may look old with his tired brown eyes and wrinkled face, but he still had the strength of a bear in his bones. It wasn't long before Marcus had his unstable feet off the bench and on the ground. While he tried to steady himself, he glimpsed a smirk directed towards him on the face of a man walking by. They appeared to be enjoying his defeat, so Marcus silently cursed him before the sheriff stepped into his view.

"Son, I can't take much more of this," Calvin growled. "This is going too far-"

"You don't get to call me son." Marcus snapped at him. "And you don't understand

what this means to me!”

“Are you insane?” Calvin shot back. “Have you ever thought about doing something else with your life? You are thirty-four years old, for god’s sake! When are you going to get a job, or a girlfriend? Can’t you find another hobby?”

Marcus let out a scoff while shaking his head. He almost wanted to laugh at him. “This isn’t a hobby, Calvin, this is something way more important. This is my duty, this is my life.”

“Look,” Calvin sighed. “I know you blame yourself for what happened all of those years ago. I would too, but this? Wasting your life away by trying to convince people who aren’t going to listen? It’s not right.”

Marcus shut his eyes and took deep breaths, trying not to think about what happened all those years ago when he was seventeen. Bright and full of dreams, driving through the outskirts of town with his friends.

His friends...

He snapped his eyes open to see Sheriff Calvin staring back at him. All the anger in his eyes was replaced with pity, an emotion Marcus was sick of seeing in him. He seemed to be the only person in this town who ever had anything positive to say about Marcus, and it still wasn’t in his favor. Seeing Calvin feel sorry for him was almost worse than getting ignored.

The sheriff let out a sigh, a simple sound that reminded Marcus of how much weight he carried on his shoulders. “Can’t you take your banter somewhere else and leave this place alone? Maybe try a blog? Or a podcast?”

Marcus remained silent, daring to disrespect the sheriff. He had already tried both of those things, but still, no one listened. He couldn’t believe this. Doesn’t somebody in this world believe in aliens? Doesn’t somebody believe in him?

Calvin realized Marcus wasn’t going to say something, so he did instead. “If I catch you doing something like this again, I might consider locking you up overnight.”

Marcus said nothing, acting rather childish for a man his age. Calvin clenched his jaw, annoyed with his impoliteness, but said nothing and walked away.

Marcus backed up and slumped down onto the bench he was standing on just a moment ago. Four young men went missing on October 7 of 1994. They went by the names Christopher Lockwell, Ebenezer Williams, Eli Bowman, and Fin Kailins. All of



them were good friends with Marcus Armstrong, and they still would be if they all hadn't entered that abandoned warehouse.

Marcus knew they got abducted. He saw it with his own eyes. He had tried to tell someone, but they thought he was just afraid out of his mind.

Even after all of these years, they still think he is.

Marcus shook his head. He had to find a way to expose whatever he saw that night. He didn't know why, but he had to. The hard part was trying to get people to listen.

What could he do to make them listen?

Then, an idea hit him like a semi-truck.

Why couldn't he go back to the warehouse where his friends got abducted? If he went to the same place on the same night at the same time, maybe the aliens would appear again. Then, he could quickly videotape them, and he would have proof. Once people saw the aliens with their own eyes, they might listen to what he was saying.

He walked home that evening with a quicker pace, a clear vision in his head, and the determination to succeed at this plan no matter what it took.

Nothing would stand in his way.

*October 7, 2011*

Marcus glanced at his watch for the sixth time since he arrived, his foot tapping impatiently when he saw it wasn't time to depart from his 2004 Honda Accord yet. In the seat next to him was all of the necessary equipment: a camera, a flashlight, and a phone. The only new purchase out of the three items was the flashlight, which he decided was the most important. If he didn't have a light, how would anything be visible?

Marcus checked the time once more and was slightly relieved to find that it finally read 9:56, about five minutes before he and his friends stumbled upon the warehouse. That should be enough time for the final preparations.

So he quickly dropped the camera strap around his neck, clutched his flashlight, and slipped the phone into his pocket. Once he was sure he had everything and was completely ready, he stepped out of the car.

It was only after he had closed the car door and glanced around did he realized how terrifying and stupid his plan was. Going into an abandoned warehouse at night was

like walking into a murderer's home in a horror movie. He gazed at the building before him showered in moonlight, trying to recall when he thought this plan was ever a good idea. He had to remind himself his objective was to gain evidence that aliens were real, and this was the only way he knew how to achieve his goal.

It was scary, but did that matter now?

After another moment, Marcus reluctantly switched his flashlight on, took a deep breath, and slowly walked toward the building.

He made his way to the closest door he could find, and was slightly relieved, slightly disappointed to find it unlocked. With quivering hands, he turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Inside was pitch-black darkness, as to be expected. Marcus still had to pause for another moment, gazing into the tenebrosity. There was still time to leave and drive home, where he could slump down in his bed and finally forget about the existence of aliens, maybe start looking for a job the next day. There was still time to go back and save himself from whatever awaited him in this darkness.

But something inside of him kept him from retreating. It was the same voice and feeling that told him to shout louder earlier when the sheriff wanted him to get off the bench. It seemed to whisper in his ear and pull him forward, inviting him into the shadows.

*Here is what you have been working towards all of these years. Come and seize it.*

Marcus readied himself before stepping into the darkness. After he was a few feet into the building, he heard the door slam behind him. Jumping and turning around, he scanned the wall behind him with his flashlight but found that no living thing lurked there.

*It was probably just the wind. You're fine.* Marcus reassured himself before turning back around.

The illumination from his flashlight scanned the walls and shelves that hadn't been touched for many years. Boxes scattered the entire place. There wasn't a single direction Marcus could turn where they weren't seen. He couldn't imagine how thick the layer of dust that rested on them was.

Choosing to ignore the unlimited supply of cardboard, Marcus gripped the camera that hung around his neck. He figured he should start filming now or he might forget

to switch it on when he spotted the aliens.

“Okay, guys.” He started when he was sure it was on and recording. “If you don’t know who this is, it’s Marcus Armstrong, that dude in your town always going on and on about aliens. Well, you guys asked for proof. Here’s your proof.” He said, “Tonight, we’re going to see a live alien right here in this video. If this doesn’t convince you, I don’t know what will.”

Gaining a little more confidence, he proceeded to go deeper into the building. His feet took him wandering down the nearest aisle as he talked.

“I know you guys say I’m weird and delusional, but I swear upon every cell in my body, this is all real folks. All. Real-”

Marcus was cut off by a scratching sound behind him. He whipped around and scanned the end of the aisle, looking for who could have caused such a noise. Was it simply a wild animal, or the extraterrestrial he was looking for?

“What was that?”

For a moment, Marcus couldn’t see anything. He was about to assume it was just an animal after all when suddenly, a figure that wasn’t human at all seemed to materialize out of nowhere. It had spindly limbs and a slim body, with a large head in the shape of an hourglass. Marcus could see it had no physical features or color, it was just a shape.

It honestly looked more like a shadow than anything.

Marcus froze, stuck in a line between awe and fear, but before he could react further, the creature before him started to run toward him. Marcus yelped, startled, and started to run himself. Whatever that thing was, it didn’t seem friendly.

He ran as fast as he could go while memories started to flash back to him, ones that he had been trying to forget. Memories of him and his friends fleeing as fast as they could to escape a creature similar to the one chasing him now. The memories seemed to try and take over his mind, to make him stop and surrender, but Marcus didn’t let them. He knew what would happen if faltered, whatever that thing was would catch him, and he was determined to not let that happen. Instead, he thought about what the people would say once he showed them the evidence. They would listen and finally do something about this problem so that no one else ever had to go missing due to this place again.

With speed he didn't know he was capable of achieving, he sprinted down the next aisle and the rest of the way to the door. He had never been so relieved to see an exit in his life. All he needed to do now was just reach it... He suddenly stopped in his tracks.

The door was only a couple of yards away. He desperately wanted to escape but found he was unable to move. The same voice and feeling that beckoned him in here now refused his freedom, physically holding him in place. That was when he realized it was all just a trap, a trap he had set for himself.

*This is what you wanted all along.*

Suddenly, inhuman hands grabbed Marcus's throat and yanked him to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. His flashlight and camera hit the ground and a large, bright, white light started to shine in his face. He shielded his eyes and noticed that four human figures were standing in the light, all of them staring down at him.

"Welcome home, Marcus."

The voices of his friends all spoke in unison, and he realized that it was over now. His fate was going to be the same as theirs. That he was going to go missing, and that everyone in Starville would wonder where the poor man who never gave up went.

He tried to crawl away as the figures started to creep towards him, but he found he was physically unable to move. The only thing Marcus was able to do was scream in terror.

Then suddenly, all light went off, and his voice was silenced against his will.

And everything was calm again.

*October 8, 2011*

Sheriff Calvin stepped out of his cop car and closed the door behind him, gazing at the warehouse he had to search so many times due to Marcus Armstrong. He had wanted to surprise the man by giving him a visit that morning but found that he wasn't in his house. Since the man was not shouting nonsense anywhere in town either, Calvin knew something sketchy was going on, so he called his friend Bill to go to a search party to see where he had gone. The warehouse was the first place Calvin wanted to start.

On the other side of the car, Bill made a huffing sound. "Did we have to come out

here this early in the morning, Calvin? It's not like anyone really gives a damn about this dude, anyway."

"I give a damn," Calvin said, turning towards his tall partner. "Now, are you coming with me or staying in the car like a coward?"

Bill paused for a moment before shrugging. "Eh, whatever. If you believe that he'd come here again, then I'll tag along." So, the gray-haired man followed Calvin as he started to approach the building.

Calvin walked up to the closest door he could find and curiously found it slightly ajar. After a moment of observation, he pushed the door open while Bill came up behind him. The two of them gazed inside.

It wasn't completely dark. The morning sun cast a little light into the building, so everything had a faint outline. Calvin tried to imagine how dark it must have been last night and shook his head, surprised that anyone in their right mind would ever dare to enter.

Except Marcus wasn't in his right mind, and you know that. The sheriff thought.

"Don't think this place has any power, do you?" Bill asked from behind him after a moment of silent peering. Calvin shook his head.

"Electricity has been down for decades, and nobody has bothered to fix the lights," the sheriff told him. His eyes searched the room, trying to find the shape of a person or anything, but all he saw were shelves and boxes. If Marcus was in there, he either didn't want to come out or couldn't.

"Well, I don't see anything." Bill sighed after another moment of staring. "I say we head on back and break for breakfast."

"Hold it." Calvin held up one hand and pointed toward the ground with the other. "What's that?"

Bill turned back around to see what he had found. Two objects rested on the floor, not far from the door. It would have been almost impossible to see if the sun wasn't in their favor.

"Looks like a flashlight and-" Bill squinted. "A camera."

Calvin cautiously entered to gather the two items up and didn't waste any time leaving. He never knew what it was about this place, but it always creeped him out.

"Are they his?" Bill asked the sheriff once he was back outside, and the door was

closed. Calvin turned the items over in his hands, inspecting the dents on the flashlight and turning on the camera.

“I believe so.” He replied. “It looks like this camera even has a video on it.”

“Really?” Bill leaned over Calvin’s shoulder to take a closer look. Sure enough, there was one. “Well, what are you waiting for? Watch it.”

Calvin reluctantly pressed the play button on the command, and the two friends watched the video closely with anticipation. After a moment, they both had confused faces.

“Huh,” Bill said, “That’s strange.”

“Very,” Calvin murmured, his brow furrowed. He had no idea where Marcus was or why he was missing. But either way, he began to wonder if Marcus was right.

The only thing that played on the video for five minutes straight was a white screen with bold black letters painted across it.

*We Aren’t Alone.*

## THE CALL

Kai Parkinson, 12

A girl had disappeared, three years ago now. Today was the anniversary of her disappearance and death. She was thirteen when she disappeared.

Her mother set her towel down from drying the dishes, and walked over to the ringing home phone. “Hello?” she asked, bringing the phone to her ear.

“Hello, Mom.” A teenage girl’s voice rang through the line, the woman froze with pure shock, she nearly dropped the phone. She knew who this was, but it couldn’t be. Could it?

“A-Anna?” the woman stuttered her only daughter’s name, her voice shaky as she gripped the phone tight once again.

“Yes, it’s me. I miss you, Mom.” The girl spoke solemnly, her voice sounding sad, her mother didn’t understand this one bit.

“But you died!?” she exclaimed as her husband came into the room.

“What is it dear?” he asked, wiping the tire grease off his hands.

“It-” the woman pulled the phone away from her face, sliding her hand over the microphone to make sure her ‘daughter’ wouldn’t hear. “It’s Anna.”

“Wh-what!?” the man exclaimed, reaching for the phone. His wife gave it up and he put it quickly to his face.

“Anna!?”

“Yes Dad?” the girl replied with a bit of confusion in her tone, there was a windy-static buzz from the phone in his ear.

“We...we killed you, that night, how could this happen!?” he blurted out quickly, not realizing this could be a cop.

“You did what? I don’t-” She seemed to be distraught, like she didn’t understand how her parents could ever do such a thing. “You never did that!”

The man put the phone back onto the base.

“It’s not her,” he told his wife, putting his arm around her as tears started streaming down her cheeks, he wiped them and reassured her, “it’s alright, she’s not coming back.”

## WELCOME TO THE MAZE

William Tanner, 12

Jimothy Blake was a very normal man. He and his wife Summer Blake lived in Scranton, Pennsylvania. They lived alone, and had no friends, as they didn't trust other people. That is, everybody but their psychiatrist, Adolph.

Adolph was from Thal, Austria. He also had a deep mistrust of people that didn't believe the same thing that they did. He was a devout Lecton, a religion solely based on the normal aspects of life. They believed that only they were right, and holy, and that all other forms of life were below them. They thought that, if they were to come across a man dying, before doing anything they should ask his religion. If he dared speak to a Lecton without being one himself, then he was as good as dead.

Adolph, who never revealed his last name, had convinced the Blakes to join him in his semi-psychopathic religion. They soon became some of the most devout Lectons that the world had ever seen. They became so obsessed with themselves that they separated themselves from the rest of society to live their own, "righteous" life. They devoted themselves entirely to the Grand Church of the Lectons. There they spread their beliefs to anyone that would listen.

Soon, they became very prominent figures in their community. But not everybody loved them. They were greatly hated, almost as much as they were loved. Their radical ideas motivated some, but turned others away just as quickly. But one day, one fateful day would change that for the worse.

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon, and the Blakes had just finished their lectures. Opening the mailbox Summer exclaimed, "Look at this! We've been invited to join the yearly Lecton convention in Stamford!"

"That's strange," Jimothy replied curiously, "we've never been invited to this, yet they are saying that it is the tenth annual convention."

"Hush, Jimothy," Summer retorted, not wanting to even think that they had been left out of nine conventions, "They must have made a typo, and are proclaiming that it is their first ever."



Silently, Jimothy thought that this sounded very suspicious to him.

“It looks like the convention will be held on October 29,” Summer exclaimed, running over to the calendar she looked at the date.

“But that’s less than one week away! How will we have time to prepare our sermons?”

“Relax, Summer,” Jimothy said soothingly. “We can think of something on the way there.”

