

SCHUSTERMAN-BENSON LIBRARY
PRESENTS

SPOOKY STORIES 2023



Schusterman-Benson Library

presents

Spooky Stories
•2023•



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Design, illustrations & editing by Amy Kemper, Schusterman-Benson Library
Sensitivity reading by Robin Taylor, Brookside Library

‘Mirrors’ © 2023 Ava Blankenship
‘The Curse of the Red Moon’ © 2023 Neko Burnam
‘The Woman from the Bush’ © 2023 Peyton Chartier
‘Spind’ © 2023 Kayla Coffee
‘The Hallway that Never Ends’ © 2023 Zach Costa
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‘The Riverford Cult’ © 2023 Danika West

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FOREWORD

The Schusterman-Benson Library would like to thank those who made this year's Spooky Story writing contest possible—from the aspiring writers themselves, to the caregivers and teachers who encourage them, and of course the Tulsa City-County Library staff who lend their time and consideration to this project!

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.

Content warnings are also available at the end of this book, so you can enjoy these stories safely—see p.140.

Of course, if you're not scared of anything...*just turn the page.*

* * * * *

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.



SPIND

Kayla Coffee, 10

Nobody ever tells me why I can't look outside after dark. They just say, "Don't look outdoors after dark, Cercile," or, "Shut the drapes, Cercile," and my least favorite, "Follow rules, Cercile." It's sooo annoying. I roll my eyes just thinking about it.

On the night of my eighth birthday, I decide to make my own decisions for once. Ignoring the rules, I, for the first time, leave my window open.

I sit in the window seat and look out over the forest of tall, dark trees. They are black and dark brown with the faintest glimmers of dark green leaves prodding tentatively at the blackness. All looks normal. Why would they keep this natural beauty away from me, I wonder.

Wait, what's that? Clusters of eight, unblinking, ruby-red eyes stare with malevolence in their dark pupils. My mouth opens to shriek but snaps closed again with a silken rope binding it shut at the same moment another rope tethers my arms and legs to my sides. Then, I'm dragged silently through the open window to the spiders. They are enormous versions of the black furry Lady Jaws spiders my mom squashes on our kitchen floor. They drag me through the woods.

While they are still dragging me, I make a surprising revelation. The silk's not sticky! Then, I remember a book I'd read the summer before just as they drag me into a very large clearing. It said spiders can choose which type of silk they...

All thoughts drop from my mind as I notice a gigantic web spanning three-quarters of the clearing, and it is covered in spiders. Thousands, maybe even millions, of them. Some spiders unwrap just my limbs, and others then spread me out on a bare part of the web. Unlike earlier, this silk is sticky. Then one large spider steps forward and sinks her fangs into my arm. I brace for pain, but all I feel is icy cold. I feel a change setting in. The spider vanishes.

I can see my reflection in the eyes of the spiders around me, as my eyes roll back to reveal blood-red irises on the backs of my eyes. Then, I feel something wriggling inside me. It shoves its limbs into mine and settles in. Spinnerets rise from my back and shaggy fur sprouts from my body.

The spiders say in hollow tones, “Welcome, new spind.” Someone from the village calls their dog indoors, and that is the last moment I’m me.

THE DEEP DEEP END

Haley Rose Mapp, 8

Once upon a time there were three kids, and two of them dared one of them to go to the deepest part of the lake and grab some mud. And the girl they dared accepted that dare.

She walked to the lake and got in the water and swam very very very deep. She heard something and turned around and she saw a sea monster with ferocious teeth and really really really sharp claws.

She yelled so hard and she swam as fast as she could towards the surface.

The monster was following her and the monster grabbed her ankle. She was trying to escape from his slimy scaly hand.

The monster tugged on the girl down to the bottom of the sea.

She was about to run out of breath. The monster kept pulling and pulling.

She ran out of breath and she was never seen again.

THE CURSE OF THE RED MOON

Neko Burnam, 9

It was a dark and stormy night. The wind was howling. A 9-year-old girl was trying to sleep but the storm was too loud. She tried and tried but she couldn't. She finally snapped and screamed "I HATE STORMS!" and something very strange happened. The storm that had been keeping her awake suddenly stopped. But she didn't have time to think, because something or someone pulled her from her bed.

The next thing she knew, she woke up in a strange forest. She didn't know what to do, so she got up and started walking. And walking. And walking. And then something weird happened: the trees started turning purple. The grass turned black. And most strangely, the moon turned blood red.

Suddenly, what seemed like ten thousand fuzzy little monsters came running. Something happened and she blacked out.

The next thing she knew she felt ropes wrapped around her ankles and wrists. She tried to scream but nothing came out. She opened her eyes and saw all the little fuzzy people talking to each other. She realized that she had been kidnapped. Then they realized that she had woken up. All of them started calming down. The leader whispered into one of their ears. He went behind the leader's chair and brought a human boy out.

She recognized the boy, but couldn't remember from where. He had blonde wispy hair and looked about twenty years old. The monster who had taken him out yelled at him in some sort of mysterious language. Then the boy spoke. He explained that the leader told her that she had been kidnapped by the Rongos.

The Rongos were a group of children from 1523 who went missing on a very stormy night, just like the one that had been going on when she got kidnapped. He said that the reason she had gotten kidnapped was because on dark and stormy nights, the spirits of the Rongos come and haunt a child and make them extremely mad, to make sure they scream. And when they do, they pull them from their sheets. And bring them into the forest. Then take them captive. The reason they do this is because they want to torture the people who stopped their playing. They believe that revenge is the only

way to find a way to go back to the human realm. They have been trying for five hundred years.

She knew if she could find a way back, which would be almost impossible, she would have to get herself untied. While she had been thinking of all of this, she hadn't realized that someone else had gotten tied up. The strange thing was she knew who it was. Bella Cricket, the most popular girl in Ms. Branson's 4th grade class. Bella looked at her like she was some type of animal. Bella had long black hair and wore a black and white nightgown. She appeared as though she was about ten, even though she was only nine.

Bella looked over at her. "LILLY!" she cried. The whole room went silent. Bella's face went white with horror. The leader yelled in the mysterious language.

Lilly suddenly remembered who the guy was. Thomas, her best friend's older brother who went to college two years ago. Lilly realized that he had not come home for Thanksgiving or Christmas, spring break or even summer. Lilly decided that if she was going to escape, she had to bring Bella and Thomas with her. She looked at Bella, then Thomas. Bella's face was still very pale.

Lilly remembered a knot-tying class she took during the summer. She recognized the knot. She slowly started to untie it. When she finally got them undone, Lilly decided that this was the time for action. She looked at Bella. Bella looked back at her. Then Lilly looked at Thomas. They all knew what had to be done. Lilly decided she was going to make a distraction so they could escape. So she yelled, "Come on over here and try to get me!"

She spied a little black door. And as Lilly was yelling, she jumped up on to her seat and started to wave her hands in the direction of the small black door. Bella and Thomas looked at her with confused faces. Then they realized what she was doing. Bella untied herself as fast as she could. Then she tiptoed towards Thomas. She started to untie him. His knots were much more complicated than hers and Lilly's. Bella finally finished up untying the knots.

Lilly saw them crawling through the tiny door so she started moving little by little towards the door. She pointed to the other side of the room to make a distraction. Then she crept out of the small door.

The red moon was still out. The grass was still black. And the trees were still purple.

Then she saw Bella and Thomas. They were huddled under a giant tree colored deep deep purple.

Being the prankster she was, Lilly wanted very much to go and surprise them. But she felt they had had enough scares for one night, so she just walked up and said “Hi” like a normal person. They weirdly waved at her. And then both Thomas and Bella's faces went white.

“What, did I forget to brush my teeth?” Lilly said, laughing, but she could tell something was up. So Lilly looked behind her and saw that all of the fuzzy people were standing right behind her. So she signaled to Thomas and Bella to start running. They ran, and ran, and ran until they saw a giant cliff. Lilly's heart stopped. What was she going to do? She could either fall off a cliff or be captured by the fuzzy people.

It was the most terrifying choice of her life but she knew the answer. She saw Bella, her eyes were wide open. She was terrified. So was Thomas.

She ran to the cliff. If she was gonna die, it would be cool.

She jumped off, but right as she was about to hit the ground, Lilly woke up. In her house.

She turned on her lamp.

The lamp was blood red...

WILLY THE GHOST

Jocelyn Hancock, 10

Once, not so long ago, there was a gigantic mansion haunted with ghosts. The smallest was Willy. You see, Willy was so small and the mansion was big, so he did not take up much space. There were thousands of witches, ghosts, and goblins, so Willy was barely noticed at all.

“Hmm... maybe if I do something cool then I will be noticed,” thought Willy. Willy set out on an adventure to be noticed. He found a town and thought he could stay there.

Later that day, Willy saw a sign that said there was a haunted house contest. “This is so cool! I’m signing up right now,” screamed Willy. He floated excitedly all the way back to the mansion to tell everyone what he did. But nobody listened. He was about to give up but then, Willy had an idea. He would make posters! With the posters, everyone in the mansion will know what Willy was doing.

Soon the witches, ghosts, and goblins saw the posters and got busy right away, making sure the mansion seemed extra spooky. The day of the contest drew nearer and nearer. Finally the day came.

The contest judge came to check out just how spooky the mansion was. He walked up to the house and the door creaked open. He thought it was just a special effect. As he went around the house, he saw witches, ghosts, and goblins. He thought they were all in great costumes (not realizing that they were actual witches, ghosts, and goblins). The judge liked this house better than all the other ones he saw.

“Who signed up for this?” he asked. Nobody answered, until Willy floated up. “Nice costume and nice house, you win,” stated the judge. Everyone cheered happily!

Willy wanted to say he was not in a costume, but he did not. All the witches, ghosts and goblins came up and cheered even more. And Willy was finally noticed.

THE END

THE HALLWAY THAT NEVER ENDS

Zach Costa, 11

Chapter 1: School to Bus to Factory to Doom

Sam groaned as he typed words on his Chromebook. He was very bored. Sam looked around. His classmates all stared blankly at their screens. *Like zombies*, he thought, grinning as he imagined zombies staring blankly at computer screens.

“All right!” Mr. Rorret said. “Time for the field trip.” There was near silence in the room. One kid halfheartedly said, “Yay...”

The reason for the unenthusiasm was that the field trip was to a cheese factory. The factory smelled like cows, bacteria, and sweat. But school regulations are school regulations, and so Sam got in the line along with his other twenty-six classmates and walked out of Faulkner Elementary. And as Sam got on the bus, he was thinking, *I could be going to the beach. I could be at my house, playing Call of Duty or Plants Versus Zombies. Even Tetris would be better than staring at machinery covered with gunk.*

But, as it turned out, going to the factory would be a bit more exciting than Call of Duty. But Sam didn’t know this. He stared bleakly out the window as his fellow fifth graders howled and jumped and watched TikTok. So the howling, jumping, phone-staring bus line went on. Next to him, a big fifth grader was leaning across the seat and telling three small kids a scary story.

“And then...a monster ate his head!” The small kids trembled and gulped. Sam rolled his eyes, then leaned across the seat towards the kids and said, “You actually believe this?”

The small kids just sat there, but the big kid said, “The ones who don’t believe the story are the ones who get killed first!” Sam just smirked and said, “Oh yeah. And that happens every day. Tell me, how many kids do you know of who mysteriously disappeared and were never heard of again?”

“Oh, shut up,” said the big kid, who now had a sour expression on his face. Sam just smiled.

“HEY!” shouted Mr. Rorret. Sam jumped. “NO FOOD ON THE BUS!”

Sam turned around to look at the unlucky snacker. It was a weaselly-looking kid

He was falling. It was over. He closed his eyes and waited. **WHUMP!**

He wasn't dead. He opened his eyes. Nothing. He cautiously got up and bumped his head on the ceiling. *I thought I fell through the hole. Man, Maxary is awful.* He felt the ceiling and realized it was carpeted. He felt around him and realized three things. He was in a tunnel, it was about three feet in every direction, and it was carpeted. He shivered as waves of claustrophobia spread around him. He then opened his eyes. He saw nothing. He looked around. There!

At the far end of the tunnel, he saw a faint glow. He started walking towards it. But then he stopped. He heard a snicker. He whipped his head around to look backward. Now, just like the tunnel ahead of him, there was a faint glow. But the glow was red. And it was coming from two points.

He screamed in abject terror. He turned around and started running. "Wait," said a raspy, metallic voice. "I just want to..."

"Want t-to what-t-t?" asked Sam, quivering in terror.

"WANT TO RIP YOUR LIVER OUT AND SHRED YOUR FLESH!!!"

Sam resumed sprinting. He heard **CLANK, CLANK, CLANK** behind him.

"YES-S-S-S," said the rusted thing.

"Nooo!" wailed Sam as a metal claw grabbed him by his neck. He twisted around to look at the metal thing. It looked like a metal person with spiders growing out of it.

He yelped in horror. The robot said, "Oh, don't worry. This will only hurt for five seconds." The robot opened his mouth wider and wider.

"What-t-t are you?" asked Sam. The robot twisted around, still keeping a firm grip on Sam. A panel on his side declared that he was CYBORG ORGANISM CREATED FOR KILLING. Sam began sweating profusely, and stalled the robot by saying, "How did you fit in this tunnel?"

The robot began shrinking, and with a resounding CLANK, he turned into a tiny tank. But the most important part was that Sam could now get away. So he began running, but was grabbed by the robot again. *Well, I guess this is it,* thought Sam.

BAM! The robot toppled over and smashed to the ground. "What exactly..." began Sam, staring in shock at a kid holding a taser. The kid also was wearing a backpack stuffed with... something.

"Hi," said the kid. "I'm Eli."

Chapter 2: Takis and Tasers

In a daze, Sam followed Eli down the hall. There was a trapdoor in the wall behind where the robot first appeared. Eli said, "Takis rule," into the speaker next to the trapdoor. The trapdoor slid open.

"Welcome to the Hub," Eli said. It was a big metal room with a compass on the floor. On the north wall was a bunch of computers and an Xbox 360. On the west wall were a bunch of different tasers and weapons. And on the east wall were an uncountable amount of Takis.

"Wow," whispered Sam. There was also a bed next to the east wall. Sam and Eli had come in through the south wall. Eli got on the computer and started typing.

"So... now what?" asked Sam. Eli turned around and looked at him like he was crazy.

"Now what, he says?" Eli exclaimed. "Where is the questioning, the general confusion, the helplessness? Don't you wonder what this IS!?!?!?"

Dimly, Sam remembered that there were rumors that Eli was crazy. That was halfway true. Living without any form of human contact other than getting yelled at by a teacher had had its effect on Eli. He was also unhealthy due to the extensive consumption of Takis. Sam realized something. Eli's eyes were reptilian. What should have been the whites were green, and his pupils were vertical slits. Sam yelped in shock and staggered backwards.

"This is my true form," said Eli.

"HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?!!" Sam was stunned.

Eli sighed. "Observe." Eli walked over to the Takis pile. He pushed the spicy snacks away, and there was a door that said LAB. Eli tapped against it four times, and it disappeared. Sam managed to not yell with shock. He calmly said, "So that's where you got lizard eyes?"

"Yes," said Eli. So then, they walked inside the lab.

Chapter 3: Eli Explains

I once was a normal boy. That was, I don't know, maybe kindergarten? Anyways, so we went on a field trip. I remember pure joy, suddenly gone as the teachers told us we were going to a factory. So, of course, I throw a tantrum, right? And then, Mr. Rorret took me to his office. By the way, Mr. R. is evil. What is "Rorret" backwards? Terror. He threatened me, saying he would throw me in the private room and feed me to his pet, Cy.Org.Cr.For.Kill. Or Cyrus, as I like to call him. So he throws me in this dungeon, and I waste no time in running away from Cy. I jump in this trapdoor and build my base. Now, you might wonder, *How did you build a base with almost nothing?*

The answer is this. When I attack and defeat Cy, a portal opens and it leads to my old house. The reason I could defeat Cy at age six was that he was untested. Whenever I defeat him, he upgrades. That takes me to the outside world and I stay there for twelve hours. When twelve hours are up, I teleport back inside my base. At one point in this back-and-forth miserable life, I found out how to time it right, so I walked into a police station, stole a taser, and teleported back right as they were about to get me. I did this many times, with many different things, including Takis. This lab is the reason that I have lizard eyes. I tried to turn myself into a giant lizard.

Chapter 4: And So it Ends

"A giant lizard?!??" Sam was staring at Eli in shock. "That could never work!"

"Actually, it could. However, the controlled system shutdown isn't calibrated to solar time," said Eli.

"Can you explain it in terms where I can understand?" asked Sam.

Eli said, "If you can't understand what I just said, there is no way to understand." And with that, he walked over to the Xbox 360 and inserted *Combat Evolved: Halo Anniversary*.

"Ooh, can I play?" asked Sam.

"Yes, but you might not be able to keep up." There was a loud crashing noise. Sam and Eli turned around, and there was Cy.

"CAN I PLAY?"

THE END

BLOODY NIGHTS

Braelynn Huerta, 9

There I was, with a forehead as sweaty as a turkey on Thanksgiving, hearing blood-curdling screams from left to right. It all started on October 31, 2023 when I was on a road trip to go to the Halloween festival in Juneau, Alaska. There were gigantic clouds of smoke forming in the air around us but Ma and Pops just shook it off. The road was rugged and I had a pounding headache. I just couldn't take it anymore so I let out my loudest, blood-curdling scream. Before I could even stop, a loud thump came crashing into my ears as I blacked out.

In a few minutes, I woke up with the same headache I had earlier, but it was even worse. I was...upside down! I got up, screeching for my parents. My forehead was dripping blood everywhere and the flesh in my lower left arm was peeking out of my skin, but I didn't care one bit about it. I just wanted my parents. I carefully hopped out of the clearly-damaged green Ford truck and walked around, latching onto it so I didn't get lost.

Turns out, that was the least of my worries. Again, I yelled for my parents. The blood was still dripping down my forehead and now into my mouth. It tasted like desperation and defeat. I was going to die here, all by myself, all alone, no funeral, not even a witness. It was time to face the truth. I was going to die here, due to the terrifying cold of Alaska or of dehydration. My parents were obviously dead, unless...

I jumped up from the cold snow I was sitting on. I was right next to the grille on the truck, as it was the little warmth I had. I ran over to the front seats and tried to open the door, even though I couldn't see any shadows or figures through the front window. When I finally shoved open the door, there was absolutely nothing! Not even any blood, body parts, or any evidence leaving a clue of where they went, or why?

At first I felt my parents had just abandoned me, left me all alone in the middle of nowhere, in the freezing cold, but then I thought. My parents had never been bad to me, and they were generally good people. I don't think they would do that to me. That would be cruel, evil, and unfair. That's not my parents! Still, I was afraid that's what had happened.

I broke down. I laid on the ground, screaming and crying. Thinking of what creatures are in the deep woods and snowy mountains. Then I remembered, my parents allowed me to bring one small plaid blanket and a green platypus Pillow Pet for the road trip. Now the question was, where was I going to sleep? I knew I had to act fast before I froze to death. What was I going to do? Obviously, I needed to find shelter, but where was I going to do that? It was cold and dark. There were probably rabid bears waiting to eat me alive! I had no hope, but I decided to try to survive the night, or at least for the next few hours.

I decided to climb into the truck bed and get my bag, since it had my blankets, Pillow Pet, and warm clothes for me to change into so I could survive the night. First things first, I changed into my warm clothes. When I was doing that, I went through a cycle from cold to super cold and back to cold. Then I grabbed my Pillow Pet and blanket from the cold, damp rock that I had set them on. I set my Pillow Pet right in front of the grille. Then I laid down, put the small plaid blanket over my body then closed my eyes.

I felt a mixture of emotions. Depressed, upset, furious that my parents left me! But most of all, I felt terrified. I pulled my plaid green blanket over my forehead, which still had blood on it. I woke up at about 12:00 a.m., screaming for my parents, but there was no one there. I stayed awake, gazing at the stars.

I had a strange feeling. A peculiar creature was watching me from a distance and it was not looking for friends. I didn't go back to sleep until 5:00 a.m. and I regretted that and I woke up at midnight. I was planning to go search for my parents today and hopefully find them while there was still light outside, so I could go on with my life and pretend this never happened, but sadly that was not the case.

I looked in the truck to find the markers I had brought on the trip and then I could make a little green line wherever I went to find my way back if I get lost. I would sleep in the truck, but it looked like it could collapse at any second and I did not want to risk it. I grabbed the green marker off the same rock from earlier, still damp and cold, and made my way through the gory forest, scared and alone with each step. Each tree I passed, I did as I planned and made the little green mark. Tree by tree, rock by rock, I could feel a mysterious figure following me. I became more scared with each step. The creature was a demonic sort of animal, like a goblin or a vampire. But these two

creatures were not nearly as bad as them. It was an animal. Or was it a demon? Either way, it was evil. Something you can't see or touch. And when it gets close, you know, because the hairs on your neck and arms begin to stick up. As you turn around, the creature mysteriously disappears. It makes you think you're mad! Until you realize you're not, because the creature is real. You are NOT mad, there *is* a demon!

There was nothing I could do to stop it from following me. I just kept walking and walking. Every few steps I turned around, feeling chills all over my body. But not because I was cold. Then I heard the sound of a stick break suddenly followed by my parents calling my name. They sounded so desperate that they were screeching. First I thought it was my imagination and then I thought I was hallucinating. But as I turned around, screaming my parent's names, there they were, running towards me.

My dad wrapped me in his arms tightly while my mom was kissing me on the cheek with her cold, dry lips. I didn't care at all. I was just happy to be back with my family. I was on the verge of crying. I hadn't felt joy in two days! I had so many questions!

I asked them what had happened. My mom told me that they had passed out. When they woke up they couldn't find me, so they left to get help. That was what happened. At least that's what my parents told me. I told them about my plan and the trees and how I made marks on them so we could find our way back. My mom declared, "Our boy is so smart!" I smiled and we all walked to camp together.

I was so relieved; however, I still felt the demon following us slowly. I could feel the cold air coming out of its mouth onto my neck, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stick straight up. By the time we finally made it to the camp, my parents and I were all shivering from head to toe, so we decided to cuddle together and get some much-needed rest. It was already 10:30 p.m. and it was pitch-black. With each step to the car, the dark was getting more and more terrifying. As soon as we got to the truck, we all quickly hopped into the truck bed. I shared my blanket and the Pillow Pet. I felt warm, snuggled up with my parents. I felt safe and not as scared anymore. I peacefully drifted off to sleep.

Suddenly, I awoke at 6:00 a.m. There was no one there! The truck bed was now empty. With just me sitting in it. I gasped loudly as I jumped out of the truck bed as fast as I possibly could. I walked left, not finding any green marks on the trees. I checked to my right and saw nothing. Here I was again, lost in the woods FOREVER! I

just kept walking. I was going to die. Survival wasn't important anymore. Unaware of what my legs were doing, I walked on.

Then I saw it. My mom. Her flesh was hanging out of her feet and stomach. Blood running down her face and shoulders. Her head was hanging on by a thread to her neck. You could see several of her bones sticking out. She was hung on a nearby tree, about five feet away from where I was standing. I let out a thunderous screech and started to run away to my left. That's where I saw my dad. He had a knife protruding from his chest. He was bleeding out, but miraculously he was still alive. He was lying there in the powdery white snow, breathing heavily and trying to scream for help. I sprinted over to him, kicking the frigid snow up that felt like jagged nails going up and down my back. I kneeled down to my Dad. He was mumbling something with his last few breaths. "It was...a demon," Dad said, as his eyelids closed and his heartbeat stopped. Before I could even move, I witnessed all the pure white snow that was next to my parent's lifeless bodies turn blood red. A sea of red started spreading like wildfire. As it quickly arrived at my motionless feet, it turned a deep black.

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp pain in my stomach. I looked down to find a knife jabbed in my abdomen. I felt at least twenty gallons of blood pouring over my head. I squeezed my eyes shut, but I could somehow still see a black shadowy figure coming from the woods. It kept repeating the same sentence over and over again.

"Bloody mornings, when you wake up and I watched you get out of bed from the dark corners of your room.

Bloody afternoons, when I watched you fly your kite from behind the bushes in your front yard.

Bloody nights, when I watched you go to sleep cold, hungry, afraid, and alone."

I let out my last breath and died...peacefully?

To Be Continued

Thank you to Mrs. Brown and my 4th grade classmates for supporting me in the process of writing this story. I dedicate this to you.

THE MIDNIGHT MONSTER

Evelyn Johnson, 11

I trekked through the snow, ducking under a low-hanging branch upon a tree. There were enough branches that it would at least provide minimal protection from the falling snow. I didn't know how many hours I had been walking for, but I knew it was too far to turn back now.

I needed to sleep, but instead I decided to stay alert. I sat down and leaned against the trunk of the tree, and reached into my backpack. I pulled out a photo of Ellie, my baby sister. She was only six months old. I would probably never see her again. Just as a tear came to my eye, I heard a soft crunch in the snow. I brushed the tear off of my cheek, put the photo back in my bag, and stood up. There was something outside the branches of the tree, and it definitely wasn't human. I bit back a scream.

I was lucky that it was facing away from me. If it wasn't, I would probably already be dead. It was all black, with long horns, and fingers as long and as sharp as knives. It was draped with layers of black robes, making it hard to tell where the monster ended and where its robes began. It turned. The only thing light about it were its lamplike eyes, glowing with a pure white light. So, remember how I said it turned? Yeah. It turned. And it definitely saw me.

I screamed, grabbed my bag, and took off running in the opposite direction. It followed me. I realized, right after it started chasing me, that it was much faster than I was. I ran faster. So did it. I was terrified, but I kept running for one reason. I had started running back towards home. I didn't care how far I had to run. If I was going to die, I at least wanted to see Ellie again.

I ran as hard as I could, but I had been outside in the snow for a long time, and the cold and the exhaustion was starting to get to me. The monster closed in, and I tried to run harder, but I couldn't. It grabbed my shoulder, and I screamed again. My last thought before it devoured me was, *I'm sorry Ellie. I hope your life is incredible.*

I woke up in a cold sweat. Sun was streaming in through the window. My pet cat jumped onto my bed. I sat up and petted her. Then I jumped up, and ran across the room to Ellie's crib. I sighed with relief. My baby sister was laying there, fast asleep, probably

dreaming tiny baby dreams. I picked her up and held her close. She woke up, and opened her eyes. When she saw me holding her, she gave me a tiny smile. I gave her another little hug, then carried her into the kitchen for breakfast.

My mom smiled. “Wow, I’m surprised you slept in that late, today of all days!”

And then I remembered. It was my eleventh birthday! I smiled. “Yeah, I was just really tired.”

My dad turned around from the stove. “Who wants pancakes?” he asked. I smiled wider, then sat down with Ellie in my lap.

* * * * *

Four Years Later:

I walked into the kitchen to get lunch, and Ellie, now four and a half years old, was sitting at the table, scribbling on a piece of paper with a black crayon. I made myself a sandwich, then sat down next to her and glanced at her paper. I inhaled sharply. “Ellie?” I asked. “What are you drawing?”