Summer thought about it and then declared, “How tacky of them to hold it on a Saturday. I pray that there are churches there that will help us.”

“Before we go,” Jimothy said, “we should consult Adolph about this. Something doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Okay,” replied Summer, “but we need to consult him right away, because we still need time to pack and prepare ourselves for the long journey away from home.”

Home was very important to the Lectons. If they were ever confused or felt like they were being misled, then they would return home at once, to be in a place of happiness.

The next day the Blakes headed out and went to consult Adolph. As soon as Adolph saw the letter he said, “Go, go. You will be sorely missed.”

Strangely, he asked them to go home immediately, as he had lots of work to do.

“On a Sunday?” questioned Summer, “surely you’re not working on the holy day?”

“Oh, no...no...of course not. I was doing work related to...the church...yes, the church,” Adolph replied, cowering away from Summer’s glare. “Well you must get going. Goodbye now.”

Adolph quickly rushed them out the door.

“That was strange,” Jimothy remarked.

Over the next week the couple packed up and got ready to go to the convention. When they finally arrived in Scranton, Jimothy was so exhausted from listening to Summer rant on and on, that he decided to go directly to the hotel instead of the early access to the convention. When they got to the hotel they knew something was wrong immediately.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t find any room under Blake, or Lecton. Could it be under a different name?” asked the young and inexperienced desk lady.

“No, you imbecile,” Summer cried out impatiently, “it is under Blake and it IS in your system!”

“Summer, Summer, please, don’t yell at her,” Jimothy tried to explain in vain.

“You imbecile, you shall be cursed for all eternity!” Summer yelled furiously.

Jimothy quickly hurried Summer out of the hotel and back into the car. After a heated argument, they decided to go and check out the early access convention. Following the directions to the plaza, they became very confused.

“There’s nothing here!” exclaimed Summer.

“Oh really?” Jimothy replied sarcastically, clearly frustrated. As they walked inside, they realized that the convention had moved to another room. As they walked down the hallway, Summer started to rant again.

“I can’t believe that they moved the convention. How disrespectful! I can’t even start to wo-” Her rant was cut short as something grabbed her from behind.

“AAAAAAHHHHHH!” she cried.

Jimothy spun around only to be hit over the head with a bat himself. The last thing he saw before he was captured was a man with a mask. An ominous mask. It was blinding white with the black image of an X badly spray painted on it.

“Please, no...I don’t want to die! Please noooo...o...o...o...o,” slowly, Jimothy’s voice faded out as he fell asleep, only to be put into a new torture. As the old saying goes, out of the frying pan, into the fire.

The next thing he knew, Jimothy was cold. Ever so cold. He stood up only to fall back down again. He couldn’t see. His head was still spinning and everywhere he looked, all he saw was a bright white light white spray-painted Xs crisscrossed in every which way.

“Good morning, Mr. Blake,” a strange and eerie voice said, over a loudspeaker hidden somewhere in the room. “Welcome to your death. Hope you have a pleasant stay!”

As soon as this was said, the floor beneath Jimothy gave way, and he fell through. He hit the ground with a loud thud. When he stood up, he realized that he could see again. He quickly realized that he was in a long hallway. An ever so long hallway. When he looked up he could see the sunlight. That almost pushed him over the top. Even

though he could see out and into the open world, he knew that he was trapped.

“Where am I?” he cried out, once again in vain. “Where is Summer?”

“All will be revealed in due time,” the strange voice said, “your time will come soon.”

“But first, please read the signs like a normal person would, Jimothy Lawrence Blake. All will be revealed,” he said again, taunting Jimothy.

As Jimothy looked around he realized that there were signs everywhere. As he started to read them he noticed, at the bottom of every sign, was the same X he had seen so many times before. The signs, in the same badly spray-painted text, explained his dire situation. The first one said

## **Welcome to the maze**

As Jimothy slowly crept down the hallway, he saw more and more signs explaining what was happening. The signs told him that someone had kidnapped his wife and him and put them in the maze. The signs never said who the person was, but that his intentions were evil and diabolical. Jimothy would have to find his way into the center of the maze, all while trying to survive, if he wanted to get his wife back.

Jimothy soon knew that the person behind this was a psychopath. There was no other explanation. He was also quick to assume that they were not Lecton, and that a lesser being had trapped him and was planning on watching him struggle to regain the one thing that he loved in life. When the signs were finished telling him the rules, he came to a split in the road. Before he set off though, he saw one more sign. It said: “Left is always right, except when it isn’t.”

Jimothy paused for a moment. Was the serial killer messing with him or was left really the right way to go? After minutes of delirious contemplation, Jimothy headed off left, as the sign said, to find his wife.

The maze was confusing, there was no doubt about that. The maze had Jimothy constantly second-guessing himself. Another thing that didn’t help were the signs. There were signs everywhere, telling him to go every which way. At first, Jimothy trusted the signs, because he couldn’t imagine that somebody would try to trick him into going the wrong way.

After about an hour Jimothy realized that he was hungry. He started to look for

food, but then realized that the bushes around him were thorn bushes which definitely didn't have any fruit.

In vain, Jimothy cried out, "Give me some food, you monster!"

A booming voice came from the sky above, "Now that wasn't very nice, now was it? No food for you!" Suddenly it started to rain. At first it was a drizzle, but soon it became a downpour, soaking Jimothy to the bone.

"That's what you get for being rude, you little—"

Delirious, Jimothy cried out, "Please, no, make it stop. Please... please... I'm... begging... you st—" Before he could finish his sentence, though he passed out from exhaustion.

The next day, Jimothy awoke feeling just as tired and as hungry as before.

"I'm sorry, please just give me some food," Jimothy cried out, exhausted.

The voice returned saying, "If you want food, answer this. Who is the greatest man alive?"

Jimothy answered, "It is I, for I am a devout Lecton, who goes to church every day."

"Wrong!" The voice cried out, almost sounding happy. "You will not get any food until you answer my question correctly."

Jimothy sighed, but, not wanting a repeat of yesterday, trudged on throughout the maze.

The maze seemed to move at night. Jimothy soon realized that the way he had gone the night before was not the same in the morning. And every morning, without a doubt the voice overhead would ask, "Do you want food, little ant?"

Jimothy would always reply, "Yes, yes. Please give me some food."

"Then answer my question and you will get some food." But it was always the same question. It never changed. And neither did Jimothy's answer. He would always say "Me, me," or any other member of the Lecton faith. But it was always wrong. One time, out of desperation he said "Adolph. Adolph is the most devout man other than myself."

At this the voice paused saying: "You are almost there, Jimothy. You are almost at my answer. Just as you are almost at the first room. In order to get to the room, you will have to have my question answered."

Jimothy continued on, hopeful that the first room would bring food.

When he finally arrived at the first room he was disappointed. All he saw was a gray,

concrete box. When he tried to open the door, it was locked shut.

“So you have arrived, Jimothy. Finally. I suppose you know my question?”

“Yes, and I know the answer as well. It is not me, it never was. It is anybody but me. Trudging through this God-forsaken maze, I realized that I am not holy. I am an evil person. I look down on others when I should help them. That is the answer to your question,” Jimothy said, coming to terms with reality.

“Correct,” said the voice, “Welcome to the first room. I hope you enjoy your stay!”

Jimothy turned the handle and entered the room. In it was a long, narrow hallway with boards of steel blocking the path. Jimothy quickly realized that they were in the shape of a body. He squeezed his way through the first one, but came to a problem after that. At the second board, there was a hacksaw on the ground. Jimothy looked at the board with a sinking feeling that only became worse once he realized what he must do. He saw that the left hand had four fingers. It was missing a pinky finger. Jimothy figured that he could just squeeze through the board, holding down his finger.

“YOU MUST FOLLOW THE RULES!” the voice yelled booming. “FOLLOW THE RULES, ANT!”

Realizing what must happen, Jimothy broke down in tears and started pleading with the ignoring voice.

“Please, no I don’t want to. Please,” Jimothy begged. “I have a family.”

“You won’t if you can’t pass this room. Your wife will die if you can’t survive.”

Crying, Jimothy started. After many minutes of agonizing pain, Jimothy slipped through the door only to start crying again. The next board had the whole left hand gone. After another thirty minutes and so much more pain, he passed through the board. Dreading what would happen next, Jimothy couldn’t even look at the next board.

“HURRY UP!” the voice yelled impatiently.

“Please, no. I’m begging you, let me go,” Jimothy pleaded.

“But Jimothy, you are already out,” the voice paused, and then continued, “Just a few more boards.”

Gritting his teeth, Jimothy started again. As he continued down the hall, crying all the way, the boards continued having less and less of the arm remaining. Finally the last board only had the stump of a shoulder. Breaking down in tears, Jimothy plowed

through, fighting through the pain. As he went through the last board, the voice congratulated him, saying, "Congratulations Mr. Blake. You have passed the first room, two more to go before you can see your wife again."

"I want out! Let me OUT!" Jimothy, full of terror and pain, "I don't want to be here anymore!"

"But Jimothy," the voice cooed, "You are already out."

"No, not just out of the first room, but out of this whole maze."

"I said what I said, and I'll stand by my word," the voice replied, mockingly.

Confused, Jimothy cried on in desperation, "Make it stop!"

"Oh, but Jimothy, Jimothy, Jimothy. You can. You can make it stop. Just," he paused, as if to choose his words wisely, "Get. Out."

Suddenly, the door to the second room was opened and Jimothy was thrust inward by an invisible force.

"Welcome to the torture of Jimothy Lawrence Blake. Happy hurtings!"

The second room was even more bare than the first. All that was in it was one showerhead and one gas mask. Confused, Jimothy walked over to the shower and turned it on. "Maybe I'll finally be able to shower," he thought delusionally. As he turned the knob, a hissing noise started. As it hissed away, he started to smell something. Something poisonous.

"The gas mask is there for a reason," the voice said mockingly again.

Jimothy started to run, haphazardly, toward the gas mask, and started to put it on. He fumbled with the straps while already starting to feel the effects of the gas. As soon as he put on the mask, he started to see things clearer. He realized that there were two doors and that he would have to choose again. He was back to square one.

"Do you know what this means? You have to choose," the voice said, always mocking.

"But I don't want to. Please. Please," Jimothy asked pleadingly.

"You already know that won't work. Why won't you stop and follow the rules," the voice chided.

Jimothy suddenly remembered the sign from the beginning of the maze. Left is always right. He started off to the left, and the voice said "So you've chosen. Fine, have

it your way. Don't play the game, don't follow the rules. Left is always RIGHT. RIGHT. You should have gone right."

Suddenly, the gas mask was thrown off of him and he was suddenly at the start of the room again. This time instead of turning the shower head, he went right to the left door. When he tried to open the door, he was sent again to the start of the room. This time, he didn't turn the shower knob, and went down the right door. When he opened the door, he was allowed through.

"Do you realize what you have to do now," the voice said arrogantly.

Jimothy then chose the left door, and was sent back to the beginning. He quickly realized that this was going to be a while.

After a couple of hours, Jimothy was finally at the last door. Turning left he opened the door and saw sunlight.

"Finally! I've escaped," Jimothy cried out in joy. "Only one more room to go!"

"Congratulations Jimothy! You only have one more room. You're already done," the voice chide.

Jimothy could see the third room. He could see the end. He started to sprint toward the door. Finally he could escape. He could find his wife and get out. He slammed into the door and fell to the ground. When he got up and tried to open the door, he found out it was locked.

"What else must I have to do? Have I not already given enough?" Jimothy cried out in anguish.

"You have, you have. But this is not the right door. You chose wrong!" the voice said, always listening. "You ARE wrong!"

"No! No! Not again! Please, not again!" Jimothy cried.

"NEVER! NEVER! You shall suffer!"

Crying out in anguish, Jimothy flung himself against the door. As soon as he hit the door, it flew off the hinges. Looking into the room, he spotted someone floating in the center of the floor. Looking closer he realized that it was Summer. He immediately sprinted towards her. Instead of running towards her, he slammed into a glass pane.

"OW! What tha—I'm so close. So close. So. close." Jimothy started to break down. He started to crawl on the ground groping for the end of the pane.

Crying out in pain and hysteria, Jimothy yelled, “Summer, please, help me! Please, tell me where to go. HELP!”

Slowly inching his way through the maze, Jimothy made it to the end of the maze. He managed to stand up and walk toward Summer.

“Summer! I’m here. I’ll save you. I’ll—AAAAAAAHHHHH!”

As Summer rotated around, Jimothy saw her face. Her horrible face. Scarred and bruised. Her eyes were milk white. Completely blank.

“She’s dead. NO! SHE CAN’T BE DEAD! She can’t. Please. I’ve sacrificed so much. Please, don’t be dead. Please,” Jimothy gasped out.

“Congrats Jim. You’ve done it. You solved my maze. Good job, sir,” said the voice, returning again.

Jimothy fell to the ground, collapsed from exhaustion. He was yanking up from the ground, by a strong hand.

“Summer, is that you?” Jimothy asked, full of delusion.

“No Jimothy, it is I. I am your tormentor,” the man threw him over and revealed himself.

“No, not you, anybody but you. I vouched for you. I- I- no!”

“Oh, well Jimothy. Oh, well,” said the man.

“Adolph, no! I can’t believe you. I won’t!” Jimothy cried.

“Well, seeing is believing,” cooed Adolph, knocking Jimothy out.

When Jimothy came to, Adolph was standing over him.

“Here son, let me help you,” said Adolph, reaching for his left arm.

“What I—no no you son of a—,” Jimothy yelled realizing that what happened, did really happen.

“Where am I?” Jimothy asked.

“You are here. In Stamford. Where you’ve been all this time. You’ve been here, hallucinating. You never went into a maze. You were never starving. You were hooked up to a machine that convinced you that you were in the maze. You never had to do any of the terrible things, but you did. You never had to get through the hallway with the boards. You could have never gotten your wife back. She was dead from the beginning. Too bad, so sad. The mind really can do some amazing things, can’t it.



That's the crazy thing. You didn't have to do any of that, but you DID! You DID. That's the great thing! YOU. DID. IT. All you had to do was literally nothing, but you didn't. HA. HAHAHAAAA. You see, Jimothy, I hate you. I hate all of the Lectons. I built the simulation so that I could kill off mass numbers of you. You self-righteous, dirty good-for-nothing Lectons. You think you're so pure, but you will die just like the rest. And you weren't the first. Not nearly. There've been so many. So many people to improve my maze. Make it better. So much better. Thank you. Goodbye, Jimothy. I won't miss you, nor any of your crazy Lecton fanatics. You can all die. DIE. And you will. Oh, you will."

Taking out a gun, Adolph shoots Jimothy.

"All maze and no wife makes Jimmy a dead boy."

THE END



## THERE WERE MORE CATTLE YESTERDAY

Jack O'Rabbit, 17

Ophelia's father had fallen ill. The blood he vomited was strikingly red against the paleness that clouded his eyes and tinted his skin. The doctor said it was Yellow Fever. When she asked after a cure, Dr. Miller's face split into a shrewd grin. He explained the process of bloodletting, its risks, and finally; the cost.

Ophelia's calloused fingers itched for her Colt revolver—a gift from the very same man that lay in his own filth two rooms over—when she heard the numbers fall from Dr. Miller's lips like snake venom.