She looked at me. “Monster,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What monster?” I asked her.

“The one outside the bedroom window last night.”

THE CARNIVAL DIRECTOR

Ada Kern, 9

There once was an abandoned house on Fiddleberry Lane, and every day at exactly 12:00 AM and PM the phone rang. No one knew why or who was calling, but they always left a message. The message wasn't words though, it sounded like an old TV playing a game show and then a high-pitched scream. One day some kids got curious...

* * * * *

"Come on Dylan!" said Sasha, Dylan's twin sister. "Just go into the house at lunch—I'll say we're going to a pizza place—and answer the phone!"

"Not a chance," said Dylan.

"Fine," protested Sasha. "Then I'll do it."

"What!" exclaimed Dylan. "It's way too risky. What if we get caught? They could think we were stealing!"

"I'll take the risk!" said Sasha enthusiastically.

"Fiiiiiiiiiiiiine," groaned Dylan. "I'll take it too."

As they waited for lunch to come, they got bored and decided to play video games. A few hours later they realized something.

"It's almost 12:00!" exclaimed Sasha.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" said Dylan nervously.

"Well, either way," said Sasha, "you agreed to it—Mom!" yelled Sasha, "We're going to a pizza place with a friend."

"Okay!" their mom yelled back.

"Let's go, Dylan!" Sasha exclaimed. "It's five minutes until 12:00! Hurry!" They dashed across the street. Dylan turned and pulled on the doorknob.

"It won't budge," he said, relieved.

"It's a push," said Sasha, as if it were obvious. They pushed open the door to reveal a mansion-like house with two spiral staircases leading up to a top floor. The house was dimly lit, with bookcases covering every wall. The lamps had red shades. The whole

house looked old-fashioned.

“Hurry!” said Sasha, “It’s three minutes until 12:00.”

“I see it!” Dylan shouted, “I see the phone!” And there it was. A red telephone sitting on a carved wooden end table, squeezed between two bookshelves on the second floor.

“We better go up there!” exclaimed Sasha, “Hurry!” They dashed up the left spiral staircase to the second floor.

“Wow,” said Dylan, “These books are old.”

“Of course they are,” said Sasha, “This house is old. Now go to the phone. It’s one minute until 12:00.”

The phone rang.

“Answer it,” said Sasha. “Quick!”

Dylan picked up the phone, his hand shaking. He put his ear to the phone and heard carnival music. He dropped the phone with fright.

He had been afraid of carnivals since he was three. He had gotten lost in the maze of mirrors and saw a frightening clown. He still had nightmares about it.

“What is it?” asked Sasha.

“C-carnival m-m-music.”

“You scaredy-cat,” said Sasha, “It’s just music.” She quickly picked up the phone and put it to her ear. The carnival music was still playing. “Hello?” said Sasha into the mouthpiece.

“Finally,” said a croaky voice, “I’ve been waiting a long time for someone to answer the phone. I’m a carnival director. In fact, I’m hosting a carnival right across the street from this very house.”

“What?” exclaimed Sasha. “That’s our house!”

“What is it?” said Dylan frightfully. Sasha explained to Dylan what the carnival director had said. “What does he mean by that?” said Dylan when Sasha was done explaining.

“I don’t know,” said Sasha, “but it doesn’t sound good.”

As they left the house, Dylan said, “Do you think our house will be destroyed?”

“No,” said Sasha, “I think he’s just trying to scare us.”

She was wrong.

When they stepped outside, every house in their whole neighborhood, including the

house they had just walked out of, had been transformed into some sort of carnival attraction. Mrs. Thompson's house had been transformed into a Ferris wheel that never stopped spinning. Mr. Kern's house turned into a hot dog stand. The buns were green, and it was hard to see from a distance, but it looked like the meat was moving. And their own house? Their house had been transformed into the Ride of Death, a rollercoaster that went downhill and off a cliff.

"I take back what I just said," said Sasha.

Then a tall, skinny man with a purple top hat and a purple suit and tie to match it walked up to them. He had green eyes like a cat's with slits for pupils. His hair was blonde and slick, and he had a long, crooked nose.

"Hello there," he said. He was the guy from the phone.

"Give us back our house, you jerk!" Sasha shouted.

"Now there, at least let me introduce myself. My name is Archanius. I'm the carnival director, and if you want your house back, you'll have to beat me in a series of carnival games. But if you lose, your house will be lost forever."

"Okay, we'll play your game," said Sasha. "But if we win, promise to never do anything like this again."

"Let's shake on it," Archanius said as he put his hand out.

"Wait," said Dylan, "Are you sure we should do this? It could be a trick."

But Sasha just stood there, shaking her head at him with a *what am I going to do with you?* face. "I'll take the risk," said Sasha, rolling her eyes.

"Fine," said Dylan, "But if we lose our neighborhood for good, I will never forgive you. Also, carnival games are, like, impossible to win."

Sasha shook Archanius's hand, and the games started.

* * * * *

Sasha and Dylan took turns competing against Archanius. In the first game, Dylan had to knock over stuffed clown targets with a ball.

"Easy enough," he said as he picked up a ball. He tossed it in the air a few times, and then threw it. It hit one of the clowns. Dylan froze and Sasha screamed as the clown exploded with blood. Dylan turned as pale as a clown's white makeup and Sasha

looked as if she were going to faint, but Dylan kept going. At the end of the game, Dylan had hit eight clowns and Archanius had only hit five.

Next, Sasha had to beat Archanius at the strength tester. When Archanius went, the meter was about an inch from the top. When Sasha went, it went all the way to the top and rang the bell. She jumped up with excitement and let out a happy yell, but that happy yell soon turned into a scream because from the top of the strength tester tower, thousands of spiders were gushing out. Sasha and Dylan ran to Archanius, who was waiting for them at the next game.

“Now this is just a game of ring toss,” Archanius said as he threw a ring and landed it perfectly on one of the spikes. Then it was Dylan’s turn. When he threw the ring, it was about to land on the spike when it got smacked out of the way by a doll hanging on the wall of prizes. The whole prize wall laughed. Archanius landed his second ring. Dylan went again. He hoped this time no dolls would bother him, but, of course, the doll grabbed the ring right out of the air, sneered, and threw it back at Dylan. It hit him in the face. Archanius won that game.

Next Sasha played the duck game. She gagged as she looked at the water where the ducks were floating. It was murky, chunky, and it seemed to be steaming. Archanius handed her a net with a rusty handle. She played well, but on her final turn when she reached out the net to grab a duck, a huge snake popped out of the water and snapped at her. She jumped back so she wouldn’t get bitten. She had just managed to grab the duck. It was a zero, so Archanius won.

“Now,” said Archanius, “This is our final game, the Maze of Mirrors. And we’re tied, so whoever makes it out first wins.” It was Dylan’s turn and if he didn’t go in, their house would be lost forever.

“I believe in you,” Sasha whispered into Dylan’s ear. Then he vanished into the maze.

Dylan walked this way and that until he reached a dead end. The lights flickered and Archanius appeared behind him in the mirror. Dylan spun around. There was nothing there. He looked back at the mirror, nothing. He was alone. The lights went out. Dylan shivered, creeped out by what he had just seen.

“I wish I would have brought a flashlight,” he said. He turned around and walked away from the dead end. He took a left, then a right, then another right, then a left.

Then, out of pure luck, he saw the exit. He started to run like he had never run before. He ran so fast that in about a second, he had run half the corridor. When he was just a foot away from the exit, he saw Archanius in the mirror to the left, and he was getting closer. Dylan quickly stepped through the door and into the outside world.

As soon as he got outside, Sasha high-fived him and said, "I knew you could do it." They hugged and celebrated.

Then, Archanius came through the exit and smirked. He let out a low chuckle.

"Now, as promised," said Sasha, "Give us back our neighborhood and never do anything like this again."

His chuckle didn't stop as he said, "I'm afraid there has been a slight change in the plan."

"You promised!" said Sasha.

"Oh, but you made a little mistake. Would you really trust a bad guy?" Archanius laughed a loud, evil laugh.

Sasha and Dylan cried, "*Nooooooooo!*" and they watched each other fade away, as the echoes of their last words rang out into the night.

THE MONSTER WITHIN

Selah Harris, 11

Chapter One

Terror in the Night

You! *You* are the cursed one?” Tia asked with fear in her eyes.
“Has the monster followed you? Have you brought it here!?” Tia got up from the log.

“I...I think that...I lost it...in the woods,” Amelia said, so scared she couldn't breathe.

“Get out! Get out now!” Tia yelled.

“But Tia! I don't have anywhere to go...” suddenly there was a loud screech and the sound of Rose crying reached her ears.

“Amelia Redwood, I hope you're happy! Look what you brought on us...look what you brought on yourself!”

Amelia had never seen Tia like this. She looked like a different person.

“No! This isn't my fault! I didn't do any of this! Nooooo!” Amelia sat up on her bed, screaming, sweating, tears running down her cheeks. “I didn't do anything...” Amelia whispered to herself. Her chest was so tight it hurt to breathe.

Tilly walked over to Amelia's bed with a lantern in her hand. “What's wrong? Amelia, your face is red...are you okay?”

“More...more nightmares. I can't sleep, they come every time.” Amelia laid back down and closed her eyes.

Tilly sat on the bed and stroked Amelia's hair. “Don't worry. I'm right here...just close your eyes...and...” Amelia fell asleep before Tilly could go on.

“*Ameeeeeliüüia...oh dear, dear Ameeeeeliüüia,*” a distant voice called. “Amelia, why do you run?”

Amelia opened her eyes and saw herself sitting on a wooden stool in a pitch-black room. She saw herself fingering something and took a step closer. It was the necklace. Amelia reached up to the one she was wearing. As soon as her fingers touched her necklace, the other Amelia looked up. Her eyes were blood red and glowing.

“*Shabok sluss te ne shkola!*” she whispered over and over in a ghostly chant. The red-eyed Amelia looked at something in the distance and her red eyes got big, and she looked...scared. Then she started running towards a light in the corner of the darkness.

Amelia felt a sudden urge to follow. When she took a step, the whole room set on fire.

“*Ameeeeliiaa,*” said the same voice she had heard before. It was mysterious and haunting. “*Amelia, my child...you can't run.*”

Amelia saw red eyes in the darkness. Suddenly the eyes disappeared and everything went black. She opened her eyes to see the ceiling of the cabin.

“Amelia! Your breakfast is getting cold!” Rose yelled as she ran up the steps and into their room. “Mom said to save some for you, sadly,” Rose said with a sly smile.

“Well, that's very kind of you,” Amelia said, covering her face with her pillow.

“No, seriously! Go and eat your breakfast before I eat it!” Rose said, somewhat joking but mostly serious.

Tilly arrived at the top of the steps just in time to see Rose about to pull Amelia's hair. “Don't,” Tilly said.

Rose looked disappointed but then smiled. “Sorry, can't hear you, I'm deaf.” Tilly just rolled her eyes.

“Okay, okay, I'm awake,” Amelia said as she sat up.

“Nope, you're not up until you're out of bed,” Rose said, as she pulled on Amelia's arm.

Amelia walked downstairs, fidgeting with her necklace. *Why do I keep having these dreams?* she kept asking herself. A picture of the red eyes floated into her head. Then she remembered the voice. It had haunted her dreams ever since Gramma died. As she recalled it, the voice played again in her head. As if it had been recorded.

“*Ameeeeliiaa...Ameeeeliiaa...come and play.*” Amelia shivered and the voice disappeared.

“Hey, Elisabeth! Race ya downstairs!” Rose said.

Tilly pushed Rose out of the way and set her foot on the ground first.

“I won, E-lisabeth!” Rose taunted.

Tilly grabbed Rose and put her in a headlock. “What's my name?!” Tilly asked angrily.

“E-lisabeth!” Rose said, smiling.

“Your name is Elisabeth Ken Andrewson,” Tia said. “Now break it up!”

Tilly held Rose in the same position for about five seconds, then let her go. “You call me Tilly!” Tilly said, as she held on tight to Rose's arm.

“Yes, E-lisabeth!” Rose said, as she ran outside.

Elisabeth didn't like being called Elisabeth. Everyone thought it was old-fashioned except her parents. So, she had chosen a nickname from her favorite book, *The Hooded Knight*. In that book was a character named Tilly Ruffman.

“Tilly, go do the dishes,” Mrs. Andrewson ordered.

“Yes, Mama,” Tilly said through gritted teeth.

Amelia walked outside to see Rose covered in dirt and on her knees next to Daisy, the family dog. Even though Rose was ten, that didn't stop her from acting like she was five.

“Hey, I'm going for a walk,” Amelia said. “Could you tell Tia to meet me in the barn later and I'll help her with chores?”

“Sure, could you help with my chores too?” Rose asked, smiling and tilting her head.

“Maybe later,” Amelia chuckled. She loved taking walks around the farm. It always cleared her mind. Although, her favorite place on the Andrewson's property was the path to the barn. The path had dozens of trees on each side. Every afternoon Amelia would try to hurry there. Because when the sun was just right, it would shine through the trees and it reminded Amelia of home. It was beautiful. Amelia had made it just in time. As Amelia walked on the path she kept thinking about the dream.

What does my necklace have to do with anything? Why did the girl keep saying...whatever she was saying? Amelia thought. *Do I really have to leave soon?* After all, she couldn't put the Andrewsons in danger.

The monster would come soon, and with it, death, sorrow, and loss. But first, she would have to tell Tia. Then Amelia recalled the dream. She remembered Tia's face in her dream. Maybe she shouldn't. No...no, she would tell Tia! After all Tia deserved to know. Amelia had lost track of time and didn't realize it.