If he weren't the only doctor for twenty miles in any direction, she might've just shot him. Instead, she found herself putting up an advertisement requesting a cowboy the very next day. The trip would be horrifically early, with a tiny herd that she planned to sell to the ranch two weeks west of their own. It struck her pride something fierce to write the measly, pitiful sum she'd have to pay the potential partner, but what choice did she have?

It took less than two days for someone to respond to the notice.

A stranger rode in on a dirt-gray horse with a dust-covered coat, hat, and bandana that obscured any features she might've been able to make out as they rode in.

She met him at the gate. He slowed to a stop and spoke in a slow, rattling voice, holding her advertisement in one bony hand.

“Here for the cattle trail.”

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something in her gut stirred uncomfortably when she reached out to take the paper from him. His skin, or what little of it he showed, was almost the same sickly yellow as her father, with twinges of purple that looked like bruises. Part of her wanted to ask what he'd contracted, but she held her tongue. “You've done trails before?” He nodded.

“Well, glad to have 'ya on board. What's your name, stranger?” He shook his head.

“No' what? No name? You running from someone?” she asked. She met his stare, her brown meeting his wide, pale blue. She wasn't sure he had blinked the entire time they'd spoken.

He shook his head again, before speaking. “Stranger’ will do.”

Despite her instincts screaming at her, she shrugged and faked nonchalance at his behavior. She helped him bring his horse in and offered to let him stay the night inside the house, since they’d be leaving just before dawn.

Ophelia didn’t think anyone would blame her for being silently relieved at his insistence to sleep outside.

After leaving the next morning, it took less than half a day for something to go wrong.

“Oh hell-!”

Ophelia’s horse shuffled nervously underneath her as a rattlesnake sounded off its warning, echoing past the thundering cattle. “Alright, just-”

Ophelia had little time to react before the viper darted past her and headed straight for Stranger. “On your left!” she called, whipping out her revolver and emptying a round into the snake’s head just as it reared back to strike at him.

The gunshot had set the cattle into motion, she could hear it in the rising bellows and stomps of the herd. Galloping around to the front, she had no choice but to trust that the Stranger would settle the other side.

It took some time, and quite a few pleads on the unsympathetic cow’s ears, but the threat of a stampede finally passed and she was able to call out to her partner.

“You alright? Didn’t get grazed or nothing, did’ya?”

Stranger stared at her past the cattle. He shook his head, then turned to keep the cattle moving as if nothing had happened at all. Left with the choice of either following up on her side or getting left behind, she sped up and settled back into the rhythm of herding cattle.

It wasn’t until they made camp that night, that she got to thinking about the rattlesnake again.

The fire illuminated parts of the Stranger’s face. His eyes were barely visible like this, the sunken hollows of his face casting ghastly shadows. Try as she might, Ophelia couldn’t help but shudder, imagining the empty sockets of a skull.

“So,” she spoke slowly while unfurling her bedroll. “You get critters itchin’ to get at ‘ya often?”

The Stranger didn’t respond, he just stared at her. The fire glinted off his eyes, giving

them a waxy, deathly look. Locusts buzzed in the distance. She idly noted that he hadn't touched his share of rations—some canned meats and vegetables.

“Your mama ever teach you it's rude not to reply when someone talks to 'ya?”

“...”

“...How about that it's rude to stare?”

“...”

She waved him off as she sat down. “Fine, silence works too. Not paying you for conversation, I suppose.”

“You should sleep.”

“Oh, so he *can* talk!”

He didn't respond. Ophelia sighed and got into her bedroll. “Fine, take first watch. No skin off my teeth.” She rolled over, away from him and the fire. Subtly, she traced her hand over her hip under the fabric, checking that her revolver was still in its holster. Eventually, exhaustion gave way to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were more cattle yesterday.

They'd been on the road for three days, and aside from the rattlesnake, they'd gone without incident. But now, cattle were missing. Ophelia knew she wasn't imagining it. A fool could see that the herd, already a measly 200, had been cut in half *at least*.

She turned to Stranger, who had the final watch last night.

“What the hell happened last night? Where's my cattle?!” she shouted, advancing until they were only a few feet apart.

He shrugged. “Gone.”

She stared at him until she bared a humorless smile that didn't meet her eyes.

Incredulously, she shook her head with a dry laugh and walked a few meters away before turning on her heel to face him again.

“I'm sorry, what do you mean 'gone'?”

Stranger didn't respond, just stared at her. Her smile dropped and she placed her hand on her revolver.

“Half a herd don't just disappear into thin air. My father's *medical payment* don't just disappear like *mist*,” she said, her voice rising with each word. “So I'll ask again: Where's my herd, *Stranger*?”

He didn't say anything. He didn't even move. Somehow, that infuriated her more than any lie he could've spouted.

She grabbed her revolver and leveled it with his head.

"Either get me my cattle back, or give me a good reason not to kill you." Stranger simply stared past her pistol.

He didn't flinch. Didn't blink. After a few seconds of silence, Ophelia couldn't be sure that he even breathed. After seconds that passed by like minutes, his voice slowly made its way past his bandana.

"Do you truly want to move the herd, across the plains, alone?"

"Figure it's better than losing 'em."

"Should you worry about the cattle?"

"I can handle myself." She spat the words out from between her teeth.

Her grip tensed until the handle creaked and her knuckles went white. She wondered, not for the first time, why she felt like she was being watched by a predator when she was the one holding the gun.

"Can you?"

A low buzz entered her ears. Louder and louder, until it seemed as if a swarm of bees had taken to nest inside her brain. The buzz ran through her bones and down to her fingers. Her aim wavered for the first time in decades.

Dark eyes widened to search their pale blue for any sign of fear. *Any sign of life.*

Bellows of cows began to mix with the incessant buzzing, unease spreading through every living creature around her.

He did not move.

She lowered her pistol with a groan.

The buzzing didn't cease immediately, but lessened, more and more until her head was clear. She grit her teeth, feigning exasperation instead of the primal fear she felt down to her core.

"I'll haul you over to the sheriff myself once we get back to town. Until then, one wrong move, and I'll put a hole between your eyes."

He nodded. Despite her instincts, her fingers itched to go back on her word just for his apathy.

Ophelia demanded to take first watch that night. He didn't put up any argument.

An hour, she sat there, alternating between staring at the fire and Stranger. She weighed the risks in her head and her revolver in her hand.

The herd was smaller now, more manageable.

Ophelia stood up, walked around the campfire to Stranger, and fired two shots into the back of his head.

She holstered her gun and dropped down onto her haunches next to his lifeless body.

The dusty plains were silent, save for the quiet buzz of insects and the wind sweeping across the fields. Not a single soul around to damn her for what she'd done.

She was alone.

"You should get some sleep."

Stranger's rattling voice echoed in her ears. Though he barely spoke above a whisper, it sounded to her louder than the gunshots that had just cracked across the plains not even a minute ago.

She fell onto her back, mouth gaping in a silent scream.

Stranger sat up, unphased by his wounds. Were his wounds even there?

Two holes, clear as day.

But not one drop of blood.

No. Instead, where blood should be gushing out of a fatal wound, she instead saw *something* moving about. Squirring, glistening like a beetle in the firelight. The buzz of insects sounded deafening in her ears.

Ophelia scrambled away, then onto her feet, drawing her pistol. She pointed it at him with both hands, as if it would protect her.

After several moments passed like this, she managed to make her tongue work. She spoke in a shaky, hesitant voice.

"*What are you?*"

"..."

"*What are you?!*" she demanded. In the back of her mind, she wondered when she started crying.

"...You should get some sleep." She didn't move.

Neither did he.

The scene did not change, neither of them moving, neither speaking, until

eventually Ophelia sat on her bedroll, revolver still in hand. Hours passed, until Stranger's watch ended and he went to sleep. She doubted he was actually sleeping, whatever he was. She continued to stare at him, watching the veins of his wrist bulge as something writhed underneath.

Her grip on her gun didn't loosen until hours into her watch, leaving her with agonizingly stiff fingers.

The dusty plains were silent, save for the incessant buzzing of insects, and the wind sweeping across the fields. Not a single soul around to save her.

She was alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were more cattle yesterday.

They had disappeared again—leaving her with maybe 50 cattle—but she couldn't find it in herself to confront Stranger about it. The rest of them were uneasy. They'd taken to standing at night instead of lying down, and around the clock she could hear them panting, bellowing, and stomping to exclaim their discomfort.

Ophelia empathized with them.

It had been days since she had gotten more than a few hours of sleep, each rare instance not of her own will, but exhaustion forcing her into unconsciousness. More often than not, she lay awake, praying to a God that didn't answer, and listened to that horrible buzzing.

Her eyes stung, and every movement she made felt like wading through molasses, but she refused to let her guard down. Her revolver hadn't gone back into her holster since that night. Instead, it remained firmly within her grasp. She was sure that—if when she got back to civilization, she'd have to pry her fingers off the handle one by one.

Maybe, if she hadn't been so exhausted, or terrified, when a locust flew directly into her face without warning, she wouldn't have panicked and fired her gun into thin air.

It was the snapping rubber band the herd needed to start off. Thundering hooves began to trample down the plains, and for about an hour, Ophelia was able to forget her former fears in exchange for chasing the herd down and forcing them to slow.

One of them had fallen during the commotion. Unlike humans, however, cattle do not feel the need to not trample one another when running.



The heifer was battered and bruised, multiple broken bones clear to Ophelia as she rode up. A pitiful moan escaped its lungs, and Ophelia knew what had to be done.

She hesitated before firing. Only two bullets left.

But what worth were they here, anyways?

She put it out of its misery, only noticing Stranger staring her down after she'd pulled the trigger. His hands shook holding the reins of his horse. The intensity of which he stared was unrivaled, nothing like before. It felt like she was an ant being burned under a magnifying glass by some cruel child.

Just as soon as he had turned to stare, he turned away and rode forward. Like nothing had happened.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a little more than a week since they'd first left, and still two weeks until civilization when Ophelia woke up to quiet.

The fire had long died. No cattle bellowed or panted. No horses whined at her.

The only sound was the sweeping of the wind over the plains, and the buzzing of insects in the grass.

Stranger stared at her, and she stared back, too tired to cry out.

Her revolver, weighed down with a single bullet, rested in her hand.

There were cattle yesterday.

## THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE WOODS

Lauren Marnell, 16

The leaves were changing as Sadie walked home. The leaves were everywhere. They were rather beautiful, she observed, even though they would later be clogging the gutters and crowding the porches of the country house she lived in with her parents. But at the moment, they were adorning the skies and making everything seem just a bit more festive in the forests surrounding the area where she lived.

Sadie picked up her pace on the side of the road as she made her way home from school. It was still early autumn, so the chill hadn't yet set in, but she still wanted to get home in enough time to have a bit of downtime before dinner and homework.

Sadie thought of herself as a pretty well-put-together girl. She wasn't necessarily one of those people who kept a daily planner, but she did have her routine— getting up at the same time every day doing her homework after dinner, going to bed at a reasonable time—and she tried her best to stick to it. Being in control was never a bad thing, after all. True, she wasn't exceptional at any one specific thing, unlike some of the students in her advanced classes, but she figured being a jack-of-all-trades wasn't the worst thing in the world. She didn't want to be extraordinary, she just wanted to be sensible. Sadie was happy with the way she ran her life, and maybe even a bit proud of how smoothly she was able to make it all work.

Her walk went by in a blur as Sadie allowed her mind to wander away from her pacing feet, the task worn soft by familiarity and repetition. She methodically recalled all the assignments and chores she still had to complete before the end of the week, mentally checking off the things that she had already finished. The only thing left to do tonight is to submit that English essay...

Before long, the roof of her house rose out of the trees, the brown of the shingles perfectly matching the fall palette. Their home was at the end of a long drive branching off from the main road, partially hidden by the sprawling woods. Sadie started down their driveway, humming as she went. Days like this always put her in a good mood.

After traversing down the path, Sadie pushed open the front door, wiping her shoes on the welcome rug as she swung her backpack against the wall.

“Welcome home from school, honey!” her mom called from the kitchen as soon as Sadie stepped inside. “I just finished up dinner; hurry up before your meal gets cold!”

“Sure thing, Mom!” Sadie called back, raising her voice to be heard from the entry room. She took off her denim jacket she had been wearing and hung it on the ancient coat rack standing guard by the door before heading into the kitchen down the hall. The smell of chicken greeted her in the doorway as her parents set the table.

“Hey kiddo,” her dad smiled as he flicked on the tv and sat down to dinner. “You have a good day today?”

“Mhm.” Sadie pulled out her chair and sat down to a meal of chicken with a side of squash and homemade mashed potatoes courtesy of her mom. It was delicious. Sadie retreated into her own thoughts as her parents made small talk about their days and the tv droned on in the background.

“It’s about that time of year that we’ll be needing to rake the leaves in the backyard again.”

“Ugh, it’s such a hassle, I might pay the neighbor’s kid to do it this year.”

“...we implore you to keep your pets safe inside during the nights, as wild animal attacks have been increasing at an alarming rate over the past few days...”

“You hear that?” her dad asked. “I heard the Wilson’s dog went missing last week. I was always telling them you can’t be keeping it outside at this time of year, but they never listened.”

Sadie turned her attention to the tv, only slightly listening. Every few years the local news station reported on the dangers of living in the woods outside of town, but the casualties were always few, far between, and thankfully, animal-based.

Finishing up her dinner, Sadie took her plate to the sink and bid farewell to her parents before heading to her room to finish up some last-minute homework. She grabbed a couple of Advil on the way upstairs because her head was starting to pound lightly from the day’s work.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Sadie...Sadie!*

Sadie jerked awake, her heart pounding, trying to discern if the noise she heard was in her head or in her room. Nope, nothing there. Her room was the same as always, no mysterious lurking figures or monsters in the closet. The news report must have stuck

in her subconscious more than she had thought it had.

Sadie laid her head back down on her pillow and hoped her growing headache wouldn't keep her from falling back into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sunlight pounded through the window...or no, wait, her head is the thing pounding, making the morning light seem sharp and unforgiving.

"Ughhh..." Sadie rolled over, drug herself out from under her covers and shuffled miserably across the floor. She had hoped her headache would dissipate before she had to get up for school in the morning, but it seemed like it had only doubled during the night.

She resigned herself to getting dressed as fast as possible so she could get downstairs and have a healthy helping of painkillers for breakfast.

"...Mom," she moaned, walking into the kitchen. "My head's really hurting."

"Are you sick? Do you need to stay home from school today?" Her mom rushed over, checking her temperature by putting the back of her hand on her forehead.

"No I don't think so, I just want some painkillers. I think I'm getting a migraine."

"Are you sure?" her mom asked, frowning worriedly.

"Yeah...yeah, I'll be okay."

"Okay, well let me know if you need anything, alright?"

"I will," Sadie replied, grabbing a breakfast bar to eat and packing her school lunch.

As she hurried to the bus stop a few minutes later, her foggy brain made it almost seem as if the woods were whispering to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

School flew by in a flash as Sadie's focus slipped again and again, the words on her assignments blurring until they seemed like one continuous squiggle, intent on causing her pain.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she finally returned home, opening the door to fling her backpack on the floor and retreat to the living room in an attempt to find solace in Netflix.

She grabbed the remote and brought the tv to life just as she flopped down on the couch. A grave-faced reporter stared out at Sadie with a concerned but distant look.

"...reported many more of these strange attacks just today. It seems that whatever

lurks in the woods has a fierce appetite, as one of the victims of this slaughter is Farmer Joseph Higgans, who found half of his herd dead this morning. Joseph, would you like to tell us what you saw?”

The tv panned to a shaken-looking man as he began to speak, but Sadie was no longer listening. Her head was buzzing and she sat up suddenly, her fight or flight response kicking in. She turned off the tv, unnerved by both the news and her acute reaction to it. The trees stared down at her through the living room window, the once gentle giants now seeming to hold some unholy secret she'd yet to learn. She tried to place why these reports had troubled her so much, but this too evaded her.

She rubbed her eyes, sighed, and got up to get some more medicine. Maybe this would all make a bit more sense if her head would stop pounding for just one second.

*Sadie...*

Her attention snapped back to the window, eyes wide. *I swear I've heard that before...*The woods loomed just beyond the glass, their shadows ominous and strangely inviting...

*No. no. I can't go out there. Whatever is killing all those animals could get me too,* she thought. She knew she was being somewhat irrational, considering no one in her county had ever died from animal attacks, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. She felt like she was going crazy and she needed to do something, anything, to clear her head.

She marched to the kitchen, determined to ignore her growing headache and fraying nerves.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dinner was an uneventful and welcoming respite from an otherwise hectic day. Her dad babbled on about his new woodworking project and her mom proudly proclaimed that she thought she might be in for a promotion at her job at the bank. The food was good and the evening was comfortable. It was a pretty uneventful evening after you've been hearing voices in your head. Sadie glared down at her peas. *Shut up, conscience, you're not helping,* she thought.

“Are you okay, darling?” She gazed up to see her mom paused with a spoon of peas paused halfway to her mouth, frowning slightly.

“Huh? Yeah, sorry, I just zoned out for a second.”

“You were kinda mumbling to yourself, is something bothering you?” her dad interjected, more persistently.

“I was?” she said under her breath, and then, “Yep! All good! I was just thinking about school, that’s all.”

He gave her a concerned look and then reluctantly went back into his long-winded story about the new birdhouse he was trying to build for a couple of the finches out back. Sadie relaxed, glad to have the attention back off of her. If she was going crazy, she thought it was probably for the best if she didn’t tell her parents until she knew for sure what was going on so that she didn’t worry them.

Hurriedly, she finished up her dinner and excused herself to an early bed under the pretense of her still-persistent migraine. She prayed she would feel better in the morning, and shut her curtains firmly against the woods outside before going to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Sadie was in the woods. Sadie was running in the woods, going somewhere, always somewhere. Her feet ate up the ground beneath her as she ran, always hungry, just like her. Her hands and mouth were sticky, and she felt free. Truly free. It was amazing. She ran deeper into the trees, knowing exactly where she was going, knowing exactly what she had to do.*

Sadie turned over in her bed, trying to shake the cobwebs from her mind. She’d just been having the weirdest dream...

*The shadows of the woods were where she was meant to be. Hidden away, far from the daylight, far from the noise, coming close to civilization only to eat and grow stronger. It wouldn’t be long now. It wouldn’t be long at all.*

Sadie jolted awake, shaking, drenched in sweat. She tried to breathe slowly, tried to slow her heart rate. *It was just a dream, it was just a dream.* It seemed too real to be a dream. Her head was still pounding. Beat-beat-beating like a drum at the slightest movements. She cringed from the pain, and tried to turn away from the too-bright moonlight streaming through her window. *Wait. Moonlight?* Her curtains were opened. So was her window, letting in a chilly nighttime breeze. *I closed that, I know I closed that.* She scrambled to her window to slam it shut, her headache momentarily forgotten. Panic rose in her as she stared transfixed into the dark woods. Tearing her eyes away, she flung her curtains shut and crawled back into bed, shutting her eyes

tight against the dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

She woke up to sunlight. Her head hurt. Her head hurt so bad. It felt as though she would never be whole again.

Her mom knocked on her door—too loudly—sometime later, checking up on her, wanting to see how she was doing, letting her know *you didn't come down for breakfast and I just wanted to make sure you were okay, and that she should probably stay home from school today, I mean you've already missed the bus, just sleep for a bit longer until you feel like yourself again.*

Okay Mom, she tried to mumble before she mercifully fell back into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day passed quickly and too slowly all at once, the pain stretching and compressing time in ways that were otherwise unknown to physics. The morning light slowly crept across the floor, changing color as it matured and took on the harsher tone of noon and then the purplish orange shade of dusk. Sometime in the evening, her dad came to offer her a bowl of leftover soup from dinner and his best wishes that she got well soon. Sadie barely had enough energy to even touch the food, and slipped back into unconsciousness soon after he left.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sadie was in the woods. Correction: Sadie was watching herself in the woods. She saw her body from above and she knew it was her even though that thing that darted between the trees did so in a not quite human way. She knew it was her the same way that one knew the events of their childhood, or their younger selves.

That is to say, blurrily but with strange confidence. She couldn't explain why she knew, but she couldn't deny that she did.

Deep down she knew what she was doing in the woods on this moonless night. Deep down she had always known, but she had denied the truth in the way that people often do.

Her dream resolved into sharper focus as she came across one of the many farms that dotted the woods around her house. She saw herself, in the third person, approaching the pasture just behind the farmhouse. She watched as her body slaughtered one of the sleeping cows, knives tearing and nails slicing like claws. She

saw herself wild-eyed and vicious, butchering the animal in just the same way as was mentioned in the local news reports. Blood dripped from her hands and decorated the front of her shirt.

Sadie felt detached as she watched all this happen below her, somehow resigned and unsurprised at the reality of what she saw. Before she knew it, she was fading back into the oblivion of sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was night. Sadie was awake. She didn't remember falling asleep, or even waking up, but she was painfully conscious right now. Something was wrong. She felt...wrong. Her headache seemed to be peaking and subsiding at the same time, morphing into something different, something unknown. She felt she had forgotten something, something important.

She needed to get to her parents' room. She didn't want to worry them before, but there was no denying that she needed help now, she thought she ought to wake them up-

I-

Sadie blacked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was nice being unconscious, some deep part of her said. She didn't have to worry about creepy voices, or splitting headaches, or monsters when she wasn't awake. She could just relax here in the dark for a bit, just a bit, and then she would wake back up.

Sadie was in the kitchen.

*Wait this isn't right—no, no, yes it is, it's better here, in this place, in this black, instead of the too bright world. It's much more soothing, isn't it?*

*Yes...no! This is wrong this is wrong this is wrong.*

Sadie was holding a knife.

Alarm blared through her, red hot and intense, before she slipped back into her state of semi-unconsciousness. Something about that place seemed to soothe her. Or suffocate her. She reached out with her mind, cautiously testing the boundaries of the place she was in.

*Don't struggle, the voice said.*



The voice. It wasn't hers. It was the other. Sadie lashed out, panicked. What was happening?

Sadie was in her parents' bedroom.

*No no no no no this can't be happening. I must be dreaming.*

*Yes, yes, that's right. You're asleep, that's all. Having a nightmare maybe. It'll all be forgotten once you wake up.*

*No! No, this isn't right! Wake up wake up wake up!* Sadie struggled with whatever force was holding her, her desperation growing.

*NO!* The voice roared, growing angry. She was horrified of what would happen if she made it mad, but she didn't know what else to do.

Sadie was in her parents' bedroom, standing over their bed, holding a knife.

Sadie panicked. She screamed. She fought. She broke. She snapped awake.

Blood. There's blood on the walls. *I'm going crazy.* There's blood on her hands. *Why is there*—it shouldn't be that red. Blood can't be that red in real life. Sadie was shaking. It's only that red on tv. Her parents were lying in bed. *This can't be real.* Dead. *This isn't real.* Throats both slit wide open from the knife still clutched tightly in Sadie's hand. *This can't be happening.* She screamed. *This can't be happening this can't be happening this can't be happening—*

*Sadie.*

Her head snapped up. The voice was so, so loud now. She wished it was loud enough to drown out her thoughts, to drown her. She didn't want to be here anymore, she'd give anything to be away from this room and this night and all this blood. There was so much blood.

*I can help with that.* Sadie backed out of her parents' bedroom, head shaking, whole body trembling.

*I can make you forget all of this if only you surrender to me.* Sadie realized she was still holding the knife. She dropped it. She ran. She didn't know where she was going but she couldn't stop. She ran through the back door, she ran past the pool of soft light that emitted from the porch lamps. Sadie was distantly aware of tears on her cheeks, which seemed odd, because all she felt right now was numb. She ran into the woods, her only thought that she wanted to get away, away, away.

*Surrender to me,* the voice in her head grew more insistent. *Let me take control and*

*you will finally be at peace. Don't you see what happens when you don't listen to me Sadie? People die. Don't you want to stop killing?*

Deeper and deeper into the woods she ran, a mirrored reflection of her dreams.

*All you have to do is give up.*

There, deep in the woods behind the house she grew up in, Sadie knew she had no one to go back to and nothing of her life left to save. There, in the woods, she felt truly alone and out of control for the first time in her life. There, in the woods, she knew she had nowhere else to go.

Sadie gave up.

## THE WELL

Tristan Qi, 15

Aaron was awoken by the knocking on his front door. Loud thumps came one after another as he got out of bed and approached the door, the knocking grew louder, and faster too. Aaron laid his hand on the doorknob, slowly he turned the lock, and akin to ripping off a band-aid he tore the door open. What was revealed on the other side of the door was a boy, and the boy's name was Peter.

“Come look at what I found!” Peter said with his usual enthusiasm.

“Where, and what is it?” Aaron asked. The two boys were probably the closest friends in the whole neighborhood even though Peter was a few years younger than Aaron. They spent most of their time exploring the forest bordering the dead end of the street they lived on.

“You'll see,” Peter answered, “Come on!” He ran off, signaling Aaron to follow.

“Wait up!” Aaron shouted as he grabbed his jacket and chased after him. The two ran to the end of their street, entered the forest, and advanced deep within. Aaron tailed Peter as he ran with no signs of stopping, soon they were surrounded by nothing but forest in sight. The trees were dead and the only noise accompanying them was the crunch of leaves beneath their feet, while the cool autumn wind occasionally rustled a few dead trees or blew a few leaves from here to there. Finally, Peter came to a stop, and soon did Aaron. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

Before the boys lay a structure, a well, a rectangular-shaped well lined with mossy dark bricks of stone. The well had no roof and was left unprotected from the elements of the world, and the greatest wonder of the boys was what filled the well. The structure that had peaked the boys' attention was filled with a dark, viscous, and pitch-black liquid. The liquid lay calm, with soft ripples covering the surface.

“What is it?” Aaron watched the liquid in the well ripple and shift.

Peter responded, “I don't know, I found it this morning, and I ran straight back home to get you.”

Aaron remained in awe. The structure was so odd, unnatural in a way. He couldn't shake off the feeling that there was something sinister about it. Peter had his own idea and picked up a nearby stick lying among the rubble of leaves and twigs. The stick was

barren, dead like every other stick and branch in the forest.

“What are you doing?” Aaron questioned as he took a step back from the well.

“I’m gonna figure out what’s inside this thing.” Peter tossed the dead stick into the well. Slowly the stick began to sink into the dark liquid, soon it began to bubble and spark to life, and the stick sank away as it was covered by the choking black fluid. Soon the liquid began to settle, and it was almost like nothing had been thrown in to begin with. Aaron had taken a few steps away from the well, while Peter stood right on the edge, waiting for something to happen. The two shared a silence as all the noise of their surroundings faded away. Something felt off to Aaron, it was the feeling you get right before something bad happens, yet he continued to observe cautiously. The liquid bubbled back to life as Peter hunched over the well.

“Peter!” Aaron shouted, “Peter, get back!”

Peter didn’t seem to hear him, he stood over the well as the fluid within it began to bubble violently, in the middle of the well something began to rise. A mass covered in the same black goop that filled the well slowly began to emerge. Aaron impulsively pulled Peter away as the object surfaced. The liquid soon drained away from the object to reveal a stick, floating seamlessly upon the surface of the liquid, as it drifted towards the edge, Peter lunged for it. Aaron tried to protest but before he could say or do anything to stop him, Peter was already examining the stick in his hand.

“Look,” he held out the stick to Aaron, “the stick’s alive again!” Aaron carefully took the stick from Peter, and sure enough, the once-dead stick had sprouted back to life. The body of the stick felt smoother and stronger, a few leaves had begun to grow, and a thin green vine had wrapped itself around the body. As he was examining the stick, Aaron felt a sharp prick in his thumb.

“Ow!” he shouted as it fell to the ground, the two boys hunched over to observe the stick, it had grown thorns, sharp, dark red thorns. “Why are there thorns?”

“What do you mean?” Peter asked.

“None of the plants in this forest have thorns,” Aaron answered in a concerned tone, “if this is the same stick you threw into the liquid, how did it grow thorns?”

Peter shrugged it off, “I don’t know.”

Aaron hesitated for a moment, he didn’t want Peter to end up getting hurt playing with this well. “Come on, your parents are probably getting worried,” Aaron stated.

“What?” Peter exclaimed, “it’s only noon!”

“We’ll be back tomorrow, I promise,” Aaron dragged Peter away from the well, and soon the two embarked home.

The next morning Aaron was awoken by the same knocking he had heard the day before, he got dressed and opened the door to be met by Peter. This time he was carrying a large black plastic trash bag, with something weighing it down.

“Come on, let’s go to the well!” Peter began, even more enthusiastic than the day before.

“Well, I was thinking what we could do instead was-”

“I’ll see you there!” Peter cut him off and began running to the forest.

Aaron stepped outside his front door and shouted, “What’s in the bag?”

Peter responded from afar, “You’ll see!” Aaron hesitated, but then chased Peter back into the forest. Once Aaron caught up to Peter he was already at the well, but something about it had changed, the well was surrounded by vines, and the vines were covered in thorns. The vines surrounding the well felt out of place in the forest devoid of living plants. But Peter didn’t seem to notice as he dug through the trash bag he had brought, he pulled out a mass of light grey feathers.

“What is that?” asked Aaron. Peter didn’t answer. “Peter what is that?” he asked, with growing concern.

Peter answered, “A bird.” He showed it to Aaron. The bird looked to be a pigeon, it was medium in size, about the size of both of Peter’s fists put together.

“Where’d you find it?” Aaron began questioning Peter, “Is it dead?”

“Not for long,” Peter responded as he carelessly threw the lifeless bird into the well, and slowly, the well swallowed the bird whole. Once the bird was fully submerged, silence followed. Aaron stayed his distance, while Peter stood dangerously close to the well.

“Peter?” Aaron began to speak but was interrupted by the splashing sound from the well. Swooping out of the well was a bird, it flew around as it was covered in the black liquid and perched itself on a nearby branch. Once the bird was completely dry it revealed a set of black feathers, like that of a crow’s. Both the boys watched as the bird looked around and flew from perch to perch, a once-dead animal reanimated, but what

startled them was the bird's cawing, a caw just like that of a crow. Aaron looked over at Peter, he seemed amused, but Aaron was freaked out. "Come on, we're not coming back here again," Aaron grabbed Peter by his wrist, and forcefully dragged him away.