“Amelia! Amelia!” Tia yelled at the top of her lungs. Amelia jumped and turned around to see Tia running toward her.

“I thought you said you were going to help me?!” Tia said, acting as though she were

mad.

“Don't do that! You made me jump like three inches!” Amelia said.

Tia rolled her eyes. “Oh, in that case, never mind.”

“What do you mean?” Amelia asked.

“Rose probably just lied,” Tia said.

“Okay, come on!” Amelia put her arm around Tia's shoulders. As they walked to the barn, Amelia hoped. She hoped this friendship would last longer. At least till she told Tia.

Amelia remembered how her mom would always talk to herself. How mom would always think out loud. *Mom*, Amelia thought. Just thinking of her made Amelia's eyes water. Then she remembered May, Grace, and little Colten. How Colten would call her Mimi. She wondered how her siblings felt about her leaving. A tear ran down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away. Tia seemed not to notice.

“Hello? Earth to Amelia!” Tia waved her hand in front of Amelia's face. Amelia's attention snapped back to Tia.

“Oh...what did you say?”

Chapter Two

A Brave Warrior

When Amelia walked into the cabin, she gagged as she smelled what Mrs. Andrewson was cooking.

“What's for dinner?” Amelia tried to sound cheerful.

“Chicken pot pie!” Mrs. Andrewson smiled with pride as she took it out of the oven.

“Okay, okay, it's a little burnt. But you can eat it!” Mrs. Andrewson said as she set the pie on the table.

“It's a miracle we live after each meal!” Tilly said under her breath.

“Hey Papa, could you get a fire going outside?” Tia asked.

“Maybe after dinner,” he replied.

“Oh! We could do ghost stories!” Rose said as she stuffed food in her mouth.

“Honey, please don't talk with food in your mouth,” Mrs. Andrewson said.

Mr. and Mrs. Andrewson's names were actually Malachi and Rebecca, but to Amelia it felt weird calling them by their first names. Tia looked at her plate with disgust. Her slice of supper was burnt.

Amelia slowly put her fork into the food. She very carefully lifted it to her mouth. Tia watched her with big eyes. As soon as the food touched Amelia's tongue she regretted putting it in.

As Amelia gagged, Tia kept encouraging her. "Chew...swallow...just chew it really fast, then swallow."

Amelia swallowed and got ready for the next bite. Tilly came over and slapped Amelia on the back. "You got this!"

Amelia smiled at Mrs. Andrewson every time she swallowed a bite. Mrs. Andrewson would smile and ask if anyone wanted more. Everyone would answer "no" at the same time. Mrs. Andrewson would frown at them all.

"Mama, can we go outside now?" Rose asked after she swallowed a huge bite of pot pie.

"Fine," she answered, and everyone raced outside except for Mrs. Andrewson.

"Papa, why don't you tell a story?" Rose asked as she sat down near the fire.

"Well, what story do you want me to tell?"

"How about one we haven't heard before," Tilly suggested.

"Okay. Do you girls know what '*Dunyo*' is?" Mr. Andrewson asked.

"I know it is the name of this earth," Tia answered.

"Yes, but do you know where it came from?" he asked, as he put a log in the fire. When no one answered, he chuckled. "'*Dunyo*' means 'earth' in one of the oldest languages* in this world. You see, some of the first beings spoke a beautiful language only they knew. They taught it to their kids, and they taught it to their kids. But sadly, after years of teaching it, they lost interest and most forgot it, and the language died. But we all do know one word...*Dunyo*," he finished as he scratched Daisy behind her ears.

"Wow! That's really cool!" Amelia said.

"So was that the story?" Rose asked as she crumbled a leaf.

* '*Dunyo*' means 'earth', or 'world', in Persian.

“No, there’s more,” he answered. “In the first years of Dunyo, there was a Great War...a war of good against evil. The Denjeros were the leaders of the men who rebelled against King Devtar. King Devtar was a good man and a good king. He and his army rushed at his enemy. But sadly, there was a traitor. The king's own daughter betrayed him and all of Dunyo. She gave the Denjeros the king's most valuable possession, the stone of Zember: a stone with a dragon soul trapped inside. It gave the land magic and the king had always used it to help his people. But in the wrong hands, the stone was a deadly weapon.

“Once the Denjeros had it, they put all of their dark magic into it. It was now their source of power. The leader of the Denjeros was named Ethoim, and he was the most powerful of all of them. He wore the stone on a chain into battle. All of the king's men who saw it fell to their knees and begged the enemy for mercy. But one warrior stood. He would not bow down to his enemies. Four companions saw his bravery and stood with him.

“The first warrior charged at Ethoim and they battled. As they were fighting, the warrior's axe hit the stone and it shattered into five pieces. Ethoim then stabbed the warrior in the chest. Seeing all was lost, Ethoim grabbed his weapon and took his own life. The warrior bent down and took one of the pieces of the stone, then he said something to the four companions and started to walk toward the mountains.

“No one knows what he said to the four. No one knows who he was. As he walked into the mountains, he left a trail of blood from his wound. Some say one of the four went after him. Some say they both died in a cave.”

Mrs. Andrewson came outside just as Mr. Andrewson finished.

“You guys are going to be grumps in the morning if you don't go to bed,” Mrs. Andrewson said.

Amelia made her way upstairs behind Tilly and Rose, still imagining the story. Amelia laid down on her bed and looked at the ceiling. She was afraid of sleeping now. Every time, more nightmares would come. This night, Amelia dreamed of the warrior going into the mountains and the four standing there, watching him. One of them looked familiar.

“Who is he?” Amelia heard herself ask.

Suddenly she was there. She was in the middle of them. Between the warrior and

the four. Then the one that looked familiar picked up a piece of the stone and ran past Amelia and toward the brave warrior. Amelia saw Ethoim on the ground, his own sword in his chest. She almost felt sorry for him. Then her necklace got heavy, and she felt pulled toward the rest of the pieces. She didn't want to move, but the necklace started to leave red marks on her neck. She heard herself scream at the top of her lungs.

Amelia sat up in bed. There were red marks on her neck. She looked at Tilly and Rose. They were fine.

Tia's eyes slowly opened. "What's wrong?" she asked Amelia.

"I need answers!" Amelia said.

"What do you mean? Go back to sleep!" Tia giggled.

"This isn't funny!" Amelia hissed. She wanted to scream.

Tia's face changed into a caring expression. Tia got out of her bed and sat on Amelia's.

"I...I...am...I need to go." It was hard to say. Amelia cried on Tia's shoulder.

"Why!?" Tia whispered.

"I don't know!" Amelia sobbed. "But I need to go...I'm going tonight." Amelia sobbed even harder. Tia started to cry too.

"I'll help you pack," Tia said as tears rolled down her face.

Tia wanted to come too, but she understood this was something Amelia had to do herself. Tia rushed over to her side of the room and grabbed her little box. Tia opened it and pulled out her little wooden bird. It had three holes on the tail and one on the head. Its red wings spread apart and its eyes made its face look kind.

"Mama gave it to me when I was little. She said if you blow on it, it will scare any goblins and ogres away. Papa said it was made by an elf," Tia said as she handed it to Amelia.

"I can't take this! It is your most valuable possession!" Amelia closed Tia's open hand.

Tia opened her hand again. "No...my most valuable possession is our friendship." Another tear rolled down Tia's face.

"Oh!" she said as she wiped away the trail the tear had left. "Tilly won't mind," Tia said as she opened a little box next to Tilly's bed. It was like the one Tia had, only it had some small differences.

Tilly opened her eyes and narrowed them at her. "What are you doing? Trying to steal my stuff when I'm asleep, huh!?" Tilly sat up and grabbed the box from Tia.

"I'm going...to leave," Amelia said.

"Oh...why?" Tilly's face was a mix of emotion.

"I need answers," Amelia explained.

"Answers for what?" Tilly asked.

"My necklace. It pulls me in different directions, it weighs down on my neck sometimes. I need to know why Gramma gave it to me. Why I have dreams about monsters."

Tilly shivered and pulled a blanket around herself. "Okay, I have something for you," Tilly said and grabbed a bag underneath her bed. It was made of squirrel fur. Mr. Andrewson had made it for her when Tilly was five. Tilly quickly dumped her stuff out of it and handed it to Amelia.

"Thank you!" Amelia said, trying to hold back the tears.

Rose started to say something in her sleep. Everyone held their breath and didn't move. Rose just rolled over.

"Do you want to wake her up?" Tilly asked, still looking at Rose.

"Yeah, it wouldn't be fair if I didn't." Amelia carefully woke up Rose and explained everything.

"Please don't go!" Rose hugged Amelia and refused to let go.

"I need to go soon. The sun will be up in a few hours and I need to go before Mr. and Mrs. Andrewson wake up."

"Okay, but you need some food." Tilly quickly and quietly went downstairs.

Amelia put two sets of clothes in her bag, along with a blanket. Tilly came up with dried fruit and a few apples.

"Don't worry, Papa and I made the dried fruit. Not Mama," Tilly laughed. Tia found a little pouch to put the food in. Amelia put her journal and sketchbook in the bag Tilly gave her.

"Don't forget this," Tia said as she handed Amelia the bird whistle.

"Are you sure?" Amelia asked, her face red from crying.

"Once again, it's yours, not mine!"

Amelia carefully put the bird in so that it wouldn't get smashed.

“One last hug!” Rose hugged Amelia so tight Amelia had to break the hug in order to breathe again. Tilly braided Amelia's red hair as Rose tried to go back to sleep. It took all of Tia's strength not to start crying again.

“Hey, um...so you know how you thought I had a crush on Eli...well...you were right,” Tilly admitted. Amelia almost fell to the floor laughing.

“I...knew...it!” Amelia managed to say through laughter.

“You know, you're going to have to name your first child after me!” Amelia acted as though she were serious.

Tilly's face was red, not from crying but from embarrassment. Tia hadn't heard their conversation because she had been helping Rose, so she was confused as she watched Amelia almost fall over laughing. Amelia stopped laughing and her face got serious. Tia knew it was time.

Chapter Three

Scarier Things

As Amelia walked away from the Andrewson's cabin, she remembered leaving her home and how her sister May had waved as she walked away from the place where she had grown up. The place where she had been born. Amelia felt the same loss now as when she had left everything behind the first time. Tia had been more than just her best friend and was almost like a sister. Amelia would never forget the kindness the Andrewsons had shown her. She had to hurry if she wanted to get off the Andrewson's property before they came looking for her.

Every step she took was harder and more tiring than the last. She had already been walking for multiple hours. When she walked, her necklace moved forward, then hit her chest with each step. Amelia watched the sun start to slowly disappear behind the mountains as she looked for a place to sleep. Fear started to take over.

“How stupid can you get?” she asked herself out loud. “You don't know how to survive; you don't even know where you are going and you're defenseless!”

If I sleep on the ground some wild beast will eat me in my sleep. And sleeping in a tree is NOT an option! Think of all the bugs!

“Well, what do you do now, genius?” Amelia asked herself. Panic started to creep around the corner.

I can't do this! Run! is all Amelia could think. As Amelia ran, branches hit her face and scratched her skin.

“Ameeeeeliiiiia...Ameeeeeliiiiia...” The voice was back.

No! Not now! Please not now! Amelia ran harder as her necklace grew heavy. The sun was almost gone and she had to get back to the Andrewsons. Everything started to get blurry, and every step she took sounded like thunder.

“Amelia?” That wasn’t the evil voice, it was kind and caring, just like Tia’s. “Amelia, what are you doing back here?” Tia’s face was a blur and her voice went from high to low. Amelia wasn’t near the Andrewson’s cabin; she was in the woods behind it.

“Ameeeeeliiiiia...Ameeeeeliiiiia...don't you want to play?” The voice would not leave Amelia alone. Darkness started to creep in from the sides of her eyes. Suddenly everything went black. The sun was now gone and Amelia had collapsed.

“Stay here, I’ll go get help.” Tia wanted to cry and pull her hair. Tia could barely see, but managed to take a few steps. Wait, she couldn’t leave Amelia. Tia turned around to see nothing where Amelia had just been.

“Amelia?” Tia’s voice was breaking and she could barely stand from fear. Then she saw red eyes in the darkness. “Amelia?” Tia’s voice was weak. The red eyes moved and the monster stepped into the moonlight. It was Amelia.

Tia gasped, “Amelia! Your eyes...eyes are red!”

“Scariest than the rustle of leaves, more scary than the weird noises. More scary than wild beasts. Oh, dear Tia.” As Amelia spoke, her eyes glowed even redder.

“I’m the scariest of them all!”

CRUCIFIX

Trinity Hubbard, 11

*A normal boy in a normal life meets a lake with the powers of evil and once they do,
everything goes wrong.*

* * * * *

The last school bell rang. Finally, the sound of freedom; let the summer fun begin. It was the hottest day of the year and that last school bus ride seemed like it took an eternity, but at least I had my best friend Alex sitting by my side on this sweaty ride home.

“Hey Alex, what are your plans this summer?” I said quietly, to not disturb the others on the bus.

“What we do every summer, dummy, play video games and eat a lot of junk food!” Alex said. Most people would say we are typical eleven-year-old boys who run around till the streetlights come on and then stay up till sunrise playing video games. This is how we normally spend our weekends together, and during the summer we are inseparable.

Let me introduce myself: my name is Jacob, and my birthday is March 19th, 2012, and my best friend Alex was born two days after me.

“Instead of playing video games this summer, would you like to switch it up?” I asked Alex anxiously. “I think we should go to the lake. I’m sure my parents will take us if your parents agree, which I already know they will,” I said, trying to sound convincing.

“I will have to ask my mom, but right now from me it’s a YES!” Alex said excitedly. “What lake did you have in mind to go to, Jacob?” Alex asked inquisitively.