"But wait!" Peter replied, "I still haven't-"

"Come on, we're going home," Aaron demanded. He wasn't very happy but Aaron eventually got Peter to come home. On the way back the two were silent, and they parted ways once they had reached the street they shared.

The following day Aaron woke up early to check up on Peter, only for the front door of his house to be unlocked. He searched Peter's house just to find he wasn't there.

At that moment he knew where Peter had gone, Aaron rushed out of the house, and sprinted into the forest as fast as he possibly could. Aaron felt the cold air stinging his cheeks as he navigated the dead forest. He came to a stop when he noticed something was off, he took a look around. There were crows everywhere, perched all over the trees surrounding him. *There shouldn't be this many crows this time of year*, Aaron thought to himself. Yet the thing he noticed that was most concerning to him was the path of vines that lie ahead, he was sure that they weren't there previously. He followed the path of thorn-ridden vines, taking caution with each step, all the while the ominous flocking of crows rustled the trees around him. He finally stopped when he ran into Peter, beholding the well.

"Peter!" he yelled, "Stop it!" Peter had brought another trash bag, he reached into it and pulled out a white rabbit, dead, just like the crow was. Aaron grabbed Peter by the wrist and tried to pull him away for the last time, but this time Peter fought back, kicking and screaming.

"No!" Peter blurted out, "what are you so scared of?"

"Peter! Do you see what's happening?" Aaron looked around, "Don't you see that something is off? Something about that well is wrong!" The sound of crows became deafening, it was a concoction of cawing and screeches as the crows flew around with no form or unity.

"No!" Peter put his foot down, "You always follow me, you always protect me, and you always treat me like a little brother, not a friend! I put up with you thinking you're the big responsible one, I'm tired of it!"

Peter lunged forward and tried to throw the rabbit into the well, but Aaron pulled him back, causing him to slip on the leaves. They both fell onto the ground right next to the well. Peter scrambled to get up but Aaron grabbed onto his leg, tipping him over and leading to Peter falling head first into the well. The lower half of his body struggled as he sank into the dark viscous substance that was in the well, soon only his legs could be seen as Peter stopped struggling. Aaron could do nothing but watch as the liquid bubbled and Peter was engulfed entirely by the well, swallowing him up whole and leaving no evidence of his existence. He sat up and stared at the well in defeat.

The sound of crows had faded, and soon Aaron was left in silence, he could barely breathe, and he couldn't stop shaking. He looked up to see the well bubble back to life, he regained his footing as the well rippled and bubbled. He backed away as a hand began to rise, covered in the dark oozing liquid, something was coming out of the well. Aaron choked back a scream and stumbled away from the well. He ran and he didn't look back, all the while he could hear the squelching sound of something breaking free from the well.

## STANDING STILL

Isla Walker, 16

She ran her first marathon at 16 years old, with her running partner  
of eight years, Dad.

She ran her last at age 29, without Dad, because he died.

19th of June, 10:34 pm

It was strange, the many different shades of night Jes had seen over her years of night-time running. Some were illuminated by a moon, while others were darker than eyes closed. Tonight was one of the darkest she had seen. The moon might not exist and the clouds pelted down thick sheets of rain. God, she hated running in the rain. Actually she simply hated running. But no matter what, she always ran. *At this point running is all I can do.*

The goal for this foretold long night of running would be the longest mileage she had attempted since Dad left. A full marathon, the first without her lifelong running partner. There would be no official race this night and that suited her just fine, she couldn't do a race without Dad. The park she would be running throughout the night was called Pratt Park, a small desolate and grossly forgotten little government patch that was located an inconvenient distance from her residence. But three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, Jes would make the drive out (at exactly 9:10) and run though the same path she had her whole life. Dad and her must have spent hours jogging through the wooded pathways, always during the night of course, because the daytime heat and oppressive sun didn't agree with either of them.

Her family might have been proud of her if she ever updated them on her activities, but they left her long ago. Now they lived too far away. Or for them, not far enough. They couldn't escape home, but she had stayed, someone had too. A subtle pang of sadness registers, it was a big deal that she was here, doing this. She was honoring Dad, unlike everyone else who had simply forgotten. She would never forget. Part of her felt it was a responsibility, but the rest couldn't ignore its effects. She had changed, a bad sort of change. Maybe they had too, however, she may be running but at least



she hadn't left.

Her car was still dented from her accident two months ago (a side effect of her unfortunate drinking indulgence) and didn't look very nice where she had parked it. Outdated and an unappealing rust color, there was no redeeming the sedan. The rain was pooling inside the largest of the dents on the hood and then slowly seeping downwards into the inner depths of the engine. *Quite ugly.* At least she could use it as a glorified security box for her house keys and phone while she ran (Jes absolutely despised carrying anything while running). The car was certainly something that was best parked under a dark sky and in an isolated corner. Spending her thoughts on the car was a waste of time, time that was precious if Jes wanted to get the next five hours done quickly. Despite her many night runs, she could never quite shake the feeling of fear, the adrenaline spike of wondering what's out there that you can't see. An eerie feeling that only running can melody. Thus, post stretching of course, she began to run.

19th of April, 11:00 pm

Running, at this point, is a generous word. Moving slightly faster than someone walking is a more appropriate term. Jes competed in competitive running during her middle school years, however she could never run quite fast enough, and even worse, didn't have the constitution to endure mediocrity. Her idea of running was completion based, a good mindset for an indolent long distance runner. Dad used to push her to match a goal pace, *"You can't keep up with me? Do you want people at the race to see you beat by this old man?"*, his taunting never worked, Jes could only enjoy the gratuitous activity at her epitome of comfort, besides Dad was a better runner, she could never catch him.

Her shoes provide an ambient slosh as she nears her third mile, the rain hasn't ceased in its torrential downpour, constantly blurring her vision of the already dim lit path. The black concrete on which her shoes tread was cracked and faded from years of service. The trees that so densely surround the path seem almost impregnable under the dark shadows and now thick mist. The snap of a twig behind her. A sense of awareness strikes Jes and a cold spike of panic shocks her. *What made that sound?* A sudden sense of claustrophobia, something she doesn't have but something this path

is excellent at invoking. When faced with darkness shrouding the unknown, how can we do anything but wonder what's there? This strong sense of fear encouraged Jes to resume her practice of looking downward and humming a song (the selection changed weekly based on what was stuck in her head). She must calm herself, there's no wild animals that would hurt her, if any approached her at all. *Don't let your mind wonder, I can't let myself consider the possibilities. Nothing can hurt you.* With her head held low and mind increasingly occupied by blissful buzz she passed her three mile marker.

20th of June, 12:30 pm

*There had been someone standing beside the path.* There was no mistaking it now, she had seen him three times. Standing amongst the trees, covered from head to toe in black, water pouring down his matching cap. *He must know that I've seen him. What the hell is he doing?* Her heart was beating faster, her being on her thirteenth mile had nothing to do with it. She couldn't turn back at this point, and she had no phone to call for help. Stopping was not an option. At this point she could only maintain her course, if not at a steadily increasing pace. Her body kept wanting to spasm and sprint, she could barely keep her head from swiveling around at the smallest sound. Tap. Tap. Tap. Her footsteps sounded too loud, the water once smooth against the ground was parting for her steps. *What am I supposed to do? I can't turn back and I can't maintain this pace for another thirteen miles.* A shiver runs down her spine, a mixture of sweat and rain comes slick from her brow. Tap. Tap. Tap. Rounding a corner a long stretch of the trail comes into view. It's the longest straight stretch of the run and—*there's something on the path.*

20th of June 12:55 pm

For a second she almost stops, her heart beating faster. A mass of something lays thirty feet ahead, sprawled across the concrete. Too large to be an animal, and...definitely humanoid. She's still running, closer and closer. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Slosh. Her shoes sink into something thick and sticky. *I can feel the warmth through my shoes.* Slowly she lowers her gaze, white shoes now red in the pale yellow light. The smell finally hits her, putrid and thick, like metal filling her throat, taste on her tongue. Jes's face seizes and she doubles over, gagging. Bent over low to the ground, her eyes

catch on the lump, which is now only a foot away. Red. Something red. It must be covered in blood. *No, not it, she. Oh my god.* A primal scream escapes her. Stumbling backwards, hand over mouth. The contorted figure lets out a raspy breath, her entire figure convulsing. Jes's limbs begin to tremble, her breath uneven. *No that's not blood, and where's her mouth?* For the first time in hours Jes's entire body freezes. *The skin on her face is gone, there's no teeth, no eyes.* The figure goes still. A twig snaps from behind. Jes's head snaps around, she begins to creep backwards. A figure stands twenty feet away. Dressed in black.

Soaked with more than rain. Standing still. A guttural scream escapes Jes and she flings her body around and begins to sprint.

Thump. Thump. Thump. TAP. TAP. TAP. All she can hear is her heart beating faster and faster. *There's nowhere I can go. I can't sprint thirteen miles.* The trees are too tall. Thump.

Thump. Thump. The concrete is so dark. Sweat drips under the lids of her eyes. Thump. THump. THUmp. The rain won't stop. The sky is too dark. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. *No one knows where I am. Dad's gone. I'm too tired. The woman's face. Her blood on my shoes. I can't see, I CAN'T BREATHE. I CAN'T KEEP RUNNING. I CAN'T ESCAPE.* "GOD!" she sobs, "I CAN'T!"

Her entire figure is shaking now, exhausted from the sudden change in pace. Her limbs feel hollow and her breath becomes ragged. Sweat, rain, and tears close her eyes. Gasping, heaving, crying, running. A sudden rush of sound behind her. A figure, unstoppable pursuing. The street lights are dimming. The stretch ahead of her comes into view.

"No," an almost silent gasp. The trail ahead was pitch black, the lights had all gone out.

Blackness, no more path, no more anything. She tries to stop, but her momentum is too great. Sliding. Falling. Hitting. Skidding. The entire left half of her body makes contact with the ground, the concrete scraping off her skin. No time for that. Frantically she fixates on the lighted path, now behind her. *Nothing. He's gone.* The path is empty, rain falls against the ground, the lights reveal nothing. *Further back, I have to hide.* Trying to move, a sudden spike of pain rushes from her left ankle. Clenching her teeth, Jes begins to crawl forward, further into the darkness.

No more tapping of the feet. Only the pounding drum. Thump. Thump. Thump. Hand over hand.

The concrete is slick with rain, the smell of blood is in the air. Hand over hand. *He's coming.* Hand over hand. *Should I go into the forest?* Hand over hand. Suddenly her left hand lands on something soft. For the second time in hours, Jes goes completely still. Soft, cold, *a foot. Another body. How is there one ahead?* No more stillness. Her body trembles, a shiver runs down her spine. The rain is colder than ever. Thump. Thump. Thump. SNAP. SLOSH. BREATH. Not hers.

*He's here. Freeze? Hide? Scream? Die?* Thump. Thump. SNAP, closer. A heavy breath is near. Closer. Silent tears run down her face, her body trembles. Sweat, rain, tears, snot. Panic. Then...nothing. Silence. Cool air brushes the hairs on her neck. Her eyes might as well be closed. Pitch black. Wet. Shivering. More and more silence, a crescendo. Her hand feels the cool concrete. Her heart beats ever faster. A sob escapes her lips. Her hand claps against her mouth, more tears cascading down. She can't see anything. A feeling of exposure. Thump. Thump. Thump. Her back is against the air, she faces nothing. Thump. Cool emptiness surrounding her on all sides.

Silence so loud she can't stop the cold spike of dread that seems solid in her chest. Waiting.

Thump. Thump. Her heart is racing so fast. It's so cold, so dark. *He's right next to me, no, in front.*

*Was that a sound? Did I see the darkness shift?* Waiting.

Nothing. Maybe something? Thump. Thump. THump. *I can't see.* THUmp. THump.

THUMP. *I'm going to die.* THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. Shiver, another breeze- *NO hot breath behind me!* A primal scream shatters the silence as something penetrates her skin. Hot. WARM. SHARP.

"ARGHH!!!" Her body seizes forward and she falls away from the man. Down a hill. Into the forest. Leaves, wet and cold. Her face was buried among them. Crunch. Crunch. "Why god?" She's sobbing now, tears, more tears. Thump. Thump. Crunch, closer, ever closer. Her face is hot. Shaking. Something's behind her now. Heat curls towards her back. Grabbing now. "Please, please," wailing as she's dragged. Her blood smears the forest floor. "I don't want to die, I- I want to go home. No don't please, please please," *No. Dad, I can't... escape.*

20th of June, 1:24 pm

Eventually the crying stops.

A conversation out of time.

*“You thought you were running? From what?” he finally asks.*

*“...from you leaving me.”*

*“You kept running. Why? You hated it.”*

*“I was doing it for you. Always running. I- I never left, I stayed and everyone else left you. But I didn't, I kept you with me. I was running but at least I was still there.”*

*“Jes, I'm so sorry, I wish it could have been different. But, if you were running then you would have been moving forward. But you just ran the same circle. No matter how many times you run it, you still end in the same place...it's the same as standing still,” a sad sigh, “...I suppose we can do that together now.”*

## UNTITLED

Kloe Branham, 15

I love being home alone.

With our house being out in the country there is not a single soul for miles, it is so quiet. It gives me a chance to think, and clean. If there is one good thing about my parents favoring my sister it is that they take her on trips like this all of the time and I get to be alone. Also, she is not home to mess everything up. I don't know how she can even function with the mess she makes. For me, if everything is not in its right place I can't think. The clock reads 1:00 am. I put the last cup away from the sink and go into the living room and fluff the pillows. Ok, I'm done. I have cleaned every room in the house and everything is perfect.

I turn and start heading for my room. The glass I could have sworn I just put away is sitting on the dark oak table. Weird. I must be really tired. I pick it up to put it back away. Ugh! It left a water ring on the table! Who would set a glass on a wooden table with no coaster? I get the cleaning supplies from under the sink and scrub until it is gone. I take a quick scan to make sure everything is in place. There is a pillow on the floor of the living room. Now I know I just fluffed that pillow. *Calm down Katie, it was just the dog.* I put it back on the couch and re-fluff it.

*Clang.*

What was that? I'm alone, there shouldn't be anyone in the house.

"Grrrrrr. Woof!" Indi is going crazy. *Clink.* There it is again. That sound. Indi starts whining.

"Indi! What's wrong, girl?" I can feel my heartbeat start to pick up. Why is she barking? She never barks. I walk over as the clinking sound continues and the dog continues to bark. I round the corner to see what is happening.

Her bowl is empty.

"Gosh Indi! You scared me, girl. You're just hungry, aren't you." I rub her ears and go to fill her bowl.

The clock now reads 1:30 am. It is definitely time for bed. I start down the hall toward my room. When I passed my sister's room, what I saw there was terrifying. It

was gut-wrenching. I think I'm about to cry.

Her toys are EVERYWHERE!

I thought I cleaned it here. Dolls on the ground. Books are not straight on the shelf. Bed not made. Clothes on the floor. It's a mess!

Deep breaths. In, out, in, out, in, out.

*Ok Katie, it's fine. You need to clean it real fast and then go to bed.* I would rate this about a 6 on a 1-10 scale. So it will probably take me about an hour, two if I vacuum, dust, and mop. I need to. I know I won't be able to sleep if I don't.

Her room is clean. At last. I don't know how it got that messy. She must have done it on purpose. 3:12 am. Ugh, I am so tired. I'm going to sleep.

I walk a few more steps into my room.

No. This can't be. What is happening? Stuff everywhere. The picture is crooked. I never would have left my room like this. Someone is here. My vision starts to close in.

Something falls in the other room.

That definitely wasn't Indi.

I can't breathe. There is no one for miles.

I walk into the kitchen anyway. *Oh gosh Katie, this is how every horror movie ends.* People.

People everywhere. In my house. Talking, laughing, eating. They are having a PARTY. Wait, not just any people. I know these people. They are from school. These people bully me. And they are at my house having a party. My heart is going to come out of my chest. WHAT IS HAPPENING? Why are all of these people at my house? This couldn't be real. I hated big things like this. This many people.

"Katie! Come on Katie, join us!" I hear my name echo around the room as everyone sees me.

"Katie! Katie! Katie! Katie!" The chant grows louder and louder. I feel like I'm going to suffocate. Everyone started coming closer.

Circling me.

Like vultures.

"NO!" I yell.

Thank goodness my mother didn't let the dream go on any longer.

I might have had a heart attack.

## THE TRENCH COAT MAN

Annabella Elliott, 15

Ever since I was little, I've been regarded as the strongest one in the family, always combating every conflict that would come my way, even earning the nickname "trooper." There's nothing I can't handle, or at least that's what I thought. But what happens when the soldier can't fight anymore? What if the dragon gets bigger and the armor thinner?

Being a major science geek I knew one thing: every liquid has a melting point. Mine began last summer when more than ever, I was expected to bear the weight of additional responsibilities. Normally, this wouldn't bother me except for the fact I'm already depressed, not that I would ever tell my mom. She's got enough to deal with. I never expected it either, which I guess is what everyone says.

If I could put this situation in a concept it would be me quickly switching tabs on a computer, trying to balance everything from work, school, family, and eating, and then a notification pops up telling me, "you are now going to feel incompetent and unmotivated." Not ideal when you have enough to manage. It was just the cherry on top of an already awful period in my life.

My mother is a strong, Venezuelan woman who works multiple shifts to raise me and my little sister, Gabriella, since dad and her divorced years ago due to their dysfunctional relationship. So, you can imagine her reaction when I informed her that my mental health had taken a swan dive off a building. She didn't mean it, but she told me off and said, "are you trying to kill me?"

After that, I stopped talking to her about it. Not because I was getting better, if anything, it had only gotten worse these past few months. I tried asking for advice on social media, but all I got was just a bunch of comments like, "it's not healthy to suppress your emotions," as if it was so simple to share your struggles with the people you love. See, my family immigrated from Venezuela two years ago, and ever since money has been tight and I've been trying to help out to the best of my ability. So yeah, it's not so easy.

Don't get me wrong, I'm sure there are other people with worse problems.



Correction, I KNOW there are people with worse problems since the news plays them on repeat 24/7 but that doesn't make mine any less important.

It was 6:03 pm and I finished eating dinner. "May I be excused?" I requested. She sighed and replied, "fine, and Marcus please don't stay up too late, you look exhausted," she pleaded.

"Got it, thanks," I mumbled and retreated to my room. I plopped onto the chair at my desk and rubbed my eyes. I was having this weird phenomenon where I either slept for three or eleven hours, with no in-between whatsoever. Today was one of the under-sleeping days so I was especially tired and I found myself staring out the window in a trance-like state. As I was drifting off, a slight movement caught my eye. It was then that I noticed a considerably tall figure standing under a light down the street. It was a man with a brown trench coat and a fedora-like hat of the same color that cast a shadow over his eyes. Wait, did he even have eyes? It didn't appear he did, but that wasn't possible, right? This wasn't even the strangest thing I noticed. What startled me the most was how freakishly tall he was. He must have been at least 10 feet in height!

Upon further inspection, his skin seemed an ash-grey color like that of rotting flesh. I rubbed my eyes again to confirm what I was seeing was indeed real and surely I saw the same entity as before. I had no idea what it was, but I certainly wasn't going out there to find out. Instead, I hastily closed the curtains and leaped into bed. I must have been delusional from lack of sleep, or at least that's what I fooled myself into believing, because the other possibility was a whole lot more disturbing. I pulled the covers over my eyes in an attempt to try and fall asleep faster so that at least if I was going to be brutally murdered tonight, I wouldn't have to witness it. I might've been a bit overly dramatic, but this was my life now. Finally, after what must have been thirty minutes I drifted off.

I awoke the next morning, surprised I was still alive. I got dressed and raced downstairs.

"Woah, you're in a hurry!" Gaby exclaimed excitedly.

"Not now! Mom! can you come out here for a minute?" It was probably foolish of me to think she wouldn't perceive me as crazy but it was worth a shot.

"Yes, honey, what is it?" she called out from the laundry room.

"I have to tell you something!"

“Seriously? I’m kind of in the middle of-”

“It’s super important!” I yelled back.

“Okay fine,” she trudged out and stood with her arms crossed. “What is it?” she questioned irritably.

“I know you’ll doubt me, but I swear I saw some kind of monster-like man in the street last night,” I confessed. There was silence before she let out a single mocking huff. “Seriously?” she teased.

“I swear I’m not lying—it was an abnormally tall guy just standing there staring at me dead in the eyes. Oh yeah! It didn’t even have eyes!” I rambled. At that moment I knew she thought I was losing my mind because she laughed out loud.

“Marcus, I’m pretty sure I would be aware of a freakishly scary man standing outside our house. This is exactly why I told you to go to bed early. You need the sleep,” she concluded.

“No—you don’t understand,” I continued.

“What? What don’t I understand?” she demanded.

“I—nothing.” I wasn’t going to waste my time trying to convince her when she wouldn’t take my word that what I saw was real. I sprinted back up to my room and closed the door.

I’m not sure why I even attempted reasoning with my mother. I love her but it’s frustrating when I have the confidence to admit something and then she brushes it off or guilt trips me for bugging her. Then again, I can’t blame her because I can’t confirm if what I saw was even real. Maybe Mom was right, a good night’s rest could be the answer to all my problems.

In the evening, as usual, I ate dinner and it was pretty awkward considering our sort of argument earlier. Also part of me, as dumb as it sounds, was nervous at the potential of seeing it a second time. I prayed that I would look out and be filled with relief because it was a one-off encounter. I got some solid sleep last night, so I could no longer chalk it up to sleep deprivation. Time for the moment of truth. I flung open my curtains and turned my head in every direction, searching desperately to hopefully not find anything. Unfortunately, it was there.

But it was closer now.

It was only right across the street.

I had never felt more panicked in my whole life. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. I was debating if I should try telling my mom again or let it be. It didn't seem to move from its position last night so if it followed the same pattern I should be able to get some sleep with no difficulty. I couldn't take my eyes off it. Weird, considering I was positive this thing had no eyes.

Plus it almost seemed to be...smiling...at me. I was getting shivers just looking at it so I hastily closed the curtains. For safety measures, I slept facing toward the window so I wouldn't have my back to it in case it could somehow teleport. This all sounded ridiculous but at this point, nothing made any sense.

Just like the previous night, I forced my eyes to close into a deep slumber.

I had never been more ecstatic to see the brightly cast window and its beams of light peeking through the curtains the following morning. I sprung up from bed and ran to the window. Nothing there. Why would it only come at night? Was it because it was harder to see? Never mind, I don't want to think about it so I won't. It doesn't matter now anyways because like always, I survived.

For the first time in forever, I joyfully made my way down the steps, eating every bit of food on my plate. My mother shot me a weird look, probably confused as to why I was freaking out the night before and today I was perfectly fine.

At standard sunset hour, I sat outside and watched anxiously as the sun dipped below the horizon, knowing the night had just begun. I hurried inside, feeling safe to be away from potential danger, almost taunting the thing for not being able to get me when my mother said, "hey sweetie, I'm starting to get low on groceries, can you go out to the store and bring back the items on my list?" she requested. My heart skipped a beat as I considered being out there...with that...thing. I shivered.

"Isn't it a little late for that? Wouldn't you rather me go tomorrow when it's light outside?" I bargained.

"I know, and I'm sorry I didn't give you a heads up sooner but now and then I have last-minute shopping needs. Would you mind?" she went on. I opened my mouth to decline when I noticed the bags under her eyes and the wrinkles I could've sworn weren't there before. Sympathy got the best of me and I obliged.

"Thank you, baby, you really are my little trooper," she said appreciatively.

"Of course, I'll be home soon," I responded. Once she exited the room I took a knife

from the kitchen counter and slipped it into my coat pocket just to have some means of defense in case things got ugly. I peeked out the door cautiously and to my surprise I didn't see it anywhere, or at least it wasn't in the same area as last time, but I wasn't going to investigate because I simply didn't want to find it. I slid into the car and turned it on, speeding away into the night.

At the market, I felt a bit more secure since there were other people around and bright lights. It took quite a while because I was unintentionally stalling, but can you blame me? Why would I choose to return home when I didn't feel comfortable and was genuinely afraid?

However, I had to leave at some point so I checked out and walked to the parking lot, keeping my finger on the alarm button the whole walk over. After about ten minutes I pulled into the driveway and came to a stop. I practically vaulted myself out and unloaded the bags speedily. In my haste, I caught a glance of what looked like a sleeve at the side of the house, but I ran in too fast to get a good look at it.

"I'm home!" I announced, placing the groceries on the counter, and putting the food in their respective places.

Mom came out in her pajamas sleepily. "Okay sweetie, get to bed please, it's late," she yawned.

"Got it." I was halfway up the stairs when I turned around. "I love you, Mom," I told her sweetly.

"Aww, I love you too honey, have a good night's rest," she smiled. I returned the expression and finished walking up, closing the door behind me when I reached my room.

Instinctively, I shuffled to the window and peered out. Nothing. A sense of bliss settled in my heart. As I was closing the curtains to turn in for the night, I had the idea to look a little closer just in case. Apprehensively, I stared directly down and—there it was.

Right below my windowsill was the man, more ominous than ever. Now fully visible was a twisted smile, his head tilted towards me. I freaked out and frantically threw myself downstairs, crying out for my mom like a scared little kid.

"Mom! Mom!" I shouted.

She ran in hurriedly. "What is it? Why do you look so terrified?" she said worriedly.

“Okay, I know you think I’m a lunatic but I have evidence this time!” I yelled.

“Shh, you’ll wake up Gabi,” she hushed. I tugged at her arm until she finally succumbed and followed me to my room.

I directed her to the window and pointed at it. “See!” I yelled.

“Marcus, there is no one there.” These were by far the six most chilling words.

“What are you talking about? It’s right—”

“Listen, young man, I’m not going to entertain these delusions of yours any longer! I understand it’s been stressful with the move, especially to a completely foreign environment, but you can’t be lying to me like this to gain my attention because now I’m starting to think there’s something wrong with you,” she explained dishearteningly.

“Why would I lie to you about this?” I countered.

“Let me rephrase that, I don’t think you’re lying, but what I do believe is I need to get you in to talk to someone,” she replied concernedly.

“Stop treating me like I’m crazy—I’m not crazy!” I assured her, determined to get through to her.

“I never said you’re crazy, though I should have expected this, maybe I’ve been putting too much weight on your shoulders, but I never thought it would get this serious. Money’s tight right now. I don’t necessarily want to spend it on a therapist but I will if it means that all this,” she motioned in my direction, “will stop.”

“Please trust me, it’s real, I’m being real with you,” I sobbed. She reached out to me and cupped my face in her hand.

“I’m sorry, but this has gone on long enough,” she finished. I took both her hands and looked into her eyes with tears spilling down my cheeks.

“Can I at least sleep downstairs with you tonight? I’ll sleep on the floor if I have to,” I begged. She pondered for a moment before sighing.

“Fine, but tomorrow I’m finding you a counselor.”

Despite my efforts, I couldn’t sleep at all that night. Maybe it was because I was on the ground beside my mother’s bed with nothing more than a pillow and a blanket which was already uncomfortable enough but knowing there was something right outside made it a hundred times worse. I tossed and turned and drowned in my head until sunrise and a solution appeared.

Mom was already out of the house even though I got up at the crack of dawn. I

wanted to at least say my goodbyes but I didn't have a choice.

I was going to kill myself.

I had no other options left. I couldn't bear to spend the rest of my life being tormented by this entity. I wasn't going to sit around waiting for the night it'd be standing at my bedside. I can't endure that kind of mental torture.

I sobbed as I dragged myself into the kitchen, opened the medicine cabinet, and grabbed the nearest bottle of pills. I pushed down the cap and unscrewed it. I wasted no time and downed the whole container in an instant. I felt sick. I hated to leave my mom and sister like this. They didn't deserve it, but I didn't deserve this fate either. Unfortunately, sometimes reality has other plans for poor souls like me.

I leaned against the counter and sloppily jotted down some form of a farewell on the back of an old list Mom made, back when everything was all right. Slowly, my vision began to get blurry until it darkened and I stumbled over and fell onto the floor weakly, hugging my knees to my chest on the cold floor in my last moments.

I really do love you, Mom.

My breathing slowed until I fell asleep forever.

Or at least that's what I thought.

I awoke in a forest at nighttime, fog rolling over wet hills filled with dewdrops from the rain pouring down onto the earthy surface. My clothes were muddy and my body was drained of all energy but I managed to pull myself up. I was face to face with the man. I fell backward and collapsed into a giant mud pile, backing away horrified.

Suddenly it grabbed a nearby stick and wrote in the mud the word, "Hello." Why would a menacing thing like this bother with greeting me?

"Hi..." I muttered, still scooting backward.

"You've been asleep for a while," it drew.

"Probably because I'm dead," I chuckled softly.

"No," it scribbled.

"On Earth, yes, but your life here has just begun." I gazed up at its looming presence. It was already tall enough when I was standing but being on the ground with it towering over me was even more unsettling.

"Who are you?" I said shakily.

"I seek out the people soon to commit suicide. I wait." It shockingly spoke aloud. Its

voice was raspy and eerily echoey, definitely not human at all.

“So that’s why you came after me? Because you knew I was going to take my own life eventually? I mumbled. It nodded. I gulped. “Where am I then exactly?” I couldn’t believe I was having a conversation with an actual monstrosity.

“You’re in my world now,” it said. “I’ll be collecting my next victim soon,” it communicated way too casually.

“Vi-victim?” I whimpered. No answer besides its grin growing wider than ever. I shuddered. “And who’s that?” I trailed off. It pulled out a piece of paper from its coat pocket and extended its arm toward me. I scanned over the name, “Sofia Martinez.” My mother’s name.

“We’ll see you soon,” it uttered.

And then it was gone.

## HUNGER.

E. Moseman, 15

Phoebe looked at the animal in her hands, the cat laying limp in her grip. Its eyes glazed over with the shiny look of death, matted fur slipping between her fingers. The young girl didn't say anything. No expression of remorse on her pale face, just a feeling of bubbling excitement.