“When I researched lakes on the internet, I found this lake that has magical evil powers, but I don’t believe that to be true. I just don’t believe it exists,” I said insightfully.

“Well, tell me more about this lake?” Alex asked, fascinated by what I already had

to say and hanging on to every word.

I began by saying very softly, “Legend has it that this lake has evil powers to curse anyone who steps foot on its grounds. In the very beginning everyone thought it was just a normal lake but that changed very quickly. There is a story about a man and a wife who one day decided to go to the lake, but once they stepped foot out on the grounds, they were never seen again. Legend says all that was left were their fingers, and it’s not just them this has happened to. Every single person who has stepped foot on the lake grounds have only been found by one single body part. It could be a finger or a toe, or even an ear or a nose. People now say every time they drive by the lake, they hear the screams and cries of the lost people. I call it the Devil’s Lake, and in my point of view it is a one out of five stars.”

“We HAVE to go and check this lake out,” Alex said eagerly. Later that night Alex calls me.

“Hey Jacob, my parents said YES, you ready to go to the lake soon?”

* * * * *

Three weeks later Alex and I were packing together. Alex was telling me how stoked he was for the mysterious lake. “I’m so excited for this creepy lake and I just cannot believe that we’re leaving tomorrow, have you found any other reviews or legends on the internet about the lake?” asked Alex, questioning.

I responded with, “I’m excited too! And no, I haven’t found anything other than what I already told you, but we can look together tonight.”

Later that night I was researching more as Alex was sleeping. I found something interesting, but I fell asleep before I could read it all, so the next morning while everyone was still asleep I finished the article. It said something about the St. Mary Witch and how it is believed to be causing all the ominous activity on the lake. This St. Mary died a long time ago in a tragic boating accident on the lake and when she died, she lost her most precious necklace, the crucifix. *I must tell Alex about this on the drive out there*, I thought to myself.

A few hours into our car ride I was finally able to tell Alex what I discovered.

“I found another legend about the lake,” I said excitedly.

“Oh really, tell me?” Alex said with enthusiasm.

“Okay, so this legend has it that the lake only takes people when they swim over a necklace from a person named St. Mary. According to legend, St. Mary died in a tragic boating accident on the lake and when she died, she lost her crucifix in the water, which we all know is a very sacred necklace for any nun. Now any time someone is swimming over this crucifix they become lost under the dark waters and are never seen again, minus one body part floating atop the water.”

You could tell Alex thought for a long moment on what I just said, and then finally he spoke up to say, “So people are swimming over a crucifix that they can’t see, nor know is there, and then when they do they disappear?” he asked inquisitively.

“That’s about the gist of it,” I responded. “So maybe if we could find this crucifix at the bottom of the lake, the curse will be lifted, but how do you find a small object at the bottom of a big lake?”

It seemed like an eternity went by, but we finally arrived at the lake’s cabin late at night. The full moon was shining down on the lake, making it look like an empty graveyard, the wet mist from the fog of the night felt like tears coming from all the lost souls. Shivers were felt all the way up my spine and from the look on Alex’s face it wasn’t only me who felt them. That night we went straight to sleep, though I don’t think either one of us really slept much as our minds were racing thinking about St. Mary. But we both knew we had a busy day tomorrow with planning on how to find this lost necklace so any rest, even very little, was needed.

The next morning, we ate a hardly good breakfast, then rushed out of the cabin doors to go exploring. The lake was huge; finding where the boat accident took place would be hard. For all we knew it could have been on the other side of the lake.

While on our hike, we found an old man down by the dock. He looked somber and like he was reflecting on something deep as he was watching the waves on the lake go up and down, down and up. I walked in front of him and then I said, “Hi mister!” just so we wouldn’t scare him. He politely said “Hi” and I don’t know what made me ask, but out of nowhere the words just spilled out of my mouth like vomit. Before I could stop myself, I heard myself asking, “Have you heard about the St. Mary Witch?”

His eyes looked at me like they were trying to shoot darts into my soul. He quickly

exclaimed, “Where did you ever hear of that name!” I told him about the legend I found online, and said my friend and I were doing a research paper on it.

“If you must know,” he responded, “My sister, St. Mary, died right out yonder just a little before that red buoy. She’s no witch like stories have made her out to be, though. She is just a lost soul that was taken from this earth too soon, looking for her lost necklace. She always told me her necklace was her life because she got it the day she became a nun, which was two months before that tragic, tragic accident. That tragic day was supposed to be a happy and fun-filled day celebrating her thirtieth birthday, but in a blink of an eye, while she was swimming late one night with her other friends, a boat came out of nowhere and swooped her up and her body was only seen in pieces after that. I don’t think she is the one responsible for all the missing, but I could be wrong. I think she is just looking for that lost necklace of hers and she won’t be able to rest till it’s found. So, I sit here, day in and day out just looking for any sign of that necklace, but it’s been over forty years and I have yet to find it.”

The sound of the waves was noticeable in the quiet, and when I realized he was done speaking I said very somberly, “I’m so sorry, it’s so sad to hear that you lost your sister in that tragic accident.”

“Thanks,” he said with a long sigh.

We left the old man on the dock, and as we walked back to the cabin both of us were very quiet, not saying much, just thinking about the legend, the man’s story and how much, if any, was true. We were thinking about what needed to be done to prove and stop the hauntings of St. Mary, but mostly we were thinking about how much this lake gave us the creeps and how we should have never even come in the first place, but it was too late now. There was no going back. It was time to plan. It was time to prove the legend was false or true. We knew what we had to do, wait till dark then go back to the dock.

It wasn’t much longer after we got back that it was dinner, then s’mores, then lights out. After we knew my parents were asleep, we snuck outside. It was pitch black and the stars and the moon were the only light. I told Alex to go back inside and grab the flashlight. He was back in a flash and before we knew it, we were headed back down to the dock.

It was just like the article said: dark, scary, with a full moon that can send shivers

up your spine. However, unlike the article said, you won't die when you are close to the lake; we now knew you must be swimming and possibly swimming close to the missing necklace for something bad to happen.

Trembling in fear, I told Alex about an inference I had. "Alex, I don't think we die on ground, I think we die in the lake."

Alex replied, "NO! That's impossible, the curse said..." I stopped him mid-sentence and said, "Alex, listen to me! In the article at the end, it talked about St. Mary's crucifix and how it was sunken to the bottom of the lake and couldn't be found because whoever would try would die. Hey, that rhymed!" Trying to lighten the mood because I could see the fear in Alex's eyes.

"Jacob, I don't want you to be funny right now," he said with a long pause and his voice trembling with fear, he continued with, "I'm scared, and I hate to admit it, but I am, I hate this and want to go home."

I saw how scared he was, and it looked like he was about to cry and I didn't want to see him cry so I said, "You're right, this is crazy, let's go back to the cabin and get out of here before something bad happens."

We ran back to the cabin and before we fell asleep Alex looked at me and said very sincerely, "Thank you," then he drifted right to sleep. I laid there wide awake, I felt like I had a job to do.

Instead of going to sleep, I went back to the dock. Before I could even think, I stupidly jumped in. The water felt warm on my skin, but I had goosebumps on my arms because of the fear. I started to swim towards the red buoy, and as I swam and got closer, I kept getting more and more scared. I finally made it to the spot the old man said the accident happened, I stopped swimming and looked to my right and then to my left. I saw nothing but darkness and the shadow of the moon on the waters. *This is stupid*, I said to myself, *there is no legend, all those stories were made-up fairy tales*. Just as I thought it was a hoax, I started to swim back and as I did, I felt a tugging at my leg. It felt like someone, or something, was grabbing me and pulling me down. My head started to quickly go up and down, in and out of the water. I started to feel all the breath inside me leave. I tried to swim away, but it was no use, I couldn't escape.

Whatever this thing was, it was slowly pulling me under the surface until my head was completely under the water. I held my breath for the longest time, but it was

useless. I was drowning, I was getting pulled deeper and deeper under water until I could feel the sandy, cold, hard rocks at the bottom of the lake. It was then when my foot got caught in what felt like a cold piece of fishing line.

I tried to reach down and pull on the line to free my foot to attempt to swim away when I realized it wasn't a line after all, it was the crucifix! I found the crucifix at the bottom of the lake, a million and one chance and I found it, I won! It felt like I just won the golden ticket from Willy Wonka.

Placing my elated feelings aside, I quickly tried to grab the necklace, but it was stuck under a rock. I tugged and tugged until I had no energy left. This was it; I was going to die while holding the necklace that forever haunts this lake. Just as soon as I gave up, I felt a hand grabbing my shirt and pulling me upwards out of the water. This hand snatched me up so quickly that not only was I coming up out of the water, but so was the necklace. At last, my head was above the water! I took a deep breath in and clutched the necklace tightly in the grasp of my hand. Without thinking, I quickly swam my way back to the dock and when I finally reached the splintered ends, I saw Alex sitting there, cold, wet and all out of breath and through his raspy voice he looked at me and said, "I couldn't let you die alone."

I looked at him and eagerly exclaimed, "I found the crucifix, Alex!" We sat together, trying to catch our breath while looking over the moonlit waters.

* * * * *

We found the necklace...the curse has been lifted...or has it?



STATIONARY

Nathan Riffe, 12

Anton's skin was peeling. His right arm was swollen to twice its size, turning an ugly gradient from gray to black. That's what happened in the first stage; in the second you start to fall unconscious more often, your eyes lose their color after being engulfed by your pupils. Anton knew this from watching it a bit too many times.

Anton was currently taking a long saw to it with some help from Tren. The room was nearly pitch dark except for blue-gray light pouring through the empty window frame. The carpet had a rough texture that went with the severely chipped wallpaper. Anton was sitting in a chair, the only furniture in the room. Tren looked up at Anton, his brown hair glowing in the dark. Anton gave an affirmative nod. Tren sliced the saw through his skin; it left glistening blood on bone, but it didn't hurt much.

Anton knew it wasn't really a part of him as the foam-like bubbles of skin exploded. "Thank you," he spoke. Tren didn't reply with anything but a smile. Anton left the room, the hallway was the same, except with no windows. The building had fallen nearly horizontally, leading the rooms to take on the qualities of a funhouse. Anton stumbled through the corridor to a double sliding door that no longer slid, but was held by a crowbar. He was still shaking from the slicing, almost tumbling off the stone staircase outside on the way to the pavement, which was overgrown with twisted thorned vines which adorned nearly everything in sight.

Outside almost a dozen people were silently moving rusting steel beams, building a wall together. Anton thought they looked like machines themselves, just silhouettes moving in the moonlight. None of them saw him or gave him recognition. Of course he couldn't blame them for it, they were putting together a defense against the wave. A mess of fallen pipes and steel and rubble stacked sixty feet high blocked the road behind them, while large hills covered in dying grass laid past their manmade wall.

Ever since the Earth's core stopped functioning, the Pacific had kept its wave's momentum, creating a tsunami that completely submerged North and South America in under thirty minutes. Winds and clouds clashed together ripping apart cities, avalanches crushed people and their children under tons of boulders. The horrified

screams could be heard across the continents. The wave continued to circle the planet, every two months. Anton himself didn't even know where they were anymore, he guessed somewhere in southern Europe based off the architectural ruins of buildings.

A white dash caught Anton's attention. The group was maybe forty meters away from him, so it couldn't have been one of them. Anton's heart started to pump faster like a steam engine. On a skyscraper leaning onto a taller one a creature perched—it had long white fur, bronze eyes, and looked like a wolf with rabies had a child with a human. Before Anton could alert anyone else, it leapt. Anton raised his good arm, but the monster had climbed into a well-out-of-reach window. Hesitating, Anton looked at his watch and went back into the building.

Anton had recently turned seventeen and spent two years living with the small surviving group in the area. They never established a leader, they never spoke about anything other than threats to themselves, and the only other person under thirty was Tren; he was twenty. Anton helped with hunting every few weeks, which usually resulted in relying on a remaining ham from the supermarket or one of the few not-rotting corpses.

In the building, Anton turned into a damp room of cots and clothes, and settled.

* * * * *

When Anton woke, the moon was still illuminating the dark sky. It always did. Nobody could survive on the day side of the earth anymore. The radiation from the constant sun had boiled it to hundreds of degrees. Though there was barely any land either except for mountain chains. Although the dark side wasn't much better; it turns out constant exposure to secondhand light sources can lead to some unique diseases. None of this could compare to the lechings, though.

Anton reached the wall in construction. Several men were passed out from exhaustion or otherwise on the road. The wall was nothing compared to the one they had two months ago, and he knew that one barely helped. Anton smiled. Tren had told him that this town lived near a river with a dam. It was overflowing by now, but Anton could see the gigantic shadow of it resting near the hills overhead. A clanging sound came from his right. His head swerved to meet it. A pile of rubble shifted, a long black

flab of skin emerged from the cracks. It reminded him of when they had to treat infections with fire; this thing was still emerging and coming towards his legs, though.

Anton jumped up and jogged backwards, almost falling over. A long snake quickly scurried back into some mold that gave off a revolting, pungent, stench-filled odor. With a rapidly beating heart he made his way to an old ladder used for under-budget scaffolding. It crippled under his weight as he made his way to the top. He looked down for any stray jagged pieces of debris. His leather boots from a flooded sports store made a splashing sound in the grass. Everything glowed with a vibrant neon green energy outside the fallen city.