She stood up from the wet grass, brushing off her dress as she headed back to the house's entrance. Phoebe dragged her feet slowly, a tight grip around the cat's throat, where she had strangled it. *Stupid thing. It got what it deserved*, she thought, twisting the doorknob. The girl weaved her way through the empty house, stopping at the basement door. Phoebe didn't like the basement. It was always too cold, the concrete walls looming over her, but it was necessary. **Her room was starting to smell.**

Phoebe didn't mind the smell; it almost felt welcoming as it entered her body. The slightly sour scent of rotting trash or old cheese. Maybe it was because she couldn't smell that well, but her parents could. They didn't go into the basement. Nobody did, no one but her.

She set the cat down on the table, straightening its limp body. Phoebe tilted its head back, grabbing one of the small kitchen knives beside her and pulling it close to the neck of the deceased feline. She drew an extended cut down the larynx. She pulled back the flesh of the cat's neck, severing the vocal cords. Phoebe smiled, grabbing a needle to sew the wound closed.

The girl looked in awe of her handiwork, setting it on a shelf on the other side of the basement.

"Now, isn't that better? I **fixed** you."

Phoebe shot up in her bed, her hands clammy as she wrapped them around her legs. She had been having vivid dreams of her childhood, but she could never tell if her dreams had happened. Whether that cat was **alive** or dead, or even a real animal. She can't remember much of her childhood at all. Her parents were never around. She only remembers '**playing**' with the stray animals in the woods by her house.



She swung her legs over the bed, her feet touching her apartment's cold, hardwood floors. Her flat was a mess, fast food littering any concave surface. Clothes were strewn across the floor, and she couldn't tell what was clean or dirty in half-filled hampers.

**Her room was starting to smell.**

Phoebe dragged her hands across her face, sighing. She needed to get away. The routine was pounding at her skull as the brunette pulled her body to work every day. Her bones felt heavy as she put her uniform on, staring at her pale reflection in the mirror, slowly covering the scars that littered her body. She was going to be late for work. Again.

She saw Jane waiting for her by the bus stop, like usual. Her shiny black hair reflected in the sun. Jane looked up, a warm smile spread across her face as she welcomed Phoebe. She sat quietly next to Jane, who immediately started rambling about something. Phoebe just waited in her own silence as she nodded along to whatever Jane was going on about.

"So you'll go with me?" Jane asked, snapping Phoebe out of her daze.

"...Sure," she muttered. She didn't know what she agreed to do, but it was better than anything she was doing at the moment.

"Great! I will send you the location!" Jane smiled gleefully, standing up with a bounce as she dragged Phoebe on the bus.

This outing was apparently something Jane had been looking forward to for some time, having planned out everything they would do while roughing it in the woods. The fresh scent of cedar wood was a welcome change from the musty smell of her small apartment. The camping was a definite mood lift to Phoebe's spirits. Part of that fact was due to Jane pulling Phoebe around every which way, excited for every new thing they would see.

By the third day, they were running out of food, Phoebe's bag being considerably lighter than she remembered. They walked for what seemed like hours. Judging by where the sun was, they probably had. She was exhausted, her muscles weak as she slowly threaded on, her mind shifting in and out of a daze. She hardly noticed the figure behind her.

Phoebe stirred, squinting her eyes at the fluorescent light above her. She looked next to her, seeing Jane passed out in the same position. Phoebe's mind started to race, looking around at the thick walls enclosing them in some sort of cabin. Her mind raced with a flurry of curses as rope chafed her tiny wrists. She scooted her chair closer to Jane, knocking into the other woman. Phoebe winced at the noise, her body tensing as she waited for footsteps, her shoulders relaxing as she prepared for the subsequent impact she was going to make. She reared her head back, butting Jane in her skull.

Jane jolted forward, cursing as she almost toppled, chair and all. Phoebe shushed her.

The other girl's eyes soon switched from anger to fear as she made the same conclusion Phoebe did. Jane started to panic, struggling every which way. Phoebe once again shushed her, pointing her head towards the door beside them. Jane nodded slowly, her chest still heaving in panic.

Phoebe tensed with what little muscle she had, trying to loosen the ropes around her wrists. Her arms strained against the fibers. She could feel the rough material rubbing her skin raw. The familiar burning sensation trailed across the surface of her body, bringing tears to her eyes as it dug into her flesh like teeth. She started to slowly pull half her hand through, the rope scraping across her tender hands as she endured the slow pulling of the fibers. Phoebe took a calming breath, hoping to steady the pounding rhythm in her head.

She needed to focus. Jane wasn't in any proper position to help, so it was up to her and her alone. Her hand still burned, but she kept picking at the knot bounding her hand. It loosened slightly, allowing her to wiggle her right hand.

The thud of steel-toed boots echoed through the cabin, Phoebe's mind raced as she sat frozen in place. Jane silently cried next to her, mumbling whatever she could to distract her. The mysterious figure stepped into her sight. He was much less frightening than she imagined. He looked around average height for a caucasian male. He also looked to be around 30 and nothing was interesting about him. He was simply average.

Phoebe straightened her posture, narrowing her eyes at him. She knew what she was going to do. She was not frightened. She was **enraged**.

The man stepped forward with malice as he reached for her. Phoebe clenched her teeth, her body tensing as it prepared for impact. She kicked her leg up with all the

might her body could handle, kneeing the man hard in his groin. A pained squeak escaped his mouth as he dropped the weapon he was holding, his hands flying towards his crotch.

Phoebe gave a final tug at her wrist, freeing it from the ropes grasp. She hastily jumped up, vision blurring from her lack of food and water in the last few days. She grabbed the old rusted pipe the man had been carrying, swinging it into the back of his knees. The man fell to the floor, confused. The brunette struck again, bringing the pipe to the man's face. His nose splattered with blood, the bridge now crooked. Phoebe's blood boiled as she repeatedly bashed the man's face in with the pipe, occasionally hitting his neck or sternum by accident. Her arms ached with strain as she continued to bring the metal down over and over again. The man's body lay limp on the ground, his face completely unrecognizable. Blood streaked down Phoebe's body, her kidnapper's broken, battered body under her feet. Jane let a sob escape her lips. Blood splattered on the side of her body as tears streamed down her face. Phoebe's body was shaking, and her hands trembled as her vision faded into black.

Phoebe woke up with her stomach growling, which she was accustomed to. Your body can only be satisfied with random mushrooms and berries for a while before you need more. Phoebe was starting to spiral, maybe from the tension between her and Jane. Perhaps it was the hunger eating away at her body; maybe it was the **smell** that wafted into her nose every time she exited the cabin. The fragrance she was so familiar with, the **scent** she **craved**.

Phoebe dragged her legs to the kitchen, grabbing the meat cleaver on the wall, the blade shimmering in the window light. She slowly entered Jane's room, the door slowly creaking open. She wrapped her slender fingers around Jane's wrist, pulling her off the bed. Jane's head hit the hard floor, startling her awake. Her eyes widened as she saw Phoebe standing over her; the brunette clenched her teeth, digging her heel into Jane's sternum.

"I'm sorry," Phoebe deadpanned, swinging the blade down onto Jane's neck. The edge stopped as it reached her spine, Phoebe getting down on her knees as she sawed away at the bone. She wiped the blood out of her eyes, sighing as she moved away from Jane's neck. It laid there limply, like some sort of grotesque bobblehead.

She dragged the cleaver over Jane's thigh, cutting a chunk of her flesh from the bone. Phoebe sank her teeth into the beef-like texture, the meat melting in her mouth as she ravaged the flesh of Jane's corpse. Her hunger only grew as she ate, her body contorted in size. Her skin paled, almost becoming a transparent shade of white. Her bones protruded from her frame, and an abhorrent noise sounded from her body as she grew several feet in height. Her razor-sharp teeth now tearing the flesh from Jane's corpse as quickly as paper.

It licked the carcass's bones, craving a feed once more. No matter how much it hunted, killed, or feasted. It was still hungry. **It would always hunger.**

## A RACE RAN, A WIN STOLEN, A HEADACHE THAT KILLS IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE...OKAY I'M GETTING OFF TRACK

Olivia VanTreese, 17

My heart is beating in my chest so hard I can feel it pounding in my head. I breathe in rhythm with the internal punching, caging the pain that pumps me up. Pumping my legs. My mind's racing. All of me is. Racing and running but my mind is too fast, the rest of me can't catch up. Projecting a future I can't quite reach.

It's so frustrating. To push as hard as you can, to feel a change. My legs hurt, then they're numb. My breathing speeds up, then hitches. My heart pounds louder than anything else, then it stops. Or it feels like it. Feels, but does not deliver. Because my pace doesn't change. The surroundings rush past in a blur of red and gray. The trees are not red though, that's just the last thing I saw. Stuck in my mind while I'm stuck in time. I can't run to escape it, I can't go any faster. I can't stop either. So, heart pounding, head pulsing, and legs pushing. I go on like my life depends on it.

\*

I died. No, but my hope did. Right as I saw her shadow. Heard her breath, louder than my own. How was that possible? The thumping of her feet drowned out the thumping of my heart. How could I have been so dramatic? I pushed but she pulled. Pulled ahead. Pulled everything with her, except me. Mind on the track, eyes at my back. For a while at least. Now it's me staring at her back, sneaking up on her, getting closer, hand outstretched. But unlike earlier no moves are made, I don't pass her. Instead, I pat her back. "Good job out there!" Smiles delivered, smiles received. She tells me she thought I had her for sure. I told her I thought the same.

I didn't though. I don't. I don't have anything. Not a win. Not a medal. Not a prize, reward, award. Nothing. Three years of running and nothing to show for it. Good memories? Sure. Here and there. But I need a physical prize, satisfaction, recognition, compensation. Something for giving my all. Something for the three years of giving everything. Everything except up.

\*

Something for something, all I have is nothing. Nothing to my name.  
I give all I can, I try with all my might. But still nothing to my name.

\*

I want a prize, a ribbon, a medal, a trophy, a certificate. Maybe that girl's head on a stick.

I'm off the track but my head is still pounding. It hurts so bad I can't see straight. Can't *think* straight. That girl got in my way, and blocked my view! Left me in the dust, dirty and sweaty. It made me mad, which should've made me run faster. Things sped up for sure, but not the right things. Locked in, ready to win. *Thump thump, huff huff*. I think I slowed down actually, the tears obscuring my view and it's hard to go on if you're not sure where you're going. She was sure though. Sure she was gonna pass me, that's why she didn't speed up in the beginning! When I shot out like a rocket and she followed behind like the flames launching me above and beyond. Except she knew I couldn't go beyond. She knew she'd be above. And in the end, she'd won.

Stuck on this track, running laps. Getting nowhere. Getting nothing. Stuck in this cage I need release. I need to be free. On a one-track mind is always said in a negative tone. So why run on a one-track road? Carve your own path, run out of the box. I think I'll do just that. I'm not giving up. But I'm no longer giving. I'm taking.

\*

We're together again. Running side by side this time. It's just practice so that's why. The sound of our feet hitting the ground in union similar to those of horses. A sound I like. It drowns the drum beating in my head, the subconscious hits that never stopped. A beat I've gotten used to. A beat I live to, move to, listen to. The beat may be clear, but the lyrics are jumbled. Running clears my head though so that's why I'm here. Running with the enemy. I am, but so is she. I keep going, keep pushing. I stay on track. On the track. I run and I give. But I lose every time.

\*

I've figured it out. I don't win and I don't get. I'm the opposite. Instead, I lose and I give. But it's not my all, my everything, that I give. No, it's just a small part of me. Something I must want gone. Why else would I keep coming back? Why else would I keep trying? So I lose but this time with grace. With eased patience. I give and they

take and maybe I give a little easier nowadays. So what.



Many races later, I feel empty. I've given it my all, but I'm not sure to what. I've lost track. I've lost *track*. Nothing to my name and nothing to my sport. I don't even care about it now. Nothing to my name, not because I didn't win anything but because I've given it all already. Patted that girl's back so many damn times, I can't pat my own anymore. A pat on the back is something athletes need. Pat on the back for a positive performance, the acknowledgement, and appreciation. Pat on the back to disrupt the negative thoughts of one's dwindling performance.

No one ever patted my back. All my negative thoughts sat in my head cause no one patted my back to shake them off. All my sitting negative thoughts jostled as I ran. That's why my head was pounding. Not because of my heart, no, but because of the negative thoughts. Jostled while I ran they jumbled and jumped and hit around inside my head until one got stuck. Stuck in the slot of the projector seated in my mind. Hit play and a movie played. A suggestion, so wonderfully produced! Background music that's enchanting and repetitive. My negative thought might be onto something.



Rebirth and renewal, I'm a new being. With a new meaning. I'm going off course, I'm getting off track. I'm running harder than ever before. So fast, no one can tell. I look the same, I act the same. But something changed inside my brain. Stay on the track and keep passing the same view, trapped on this loop and my mind is too. Go off track and open your mind. Running so fast, I can't wait to leave this life behind.

The beat in my head is gone. It's transferred to my feet. Walking, no, running to the beat of my own drum. A medal is only metal. A ribbon is just a piece of fabric. Your win is fabricated. Just cause she beat me and was faster this one time, doesn't mean she's better than me. What if I catch up? What if I'm faster next time? Her win was temporary, her prize should be too!



I've got a medal now. Most would say there's no excitement in not earning it. But I've earned this! Do you know how hard it is to steal a medal from the bag of the fastest girl? What if the rest of her, beside her legs, were fast too? If she'd seen me, I wouldn't have been able to outrun her. This medal is proof of that. But anyways I've got it now,

around my neck. Just for a few minutes. Just to get a feel. It's a tad heavy. It weighs me down and grounds me. The weight from my shoulders moved to around my neck.

My mind is clear, it's just me in here. And now it's time for the second act. Jealousy does not drive me, justice does. A temporary win deserves a temporary prize. A temporary winner deserves a temporary life. I will win. Permanently. And my prize will last forever.

\*

I'm in track but I'm off the track.

\*

We ran together again. Like horses in a field. Her suggestion, she appreciates what I do. The view off the track, the freedom of running wild. No medals are mentioned. She's humble like that. A nice girl really. Fast, smart, kind. The chemicals in her brain are better than mine. It's colder now, not too cold. That perfect cold where you can run comfortably and in perfect condition. It's not too cold, the field is still green. The flowers still pursue, now they just sway with the breeze. The weather is not too cold.

The metal isn't too cold either. It's the perfect cold, a comfortable reminder. Others say it weighs heavy but I say it makes me feel lighter. Today is a good day, things are lining up. My knife to her neck for example. She had sprinted. To the flowers. She runs for what she wants, I do too. She pulled ahead. Pulled everything with her, except me. Now I stare at her back, I sneak up on her, and get close, hand outstretched.

\*

A move was made. A movie was played. In my mind and a part of my life. By me this time. Our race is over, I've crossed the line. We're in a field but not in the middle of nowhere. My mind was too focused, too in the zone. I didn't realize the whole neighborhood was home.

My heart is beating in my chest so hard I can feel it in my head.

What a familiar feeling.

I'm on the run again, another race against time.

Another life on the line, except this time it's mine.



## MISS NO-FACE

Athena Gadiwalla, 15

“Michael, are you ready to leave?”