After a couple minutes of walking, Anton reached the dam's side. It loomed over everything, being taller than the skyscrapers in the city would've been standing. Along its gray concrete sides a staircase went from left to right to left again, in a chain-linked fence enclosure. Barbed wire was entangled with the vines running down the structure. He thought if he could open it there would be enough space to stop the wave's source. Anton had been told by Tren and a few others that the places outside their hideout were overrun by mutated lechings. Anton could hear some growling in the distance like he thought he would. No fur could be seen though. As he pulled open the creaking latch to the gate, his mind kept telling him that there was probably a reason nobody else used the dam. The stairsteps were giant, and his knees were giving in to their soreness.

"Finally." Anton let out a sigh of relief. He took another step. He reached a long tunnel that went deep into the dam. No windows could be seen; along with anything else. Anton hesitated. He wasn't this foolish, he told himself. He took the sharpest piece of steel he could find and slashed the wall of the dam with it. Flames instantly erupted on it, to Anton's surprise. He stepped a few paces into the tunnel. He had researched dams often as a kid, thinking he would be an engineer.

The surrounding interior amplified his breath and his steps. Anton could see around ten paces in front of him, thanks to the torch.

They said the lechings came out from their caves after the first flood, that their hell had been put out only to spark again onto the surface.

Anton heard a thump so loud he could feel it vibrate back off his skull. He went tumbling down, letting go of his flying torch to catch his fall. The place was dark, with

the ends of the tunnel nowhere in sight. He heard a growling rumble by the floor next to him. Anton's hand was suddenly soaked in a warm liquid, torn from the fall.

He pulled his hand out of the puddle. Drip. Gurgle. *It's just pipes*, he thought. He abandoned finding his weapon and hurried out the other end of the tunnel. He was now on top of the dam. He could see the gray city stretching back for miles, and the river swirling to the left around it. A shiny golden lever caught Anton's eye. A panel sat next to it with a blank black screen; he jabbed at it. Nothing. A quick silhouette crossed over his vision. Anton looked up. A pile of rocks sat where he thought movement was, on the hill to his left.

He grabbed the lever to manually open it. He heaved down; sirens went off, fueled by emergency electricity sources. Not fast burglar alarms but a horrifying tornado siren-like sound. Chains tightened. Gates swung open. Water overtook all though; a thousand waterfalls rushed into the rivers. Anton knew the villagers were awake now. The sound was literally deafening. Anton had heard a dam open before, and none were this noisy. Slowly, he pivoted the other way to face behind him. Darkness took everything beneath the giant crushing wave. It was taller than any tsunami and was a dark navy. He heard low moaning voices from inside his ears, the screams inside his ears grew, and the wave blocked out all sound making it seem like he was underwater. Limbs and bodies floated through the wave as if in a stasis. He could make out the shapes of at least seven office blocks.

Anton realized that if the wave got to them before the dam emptied out, it would be useless to have even opened it. He took a step backward from the towering wave. It loomed at least six times taller than the dam. He also observed he would be squished into the pavement if he kept standing still, though that was assuming the dam wasn't also ruined. He raced back to the tunnel, sixty feet away, forty feet. The wave was approaching faster. Twenty feet away, he leapt and rolled about five feet. He covered his ears. A minute later it struck. Water climbed down both sides of the dam towards Anton. The walls slowly cracked until the tunnel joined the collection of the wave. Anton held his breath. He slammed into the wall of a floating house, tumbling through the bricks into an air pocket. The interior walls and roof had been swept away, but at the top it had not been filled. Anton inhaled the hot stuffy air, wheezing all the while.

How am I going to get out of this? How much is the dam going to stop the wave? I

suppose opening the dam could've only helped. Anton's head spun his thoughts around and around. Suddenly water engulfed his body again. He flew through the house, smashing into the sides until the world was completely dark.

* * * * *

Anton opened his red-lined eyes. He was lying half-submerged in mud and his brown hair felt stuck. He tried pulling himself from the hillside. He stayed put. Again he yanked. Anton yelled as he went somersaulting down the hill before his fingernails stopped him. Standing slowly, he looked at his new surroundings. The water level covered the city. His blood stopped flowing. Only two lone skyscrapers could be seen now. Before he could think about the losses, something smacked him from behind. He twisted in surprise midair. Long gray hair flowed down past the creature's feet. Its scratch had left an ugly mark, already turning into a black-colored infection. A leching with black slits was looking at him. Its bronze eyes were glowing brighter than anything else with the new moon. Without a second thought Anton continued to jump off the hill and into the water. Howling like tornado sirens went off surrounding the city and hills. They had been disturbed by the wave.

Anton knew they couldn't swim better than humans, thanks to the villagers. The villagers. Anton looked for anyone down below but all there was were ruins floating upon the water. He heard something above the howling though. Anton hastily tilted his head up. He could see the silhouettes of a few people jumping on a rooftop of the nearest skyscraper. They were still alive. The dam had worked. Anton paused. *At its job anyway.* He continued swimming. The mark was starting to burn now. The villagers would help him treat it. A pile of lumber and wood made a raft near the skyscraper. It was at least half-consumed by the wave, but still stood over two hundred feet tall.

To Anton's shock he saw a flash of gray land on the building, and several more followed the leching's lead. They would've had to leap nearly a third of a mile to get from the hills to there. Not looking at the villagers on top, though, they were all snarling down at him. Their snouts were long and opened to show a double set of jaws gleaming in the darkness. Anton jumped, his bare feet propelling him off the raft and through a broken window. He gritted his long teeth as a desk fell over, spilling pens and cards all

over the floor. Above and below him he heard a series of smashing sounds and screams. Anton knew they were coming for him.

I have to get to the villagers. He crept through the wooden door of the room and into the pitch-black hall. He could see no more than an inch from his eyes. He heard a creak a couple of steps in. Lechings were opening doors, as well. Which ones though? Anton felt his hand touch the end of the hall when he heard a low growl behind him. He ran to the left faster than he ever had. He nearly tripped over a staircase but he leapt five steps at a time up them instead. His abilities seemed to improve under stress, he observed. The building began to become more cramped as it got slimmer towards the top. Anton yanked open a door to grab the nearest furniture he could find and threw it down the spiraling staircase. The lechings' howling practically shook the building at this point. He reached a final floor with cubicles infecting all of it. A glass wall showed Anton fog rolling down the hills to the city. It made him stop to look at it for just a moment before he heard more banging.

He quickly found the last staircase leading to a metal door. He gave it a shove. It was locked. "OPEN THE DOOR," Anton shouted through. Why weren't they helping him? "HELP." Anton banged the door. He heard sobbing through the other side. While he could also hear howling below him, heavy footsteps were getting louder and louder. Anton's claws raked the door, leaving scratches on it. The lechings were getting closer. Anton rammed into the door. Nothing. While he rammed into it again, something ran through his head; did the villagers ever say something about lechings spreading themselves through wounds? Or was that the second sun infection? He ran into the door one more time until it clicked. Yes. Anton's eyes shone like gold. He made it. They made it.

THE MESSENGER

Hudson Gaither, 12

It all started on a warm, sunny school day. Mia was talking about other people behind their backs, as she usually did, with Ella beside her. “Wow, look at Brody! He’s such a four-eyed little nerd. Right, Ella?”

Ella hesitated for a moment. “I l-like him. He’s a good person...I mean, yeah, he’s nice, but he’s super ugly. And a bit fat, too,” she added.

Later that day, she dropped all of her books on the ground. Brody came up to her and helped her pick up her books.

“Thanks for that, Brody,” she said to him. “Why would you want to help me, anyways?”

“Because I’m nice,” he said to her. He leaned in close. “But I’m super ugly,” he whispered in her ear. He then walked away.

Mia was shocked that he knew what they said about him. They weren’t even near Brody! *I guess I should just be quieter next time*, Mia thought to herself.

After school, she got home, and she was ecstatic to know that her mom was making her favorite food for dinner, macaroni and cheese. After doing all her homework, she went out to the dining room. She sat down and awaited her plate, but she didn’t get one.

“Hey Mom, where’s my plate?” she asked.

“You aren’t getting one,” her mom said with an agitated voice.

“What?! Why?”

“Because I heard that you thought my cooking was disgusting,” her mom explained.

“Aw, come on, Mom,” pleaded Mia, “I’m so sorry, I promise! And plus, I genuinely like your mac and cheese.”

“Well, even so, you shouldn’t be talking about people behind their backs like that. You can warm up some leftovers for dinner.”

Mia was sad, but as her mom walked away, she came up to her brother Johnny. “Can I have your leftover mac and cheese?” she asked him.

“No way,” he said, pulling the plate away.

“Why?” she asked him.

“Because I heard you making rude comments about my haircut,” Johnny said.

“Ok, I’m sorry,” she apologized quickly. “Now can I have it?”

“Still no. The worst thing you could do to a man is diss his haircut, and I ain’t letting that slide.” Just then, their mom came back.

“So how did you guys hear about my mean comments, anyways,” Mia asked. “I didn’t say them anywhere near you.”

“Well, I—” her mom hesitated. “I...don’t remember, actually.”

“Same here,” Johnny replied.

“Well, that doesn’t matter anyways,” her mom told her. “What matters is that you need to start being nicer to people, alright?”

“Okay, I’m sorry, Mom.”

* * * * *

Later that night, Ella was allowed to come over to their house, and they did lots of things together. But suddenly, she heard many whispers coming from the forest next to their house. When she asked Ella, Ella said she didn’t hear anything.

She went to check it out, but Ella stayed inside. Mia started wandering through the forest, but at one point, she blinked and a mysterious figure appeared in front of her eyes.

It had pitch-black skin and spindly limbs so skinny she swore that she could see veins on them. It wore a brown, torn-up cloak that covered up its face, which was submerged in shadow except for two glowing green eyes. She was too shocked to move or speak, and it wasn’t moving either.

Suddenly, it opened its coal black, razor-sharp teeth, and out flew a green gust of wind. Before Mia could react, the gust flew into her ears, and her mind was suddenly plunged into chaos. She heard a multitude of whispers buzzing around in her head, making it impossible to think of anything. Suddenly, a voice talked to her in her head. A low and gravelly voice that overpowered all the whispers. *‘Ella thinks you are a bad person.’* Suddenly, her mind went quiet again as the gust flew out into the forest and she fell to the floor.

When she got back up, the figure was gone. In fact, she didn’t even remember

anything about him. She just knew that Ella had some explaining to do. She ran back into her house and into her room, where Ella was still there.

“Ella, I heard that you think I’m a bad person. Is that true?” she asked Ella.

“U-um, well, I—you see—” she stammered, trying to come up with a good response.

“Well, is it true?” Mia asked her, getting impatient.

Ella sighed in despair. “Yes, I do think you’re a bad person. You talk behind everyone’s back; classmates, your parents, other people, and that’s just not my kind of style, y’know? Look, you’re a good friend, but you’re really mean to everyone else. I just think we should go our separate ways.” Ella walked out of the room.

Mia was furious, and she stormed off into the forest. “Stupid Ella,” she said to herself. “She’s so egotistical. She thinks she’s such a noble hero because she isn’t my friend anymore. I only became friends with her out of pity, anyway.”

With all this being said, she couldn’t help but start to cry. Ella was her friend for many, many years, and Mia grew to really like her. But then, the figure appeared again.

“Wh—who are you?” she yelled nervously. She felt a low, gravelly voice intrude into her mind.

‘I am the Messenger. And you? You fell for my trap.’

Just then, the Messenger bared their fangs again, but this time, they were sucking something out of Mia. Mia was caught in their grasp while the Messenger drained her. Finally, they let go of Mia, and she fell on the ground.

She felt a sense of calmness. She was no longer sad, nor angry. But that calmness soon transformed into fear as she looked up and saw a perfect replica of herself where the Messenger once was. Before she had time to really process this, the clone ran away. Mia tried to run after it, but a bunch of rogue vines grew out of the ground, tying her to the spot.

The new Mia stopped at the edge of the forest, turned around, and grinned with coal black, razor-sharp teeth before running into the town.

TOP SHELF

Anna Nida, 13

An assortment of leaves brushed my ankles as I walked across the pavement. The sky was a soft gray, sprinkled with just a few hints of blue. I snuggled into my coat and boots as the wind swept across me, cutting straight through me like a blade. Increasing my pace, I rushed in the direction of my house, thinking about how much homework I'd need to finish that night. *Ugh. I hate homework*, I thought. Just then, a quick movement on a telephone pole caught my attention. It was the MISSING CHILD poster that had been hanging for months. A younger boy sat smiling in the photo, his face sprinkled with freckles like they'd been dropped there by a soft rain. He had dark, black hair and wore a faded blue shirt. **Grayson Scott** was typed in big, bold letters, above the desperate plea, ***Please help us bring Grayson home!*** The poster was wrinkled and frayed, left with the longing of a family. I turned and shook away the thought of how upset his family must be right now.

As I hurried along, I spotted the house everyone called 'haunted' up ahead. Shingles lay on the overgrown grass, as well as small pieces of glass. The paint was peeling off in sad ribbons, and trash littered the neglected yard. I stopped right in front of the open gate to the house and shivered. *Does anyone even live here anymore?* I wondered. The house was barely taken care of—if at all.

Suddenly, a violent shove sent me face first into the yard. I sputtered out dirt and grass as I quickly turned to see my attackers. Of course, it's our school's three biggest bullies. A surge of adrenaline ran through me, making me almost shake.

"Hah! You got dirt in your mouth! You look like an idiot!" The biggest one laughed.

"Shut up! I'm just trying to get home," I replied. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

He obviously was the leader of the group, because the other boys just stood behind him laughing as he fired back, "Whatever. Why are you standing in front of the 'haunted' house?"

Irritated, I replied, "Can't I look at a house? I don't care if they say it's haunted. That's just people trying to be scary."

“If you really don’t care and it’s not true, then how about you prove it to us?” He gave me another hard shove and swiftly slammed the gates closed behind me. “Then get in there! Prove it’s not haunted,” he roared.

“Fine. I’ll prove it!” I slowly walked across the sidewalk, overgrown grass dragging against my boots. The porch steps creaked as my weight settled on each one. Finally, I took a deep breath before reaching for the door handle. A cold shiver crawled through me and I looked back to make sure they were still watching. *Why me? I was just minding my own business and now I’m doing something stupid. Might as well hurry in, sneak out the back and run home. They’ll think the ghost actually got me!*

With a wave of new courage I clenched my fist around the handle and slowly turned the knob. Surprisingly, the door swung open easily. Too easily. I stepped inside, leaving the door just slightly ajar, expecting cobwebs and dirt. Instead, the house was shockingly clean—everything almost sparkled. Taking a deep breath, I softly asked, “Is anyone home?” No response. I tried a bit louder, “Hello? Is anybody here?” Nothing.

I walked to my right, into a welcoming living room where a fireplace softly glowed. Across the room was a red chair facing away from me. I slowly walked toward it; that nagging feeling almost shouting that I should turn and run. The closer I got, the more I heard a faint humming.

An old woman, happily looking at a shelf full of figurines, turned and said, “Why hello there, dear!” She paused, but smiled as she asked, “What brings you here?”

“Oh! Uh,” I mumbled. “I’m so sorry for coming into your house without any sort of permission—a group of kids dared me to do it and I shouldn’t have listened to them.”

She smiled kindly, with no hint of annoyance. “You’re fine, dear. I truly don’t mind at all—plus it’s nice to have visitors every now and then.”

I gave her a quick smile. *She really doesn’t seem evil—why do people always make her sound like a monster?* I wondered.

“Would you like some hot cocoa? You seem very cold. Please, take a seat,” she insisted.

Although I knew I should just leave, there was something about her that made me want to stay. Plus, hot cocoa sounded pretty good at that moment.

“Thank you,” I replied as she handed me a warm mug. I sat and took a sip of the drink. It was amazingly sweet, and I quickly felt its warmth spreading. “You know, a

lot of people think you're some type of evil witch—but you seem so nice.”

She set her cup down, and looked me right in the eye. A strange sensation made my fingers tingle under her gaze and I had to suppress a shudder.

“I hear that a lot. The outside of my house may be a bit chaotic, but there's more here than meets the eye. I'm quite tidy, as you know.” She smiled again. “But, I'm glad you can see who I truly am.”

I returned her smile, taking another sip of hot chocolate. *Hey, maybe I can ask her about those little statues—they look pretty cool but it's strange that she has so many.* I paused, set my cup down and took a deep breath. “Hey—uh, what's up with those little figurines? I've never seen anything quite like them. Why do you have so many?” I asked.

“Oh, that's a great question. I actually make these myself!” She grinned and got up from her chair. “Here, follow me, I want to show you how I create them.”

She turned toward the direction of a hallway, but I froze, suddenly gripped by an almost overwhelming sense of dread. “I'm so...so sorry—I really have to go home now...I have tons of homework,” I said, hoping to just get out of there as fast as possible.

“No, I insist! Curiosity should be rewarded. Come on dear, you'll have fun and learn something, too.” Her sweet gaze persuaded me. As I followed her down the hallway, my gut was still screaming that I should've turned around and left. *I'm such a pushover,* I thought. *Next time, I'm going to stand up for myself.*

We stopped in a room full of ovens and tools. “This is where I make all of my figurines! Would you like to help me make one?” she asked enthusiastically.

She seemed quite lonely, so I thought it would be okay to be nice to her for a few more minutes. “Uhh...sure! But what are we going to make?” I asked.

“Hmm...Since I don't get many visitors, how about I make one of you? I'm quite good at creating realistic-looking figurines,” she beamed.

“Oh! Okay then,” I murmured. “This won't take too long, right?”

“No, no! This is actually a very fast process,” she replied. “Have a seat on that stool over there while I start, will you?” she asked. “I won't need your help for a bit.”

I sat on the small stool, and watched her pick up one of the long metal rods. She grabbed pieces of glass and swirled them onto the rod, adorning it with small glimmering mirrors. Then, she stuck the end of it into the roaring fire, twisting it methodically, carefully, almost like she was gently coddling a baby. I watched in awe

as the fire transformed the glass pieces from hard, solid chunks into a goopy, morphable substance. As she worked, I glanced over and noticed another shelf like the one in the living room. There, on a single row, sat a figure of a boy. He looked familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on why.

"Oh, do you mind putting on this necklace?" she asked. Her response caused me to lose my train of thought. It was also quite a strange request. *Why would she need me to put on a necklace if she's just making something that looks like me? This makes absolutely no sense.* Reluctantly, I slipped the necklace over my head.

"Perfect," she said with a slight menace in her tone. As she began twisting the rod in the oven, my skin began to tingle and feel warmer. Beads of sweat trickled down my forehead as the fire seemed to race across my skin. I picked up the stool and moved it farther from the fire, hoping that the heat wouldn't be so overwhelming. Despite my efforts, my skin just kept getting hotter. My fingers also felt extremely stiff, and I would've sworn they were coated in a hard, glossy layer of glass. I panicked, my breathing quickening and my heart pounding. "Um, excuse me, I think I should be heading home now!" I said frantically.

"Oh, but the process is just beginning!" she grinned. "It's too late, anyway," she softly added.

"Excuse me? It's too late for what? I really should be heading home. I don't like the way the fire feels against my skin. It was nice meeting you, ma'am." As I tried to stand, my head began pounding and my skin felt like it was melting. The glassy cover was real—and it was beginning to crawl up my arms, slowly overtaking my skin. I could no longer feel my fingers, or even move them at all. I hobbled toward the door, desperately trying to leave the house as my vision blackened. My legs quickly stiffened like my fingers, and I toppled to the ground. The old woman's soft humming echoed around me as she twisted the rod back and forth in the fire.

That's when I realized the necklace was still dangling around my neck. It had started everything—maybe it could stop it, too! I struggled to lift my stiff, glassy arm up, trying desperately to rip it off my neck. I frantically tried to pull with my glass fingers, which weren't much of a help at all. Tears ran down my cheeks, dripping to the floor. My eyes finally gave one last look to the world before they became too heavy to keep open.

When I could finally see again, I realized that the fire had been put out. The room

was dark and empty, but I was viewing it from a different angle. I was higher, like I was on the wall. Then I recognized the shelf. The shelf! I looked down at myself and knew that I was tiny. My whole body was completely numb, and I couldn't move at all. I quickly moved my eyes each way, wanting to scream for help. Just to my right sat the figurine of the little boy on the poster—Grayson Scott. He was wearing the same type of necklace that had sealed my fate. Tears ran down his face when he saw that I was awake.

Now I realized why that figurine had looked so familiar.

YOU JUST CAN'T SEE THEM

Lucky Treanor, 14

Jay couldn't see them, but he knew they were there.

First it was random classmates, then his best friend, and then his parents had been knocked off. The town was slowly disappearing and he didn't know what the hell was happening. All he knew was whatever was taking them was in his house. He could feel them all around him, the eyes, the soft gargled breathing, tapping and shuffling of the things moving.

In the walls.

In the floor.

In his bed.

His eyes were locked on the indent on his covers, something—*someone* was sitting there, staring at the wall opposite him, the one he'd covered in the notes he was keeping on people going missing. Jay could feel his heart pounding in his chest, his mouth had gone dry and his palms were slick with sweat. It looked like it was finally his turn to get taken, he hadn't been able to stop whatever was happening.

A sour taste filled his mouth as bile threatened to leap out of his throat, his breathing hitched and he had to will himself not to vomit. Slowly he reached to his side and wrapped his fingers around his bat, praying to whatever would listen that the being in his bed was solid enough he could smack it.

Just as he was about to take a step the thing in his bed turned, he could see the crater on the comforter shifting, facing him. It looked like something was planting its hands in front of it, getting ready to pounce.

If he hadn't been dead before, now he was. His bed shook, the crater disappeared, and the monster collided with him. "Fu—"

The two of them burst through his bedroom door, wood splintering around them as the bottom part knocked Jay onto his back. He felt a hot pain on his cheek, traveling down to his jaw. A grunt was all he could manage against the pain, trying to raise his arms over his body to protect himself.

"Get off—" he rasped, planting his hands where the thing's chest should be, and

pushing. It was solid, alright, but what he felt made him grateful they were invisible.

Mush.

Fleshy, warm, wet, writhing mush.

The vomit raised in his throat and he heaved the beast off of him, turning his head to spit it up on the carpet of the hallway. His mind filled with curses as he wiped his lips with his jacket sleeve and looked around the hallway for any signs of the creature.

Jay got up, trembling and fighting to keep his legs under him, "*This is so wrong. This is so wrong!*" His head screamed, as he glanced at the now-broken door to his room.

Something warm ran down his cheek, and the urge to vomit came back, Is that—? Just a small swipe left his fingers coated in blood. "*It scratched me!*" he thought, stiffening and turning around the room again. Nothing hinted that the thing was still there.

Why come get him if it wasn't going to kill him? He couldn't feel eyes on him anymore, couldn't hear the breathing. Were they gone?

Tick.

Jay jumped and whirled to look at the source of the sound. The grandfather clock? It hadn't made a sound since his parents went missing, since the breathing and tapping had started. Rustling outside made his head snap in that direction instead. The eyes were back on him.

Slowly he crept over to the window and looked out, to find two small patches of grass pressed down, someone was standing there, watching him.

He flipped it the bird, a grimace on his face as he felt more blood trickling down his cheek and neck. Why had the things been watching him? Why not take him?

Did they find it entertaining, watching him slowly go mad the past few weeks? Watching the paranoia grow and grow, seeing his eyes dart around with every wet breath from the ceilings. Had they gotten some sort of sick satisfaction from that?

He needed to get his cheek patched up, and then his door. Who knows when they might come back?

* * * * *

Jay hissed quietly as the cleaning alcohol hit his wound, his eyes locked with his image in the mirror. He was filthy. His hair greasy and wet with sweat, his face smudged from pen ink and pencil lead. Red yarn bits clung to his black jacket, his fingers covered in bandages thanks to pricks of tacks.

He'd been too afraid to shower the past three days; with monsters crawling through his house who wouldn't be? He hadn't gone to school since his parents disappeared. He barely even slept, and when he did he shut himself up in his bedroom closet. It was the only place he felt safe anymore.

His throat was thick from lack of use; what was the use of speaking if he was all alone? Why let the demonic things around him know what was going on in his head?

Jay turned on the sink and ducked his head under the faucet, taking a few sips to help with his dry mouth. His legs shook the whole time, adrenaline coursing through him still.

Why weren't the cursed things coming after him?

Why did they leave him?

Why couldn't he save his parents?

* * * * *

"It's the anniversary of the Ashbourne town disappearances. The police have officially stopped the search parties for the nearly two hundred missing residents as of now, and are asking for people to come forward with tips—"

Jay clicked the TV off and took a deep breath through his nose.

The boy had become a recluse.

He didn't talk to anyone, and he'd quickly been titled the '*town crazy.*' Jay had even had to get thicker curtains, the light outside had turned white...bright. Almost blinding. Whatever it was it had gotten colder as well, it didn't feel natural anymore. He was getting ready, because he knew those things were going to come back. And this time he intended on winning.

Absent-mindedly, Jay ran his fingers over the two long scars on his cheek, everyone in the town said he did it to himself...*had he?*

* * * * *

Jay started awake on the sofa, blinking rapidly. He didn't remember falling asleep, but he did remember turning off the TV earlier. The screen was playing static, and the grandfather clock had stopped ticking.

Eyes.

They were back. It had been six months and they were back to finish the job! He could feel their eyes, hear the wet breathing. His heart started like a horse's, and his eyes darted around the room in alarm. The closest weapon was across the room, a rifle hidden in the umbrella holder.

Jay slowly rose to his feet, shakily walking over to the rifle.

Creak.

Jay lunged for the gun and turned around, only to be met by something sharp slicing his face.

“SHOOT!”

Something hit him square in the nose, knocking him back against the wall. Haze filled his vision as the back of his head flared up with pain.

He blinked and he was on his knees, his head dropped forward and his arms useless at his sides. The rifle kicked to the side, almost ten feet away.

If he jumped maybe—

The monsters kicked his stomach, sending him sprawling across the wooden floor, further from his defense and further weakened.

“You gonna kill me? Like you did with my parents?” Jay shouted, picking himself up and leaning against the wall. Once again he got punched in the face and knocked back a few steps out into the hallway. “Like you did with half the damn town!?” A kick to the gut sent him tumbling again.

He landed on his shoulder and a horrible pain shot down his bicep. The boy bit back an angry scream, squeezing his eyes shut and laying there for a moment, trying to gather himself.

The monsters had gone still, waiting for him to stand. He was tempted to just lay there forever, it would be so much easier than trying to fight invisible foes.

“Jay?” A strangled raspy voice called from the front door. The boy looked up, trying to see if it was help.

His mind just went further into a panic at the figure standing down the hall from him. The red fleshy humanoid mound couldn't have stood less than six feet. Its body was covered in pulsing, thick, vein-looking things that writhed off its body and ran along the walls around it.

He'd never experienced such utter *horror* in his life. He opened his mouth to scream, and only a small squeak escaped. If this was how each creature looked, he would rather die. The things didn't have faces, just huge holes in the middle of their fleshy heads; didn't have any defined features, they were just wet meat piles.

Before he could even fully come to terms with the appearance of the things, they all revealed themselves. He didn't even try to stop the vomit creeping up his throat from spilling out in front of him all over the cold white tile.

The creatures took it as a challenge. They all pounced on him, growling hissing, shouting his name in their garbled, disgusting voices.