Yes, I was ready. I had been ready. For what seemed like an eternity I had been waiting for her to finish getting ready so we could walk together to school like we always do. Anna Marie came running down the wide marble steps with one stocking up and one falling down to her ankles. Her normally perfectly smooth auburn hair was tangled and her shoes were untied. She looked very not-put-together for someone who had spent an hour getting ready. But I chose not to judge her scattered look and instead asked her why she took so long.

“I was getting Clara ready! Today will be show and tell and I wouldn’t wanna look like I don’t take care of her.”

As much as I disagreed with the fact that a doll’s appearance had priority over her own, I didn’t really feel like arguing with an eight year old at the moment, so I grabbed my bag and helped her out the door.

The walk home from school was always my least favorite part of the day. At this time of the day the sun was always hidden behind the constant fog that plagued this city leaving my usually well-kept hair frizzy and matted. I didn’t really like the city. I enjoy the sheltered peaceful atmosphere of our home. Our parents were very wealthy, honestly I don’t think I’ve ever seen a house more expensive than ours. Even though our parents were at city hall all day every day working hard, they still made sure that we were entertained. Or at least, that I was entertained. My sister never took to the walls of books that made our personal library feel like a paradise. She was always looking out windows and running away to “explore” the streets of New Orleans whenever possible.

“Hey Michael, look out for that-”

Great, my shoes were soaked. As if it wasn’t muggy enough, a puddle had to get in my way. Over Anna’s obnoxious giggling I heard a low chuckle coming from the alley across the street. The voice sounded old and his laugh seemed to echo throughout

the entire block. And I, being the arrogant teenager that I was, marched my way across the street just to see what lowlife was laughing at my misfortune.

Once I crossed the street I could see through the shadows and was surprised by what I saw. There was a little pop-up shop sitting right in the middle of the alley. A tall, rather creepy-looking man was sitting behind a wooden counter. His skin was dark brown with the brightest green eyes you would only see on a cat. He had a slender figure with high cheekbones and a smile that curled in a smirk, probably as a result of seeing me stumble into the puddle. He was wearing a black hat adorned with feathers and a painted skull mask that only covered the top half of his face. He smelled of vanilla and bourbon. A crooked sign hung above his head. *Silas' Souvenir Shop*.

"And what exactly were you laughing at?" I remember asking in a disrespectful tone I now regret. The man seemed to find the annoyance in my voice amusing and started smiling even more.

"Would you like to buy something?" said the shopkeeper, completely ignoring my question. Just then I noticed the type of wares this man sold. I still don't know how I didn't see them before. There were dolls everywhere, hanging on threads and sitting on shelves. They were alluring, in a creepy yet enchanting way. I think what was creeping me out was how lifelike they were. They were glazed porcelain with perfectly painted eyes that had horrifying depth. Each doll was different in their own way, and I wondered if they were hand made.

"Would you like to buy one?" the man repeated. I guess I had been staring for a while.

"OH YES YES YES!" Anna screeched, barely able to contain herself. I shot her a dirty look. Anna had a thousand dolls. The man grinned a sinister grin and said he would grab one from the back and return shortly. I eyed her, trying to look as irritated as I could, but honestly I was curious to see what he was going to bring out. I guess I didn't realize how big the shop was because he disappeared behind some curtains for a few minutes.

The man came back holding a weird-looking doll. I mean all the dolls were weird, but this one was different. It was completely blank, no eyes, no mouth, no face at all actually. It had almost see-through white hair and a matching plain white dress.

“Here ya are, ain’t she pretty?” he said, holding the doll out to Anna, who grabbed it eagerly.

“What kind of doll is that?!” I asked him in a demanding tone. “Can’t she have a pretty one?!”

“This is the only one for sale,” he said.

I was at a loss for words. How can a shop full of dolls only be selling one? I thought he must be underestimating how much money we have, until I told him I’d be willing to pay for one of the pretty ones no matter the cost but he just repeated himself.

“Am I supposed to paint her myself?” Anna said, sounding confused.

“I wouldn’t,” he said with a sinister chuckle.

Just as I began to protest again, Anna cut me off, claiming she loved this one and she wanted me to buy it for her. I sighed knowing I couldn’t convince this child of anything and paid for it. Because even if it’s creepy, what harm could it do to get it for her? It would make her happy, I thought.

“Thank you for your business,” said the slender man with a curled smirk as he turned and disappeared behind the purple curtains once more.

Once we got home, poor old Clara was absolutely forgotten. Anna ran around the house with her new doll showing Mum and Dad as if she had won the Nobel Prize.

“I think Miss No-Face is my new favorite doll!” Anna said, beaming.

This was her nickname as she hadn’t named her yet, she claimed that the perfect name would come to her when the time was right. That thing even sat with us at the dinner table, had its own chair and everything. I think she loved it so much because it was so different from any other doll she’d ever had. It was definitely different. It felt like paper when I lifted it, even though it was made of porcelain. And the no-face thing was super weird. But I left it alone because it made my sister happy.

After dinner Anna declared she was going to bed. I said my goodnights and went to my room to work on my homework. I was working—well, trying to work, Anna’s snoring made it almost impossible to focus. Suddenly her snoring stopped. There was a deafening silence before I got up to go make sure she was alright. I opened her door

and turned on the light. There was nobody in the room, I thought maybe she got up to use the bathroom so I went to sit down on her bed to wait for her to get back. Something poked me as I eased onto her bed. I pulled back the sheets and froze, horrified by what I saw. The previously blank doll was now a spitting image of my sister. Her auburn hair was identical. Her sweet pink nightdress now replaced the previous white one. Her eyes were staring holes in my skull, her expression frozen in fear.

“ANNA’S GONE,” I screamed, running, almost falling down the stairs. I ran over to my parents who were at the dining table going over some paperwork.

“She’s gone and- and the doll- it was blank but now look at it! It looks exactly like her- the man- he- he has turned her into a doll!” I said, screaming through my tears. They looked at me dumbfounded by what I had just said.

“Honey what did you say?”

I repeated myself and my parents looked at each other and then ran up the stairs calling out for Anna. Once they had come to the conclusion that she wasn’t in the house they came back down to address what had happened. My father roughly grabbed my shoulders and interrogated me. I could barely form words. I can’t even remember what I had said. I was so distraught but I guess they understood enough because they immediately helped me to the car.

As we were driving to the police station I was looking out the window sobbing trying to replay today’s events in my head, trying to figure out how this possibly could have happened. Suddenly I saw him, standing on the corner of the building at the alley where I found him the first time. I immediately opened the door and jumped out. I heard my mother scream my name. God, my leg hurt so bad but I didn’t care. I just ran across the street chasing him as he dove into the pitch-dark alley. I ran to the end of the alley as fast as I could only to almost smack into a brick wall. There was nowhere to go. Yet he was gone. Nothing but the faint scent of vanilla and bourbon. I collapsed onto my knees, defeated. I don’t know how, but I knew I would never see him again.

I heard footsteps behind me. I spun around immediately, hopeful, only to see an officer standing behind me. I guess he was around when he saw me jump out of a car and run as fast I could because he seemed worried. He asked me if I was alright and I started rambling about what had happened. He stared at me like he saw a ghost. After a moment he shook himself back to reality and cautiously asked me where my parents were. He claimed he didn't see any man. I was screaming at the officer at this point. He told me he needed me to calm down and he was going to take me to a hospital where they would help me. No. No no no. I wasn't crazy. The voodoo man turned my sister into a doll. I know it. I could feel it.

My father's car pulled back around. I kept screaming. My parents apologized to the officer and basically had to drag my kicking and screaming body back into the car.

"Michael, I need you to stop. You don't know what you're saying. Nobody does." The tears in my mum's eyes made me stop screaming. Only my hyperventilated breathing could be heard as we were all silent for a moment.

"Now we are going to go to the police station and properly report Anna's kidnapping," my father said in a stern tone. Kidnapping?! They couldn't possibly think that's what happened. I know what I saw. But before I could protest again he told me that they were going to take me home first so I could calm down. I couldn't speak. I felt the guilt and the panic blocking my throat. I thought I was going to suffocate.

It felt like an eternity till we arrived back home. My parents walked me inside and sat me down on my bed. They said something about staying here till they got back. I couldn't hear them. I could just hear my own heartbeat racing echoing through my head. So I just sat there. Holding Anna. Sobbing.

Two weeks of investigation and still not a soul believed me. Two years later it was the same story. I was never the same boy again. I walked by that alley every day to and from school. Every day I looked. And every day I prayed that if there was a god he'd make that horrid man appear once more so I could reach over that counter and strangle him till he brought my darling sister back to life. He never did.

I had lost hope. But I still talked to Anna every day. I gave her a shelf of her own in the house and adorned it with fresh flowers from the fields daily. I made sure she never got dusty and that her hair was always brushed and her stockings were always pulled up. Everyone called me crazy, and they still do. Maybe I am crazy for taking care of a doll. I just think that maybe on the off chance she can still hear me and see me that she wouldn't want me to have forgotten about her. She wouldn't want me to move on. I don't think I ever will. After all, she always took such great care of her dolls.

## Z IS FOR ZOMBIE

Charlotte Palmer, 15

The wind whistled through the trees, making the boughs and branches sway. Colorful leaves fluttered down to softly alight upon the ground. In the distance a crow shrieked, while the moss-caked ground slowly cracked open.

“Hurry up!” Poppy yelled as I applied my makeup in the bathroom mirror.

“Just a second!” I yelled back. After putting on finishing touches, I opened the door. Poppy, having been leaning against it, stumbled into me.

“Let’s go already!”

I rolled my eyes. It was seven P.M. Nobody was going to run out of candy anytime soon, but apparently Poppy didn’t care. She tugged at my arm and screamed in my ear.

“I’m coming! Jeez!”

Poppy adjusted her fairy wings and the satchel that hung by her side.

We left the house at exactly 7:16. Poppy skipped along beside me. She was dressed as a fairy from head to toe, with glittering shoes, a tutu, tights, and fairy wings. I, on the other hand, had on black jeans, suspenders, a black and white striped shirt, and to top it all off, face paint and a beret. I had chosen a mime for Halloween. Mostly because it was what I could cobble together from my small array of clothes.

We went to house after house, ringing doorbells and banging on doors.

“Trick or treat!” we chorused.

As the moon rose so did the candy in our bags. We heard the cawing of crows in the distance. A few minutes later we came upon what seemed to be the source of the cawing, a graveyard that lay on the outskirts of our neighborhood.

“Boo!” My best friend Max said in my ear. I screamed and turned around. He was in an inflatable Garfield getup, and dangled a bag of candy from his fingers.

“Max!” Poppy ran and hugged him with all her might. He swung her in a circle, feet flying out behind her.

“Come on!” He said, gently setting my litter sister down. “Check out the graveyard!” I hesitated, “Are you sure?”

Max nodded, "Of course! That's what Halloween's all about!"

Gripping Poppy's hand, I led her slowly to the gate that led to the cemetery. Taking a deep breath, I pushed on it. It didn't budge.

Max laughed, "You've got to go *over* it silly, not through!"

"You mean we're *trespassing*?!" I said, shocked at the idea. I'd never broken a rule at school, much less broken a *law*.

"No, the graveyard's open to the public, my great-grandma is buried in there!"

"C'mon Mae, pleeeeeease!" begged Poppy, quivering her lip and widening her eyes.

I hesitated but finally agreed. Me and Max boosted Poppy over the fence. She landed quietly on the other side. Max held out his hand but I shook him off, Instead I elegantly swung myself up and over. Max followed. I crept through the graveyard, jumping at the smallest sounds, and glancing at the slightest movements.

"Loosen up!" Max said, strolling in front of us, "It's all good, there's no zombies or witches or vampires out here."

I put on a brave face and shook off my fear the best I could. "I'm completely loose. I'm so loose I'm about to fall apart."

He looked at me skeptically but said nothing. CRACK! We hear from behind a tree. I nearly jumped out of my suspenders. "What was that?"

"Rabbit probably," Max replied breezily, "maybe a fox."

"I d-d-don't think so." I slowly raised my arm to point at something creeping out from behind a tombstone. A shriveled arm jerked about wildly, followed by a head and torso.

Poppy screamed and clutched onto me so hard I feared I might pass out. Max turned around and laughed loudly. "It's fine!" He said, "just a costume."

Inches from his feet, the ground ripped open. Dirt-covered hands shot out and started clawing, scrabbling to find purchase on the loose dirt. Max flinched ever so slightly. Nudging closer to us he whispered, "Just a costume..."

I picked up a branch from the ground and wielded it ferociously. Pushing Poppy behind me, I poked the arm and head that peeked out from behind the tombstone, hearing a cry of pain. I continued my attack. Noticing me, Max picked up a stick and started shoving the hands back underground.

Poppy shivered behind me, her arms wrapped tightly around my waist. I let out a



guttural battle cry and charged behind the gravestone.

“Don’t hurt me!” the shriveled flesh yelled. I skidded to a stop. The zombie lowered their hands and glanced at me fearfully. “Just because I’m dead doesn’t mean I can’t feel it when you bludgeon me with that.”

“I’m s-sorry,” I stuttered, pushing Poppy further behind me. “Max, stop!”

Max looked up at me and ceased his attack on the hands.

“Why?”

“We aren’t monsters,” the zombie by me said. “Despite how we are portrayed in movies and books. We just want to take a night to stretch our legs. You don’t know how uncomfortable and stiff you get laying in those coffins, it’s terrible! But where are my manners!? I’m John, and this here-” he walked to the zombie reaching up from beneath the grave. John took her by the wrist and hoisted her out. “This is Mellie.”

A little girl around Poppy’s age brushed the dirt from her dress and fixed her hair back. Smiling sweetly at us she said, “Come join the party!” With that she skipped away and disappeared into the fog shrouding the cemetery.

John winked at us, “Yes, come!” He too strolled away into the vapor.

I looked at Max; he shrugged, “Might as well.”

Poppy tugged on my arm, “Let’s go!”

I glanced down at her. If she wasn’t scared, I couldn’t be either. We quickly ran to catch up with John. He saw us coming and slowed his lurching steps.


He led us on a winding path through the tombstones and overturned graves until I started to hear Monster Mash playing. The smoke cleared on the strangest sight I’d ever seen. Zombies lurched about, shamelessly popping their hips and waving their arms. Several tables were set out. Fruits and candies and pastries and bowls of punch lay on them. A DJ booth was set up. The zombie DJ took off his head and did tricks with it, throwing it up in the air and catching it.

Max grinned at me. I couldn’t help myself; I smiled back. Poppy ran over to the little girl Mellie, and they started skipping around together. John went to join a cluster of people about his age, but all clearly from different decades and centuries. One lady zombie had a cute poodle skirt on and was conversing with a man in a powdered wig. Another young woman was decked out in an entire ball gown, complete with gloves. Max got in line for the food. He stood behind a stately old man in a tux.

I gazed at the wonderfully strange sight. The different clothes, the food, the fact that they were ZOMBIES. I couldn't believe I'd ever been scared of them. Beaming, I went to join the festivities.

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Open this tome  
and you'll find thifty  
shivery tales that have  
clawed their way up  
through the minds of  
Tulsa County students  
and found a dark home  
in these pages.

Reader Beware!



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