“Jay!”

“Jay!”

“Jay!”

He was pinned down, and one of them bit his arm sharply. “NO! No no no!” He screamed, tears streaming down his face. “HELP ME!” He was dying. He could feel the fight leaving him, he could feel his brain getting foggy. The venom was coursing through his veins, icy cold and freezing his limbs, freezing his thoughts. He'd lost. He hadn't prepared enough. He couldn't save anyone.

It was his fault. He should have gotten out of bed.

“No no no—no—” he sobbed, trying his best to thrash in the creature's hold. “I want my mom—I WANT MY MOM!”

* * * * *

“Poor kid,” one of the nurses whispered, watching as quite a few of the orderlies had to

pin down the teenager so a nurse could drug him.

“That home invasion messed him up. Have you heard him at night?” the other whispered, biting her lip with pity. “He just repeats over and over, ‘You just can’t see them.’ It’s honestly horrible.”

“He really thinks there are monsters after him...”

“He thinks he’s still in his house!”

THE WOMAN FROM THE BUSH

Peyton Chartier, 13

This was the best time of year. It was a cool fall day, the breeze running through my hair and not a care in the world.

I walk up to my grandparents' house while waving goodbye to my parents as they drive off. I was super excited to spend my fall break with them when I heard something...a noise sounding like a dainty bell...no...jewelry? I look behind me.

...nothing.

Seeing as nothing is there, I turn back while finding my key to the house because my grandparents are still at the store, when I hear it again! I whip around and look for the source of the noise. My eyes fall on one of the bushes next to the stairs that lead to the front porch and see the leaves moving. I hesitantly approach it when a girl pops out! I scream and tumble back when I see her. She is wearing a long flowy white dress that contrasts her dark, almost-black hair that is covering most of her face, but I can barely see bits of pale skin and a small part of large round, bright blue eyes. She shushes me by putting a finger over her lips.

"Shhh."

I scramble to my feet as she comes close; she's so close now that I can feel her hot breath on my cheek as she whispers in my ear with a shaky voice.

"If you don't leave...you'll regret it. These people aren't who they say they are. Run while you can!"

Her voice sends shivers down my spine as she speaks her warning. Before I can ask what she meant with that warning...she's gone...I look around and step towards the bush again to see if she's there, but stop when I hear a crunch of paper.

"Huh...? What's this?" I wonder out loud as I pick up a small newspaper clip. It's a missing girl report...Sandy Anderson went missing in 1896.

I know her. She's like an idol in our town. Everyone knows the legend about her but nobody knows what happened to her...it says she skipped school and never returned home. When questioned, her friends claimed she was at her grandparents' house, but her grandparents immediately denied.

I think about the girl I saw and look at the girl in the photo...long curly black hair, large round eyes that I'm assuming are a shade of blue because of how the ink on the page is...and she's thirteen. My age...huh. How weird.

I go inside the house and I'm instantly greeted by my grandparents' cat, Whiskers. I picked up the fat cat and walked to the bedroom my grandparents made for me when I was young and put my bags down and lay on my bed. Before I know it, my grandparents are back home and we're all in the kitchen, cooking dinner and talking about our lives when I hear it. The tiny jingle of jewelry...I look around.

"Did you guys hear that?" I ask my grandparents and my grandma looks at me, confused.

"Hear what, dear?"

"That jingle! You didn't hear it?"

"No, are you feeling alright, dear?"

"I'm fine, Grandma! I just—never mind. I must be hearing things." I shrug off the constant feeling of fear and keep talking with my grandparents until I feel something... it feels like I'm being choked, I cough and clear my throat. I'm fine somehow but feel... numb. The rest of the night goes by fine, we all eat our dinner together and watch a movie called *The Little Mermaid*. It was a new movie that had just come out and I was dying to see it. After the movie I started getting ready for bed, I took a shower, put my hair in a braid, changed into my pink velvet pajamas and got in bed. I sleep well until about three in the morning when I wake up to the sound of tapping on my window. I get out of bed and put my white fluffy bunny slippers onto my feet and opened my window, looking out of it.

...Nothing. Again.

"What on earth is happening...?" I mutter to myself as I shut my window and lock it again. I turned around and saw the girl again, this time covered in a weird-colored substance and her dress was torn and covered in dirt. Her hair was almost completely chopped off and practically a pixie, her face all beat up and bruised, big blue eyes wide and pupils almost as thin as a cat's when it's about to pounce.

"It was their fault," she says in a cold tone.

"What? Who...? Who are you?" I ask, voice soft and terrified.

"I think you know how to answer that question."

“No I don’t, who are you?”

...no response from the girl.

“Was it the people who lived here before my grandparents?” I ask, not knowing what she meant by ‘it was their fault.’

“No! Those people aren’t your grandparents!!” she screeches at me.

“What do you mean they aren’t?! I’ve known them my entire life! They’re obviously my grandparents!”

“Go to the basement.”

“What? Why?”

“JUST DO IT!!” she yells, the air turning cold and her hair floating around her before she disappears.

I hesitate before going downstairs as quietly as possible and going down to the basement. I light a candle and find the light switch that only turns on one light bulb in the basement, but it’s fine. I go down the stairs, keeping my hand on the wall as I go down each flight of stairs down to the basement until I get to the bottom. I look around...nothing.

I open the door that’s on my left. Only food in there.

I opened the door to my right. Holiday decorations. I look at an old skeleton we used for Halloween. Oh, how I used to love that thing; I would cry every time we put it away.

I chuckle at the sweet memories from all the decor in the hallway before I stop...did these bones always look so real?

I touch the bone that’s closest to me and take my hand back immediately. It feels really real, it must be a coincidence that it’s the exact size of a teenager around my age. Total coincidence.

I shut that door and opened the door to my front. I take a deep breath before peeking my eyes open to see what’s inside. I’m about to scream at the sight when a hand covers my mouth.

“It’s about time you found out...we were going to wait until you were a bit older...but oh well! Now would be the perfect time to become younger!” a crackly voice that sounds like my grandma says in a bone-chilling laugh.

I break away and stare at her in absolute horror as she seems to melt her skin and reveals a horrible discovery. The woman I loved and held so dear wasn’t who I thought

she was...I scream once more and fall to the ground as something hits my head.

* * * * *

I wake up, now tied to a chair and in front of a large fireplace with a cauldron that contains a bubbly liquid. My 'grandfather' takes a spoon and forces some into my mouth. It tastes like cherry medication if it was mixed with some expired candy. I try to break out of the chair and ropes, but can't seem to. Before I know it...everything goes black.

* * * * *

When I open my eyes I look around. Instead of seeing my 'grandparents' I see just miles and miles of darkness. I turned and saw the girl from the bush earlier. Her hair is neater and tied back in the 1890s style, and her dress is clean and seems like she just washed and dried it. Her bright blue eyes soft and bright as she looks at me while holding a brown teddy bear in her arms.

I'm about to speak when her soft voice speaks first.

"I tried to warn you. Now you know..." She gets closer to me and I can feel her warm breath. "Things...they aren't always as they seem," she says before walking off, leaving me in the darkness as I feel myself fading in a way. I stay there until I feel nothing.

I stare into the darkness before finally, *finally*, closing my eyes...

...and letting myself fade to nothing.

THE HOUSE

Anne Paschal, 14

You jolt awake, again. You lean over to get a view of the clock. 3:24 a.m. As you roll back into the comforter, you wonder how much longer this can go on. Your sleepless nights and restless days, the out-of-control feeling always lingering with you. Like you're no longer the master of your own mind. Like something else is telling you what to think, what to do.

You just moved to a new house, far from your family. You needed a "fresh start." After a few months in the house, you realized it wasn't just the pounding rain and the darkness of your street that gave an uncomfortable feeling to every breath you take in the house, but it was something ominous in the very depths of the structure.

The house seems to play with you at night. Freezing you to your bones, heating your skin until it burns with pain. And cursing you with nightmares that shock you awake in the wee hours of the morning.

Even in the day, the torture refuses to cease. Sounds with no apparent origin, creaking doors, and splintering wood.

When you first toured this house it was lovely. Antique. Fully furnished with beautifully crafted furniture. There was nothing suspicious about it as far as you could tell.

It was only after you had committed to the home that things became strange. The outside deteriorated quicker than you thought possible. The roof shingles falling in the night, waking you from your sleep, paint fading, and shutters swinging from their hinges.

You choose to ignore the rapid decline in the exterior of the house. Only raising an eyebrow when you notice the interior of your home going through the same process. The walls, which felt like new when you originally became an inhabitant of the house, have yellowed and worn away, the glass in the windows warping.

And the bedroom. It had a smell. Not a bad smell. Just different from the rest of the house. Like nothing you had ever smelled before.

You try candles and air fresheners, as a continued attempt to ignore the

disintegration of the house, but nothing can combat the smell of your bedroom.

As the weeks go on, the fine smell turns into a less-fine smell. Your room going from a neutral smell to a bad smell. Still livable, but inching towards repugnant.

After another month in the house, you can't ignore it any longer. Something is wrong. The feeling that creeps into your heart the longer you stand and take in the house. You try to figure out what to do.

You can either leave the house or go back to your family that you fought so hard to get away from.

Or. You can fix whatever's happening.

You decide to try.

The next evening you chose to stay awake throughout the night. Instead of waiting for the terrifying uncertainty to plague you unexpectedly, you sit in a chair, camera in hand, waiting for the night to fall.

At 3:01 a.m. you hear it. Your drowsy eyes dart around the room. Luckily no immediate danger is in front of you.

You hear screeching from down your hall. You're frozen; you steel yourself. *This is what you were waiting for*, you think to yourself. You can't back out now. You make sure your phone camera is open.

You contemplate turning on your phone flashlight, but decide against it.

You creep down the hall, almost trying to stall, even though you know you have to do this. The sound you hear is a high-pitched whine. Like the sound of a bird, but unnatural and elongated.

You inch closer to the sound. It's coming through the study. When you reach the doors you heavily contemplate turning back. You have not reached any danger yet. You could go back to bed. Endure another night of fear.

That can't happen. In a burst of courage, you tug on the door. It doesn't open. Even using all your strength and force it won't yield. Like glue is attaching the door to its frame.

You press your eye against the crack in the door.

The whine has slowed and you now hear a low thumping. Books. Booking hitting the ground one by one.

You flinch each time a book thuds against the carpet.

You creep backward slowly. Attempting to remove yourself from the situation.

The floorboard creaks under your feet. You raise your head to the study door. It's thrown open with so much force the bottom hinge snaps.

A blast of wind knocks you off your feet. You're jostled and turned until you feel sick. As you push yourself up off your stomach you catch a glimpse of a grey-colored gown turning round a corner. You pop up and take a few tentative steps.

After you've caught your footing, you take long strides in the direction you saw the entity go. Right towards the largest window in your house.

The tall ghost in the grey dress leaps out of the window. The glass shatters over your head. Splinters of sharp bits glimmer over the carpet. You shut your eyes and cover your head. After what feels like hours of smashing sounds and cutting glass, you open your eyes.

You look up at a perfectly intact window. The smooth glass was clearer than it ever was.

You run down the stairs, not bothering to grab a single object. Still in your pajamas, you rush out to the lawn, not stopping to grab a final look at the house.

You're not coming back here ever again.

87 MILES

Bilal Shakeel, 13

The first thing that Max noticed when he arrived home was that the curtains were shut.

He could not remember the last time that his mom had pulled the curtains in the day. Usually his mother would be standing at the window waving at him as he got off the school bus. Seeing the heavy blue curtains shut gave Max a strange foreboding feeling, as if something not very pleasant was about to happen.

The last time he had this feeling was when his uncle had thrown him into the deep end of the pool to try to ‘teach’ him how to swim. Max had been four years old, and he still remembered when he hit the water and felt it close over his head. He felt himself sinking down into the deep water, and despite his frantic thrashing he still felt like he was going down, into the seemingly-endless depth of the pool. That time it was his mother who had dived in and rescued him, after which she gave her brother a piece of her mind.

Max started walking faster towards his home. He looked around and noticed that the entire neighborhood was strangely quiet. Cody, the young boy next door who would always be playing in his front yard, was nowhere to be seen. Mrs. Parson was an old lady and was his neighbor on the other side. She was always sitting on her rocker on her porch and spying on everyone walking by. Today her rocker was empty and she was nowhere in sight. All down the street, it was quiet.

It’s a ghost town, Max thought. When he reached his front door, he noticed that the door was slightly open. The door swung open. Max called out “Mom, I’m home! Where are you?” The empty halls gave him no answer.

“David! Where is everyone?” He called for his brother. Again, no answer. Max quickly put down his backpack and walked throughout the house. A few minutes later he realized the entire house was empty. He walked quickly to the garage and noticed that the cars were all parked neatly. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out his cell phone. He called his mother, and then his brother, but both went straight to voicemail. He thought they would be back soon, so he went up to his room to finish a project that he

had stayed up the previous night to start.

He became drowsy and put his head down on his table. As he was about to fall asleep, he thought he heard something like a growl. It did not sound like a dog or cat. It was louder and much deeper. These thoughts flushed out as he closed his eyes. Before he knew it he was asleep.

* * * * *

Hours later, Max woke up with a start. His room was covered in shadows as night had fallen. Max wiped his eyes and looked around. Another growl, closer this time. Max looked around for a weapon but there was nothing. He quickly got into his closet. His old soccer shoes reeked and he held his nose. He heard something large come into his room, then something was at the closet door sniffing around. He gently slid his smelly shoes to the front of the closet. It must have worked, because whatever was on the other side of the door huffed and walked away.

Max crouched down in his closet for what seemed like hours. He did not want to confront whatever was out there in the dark, and with no weapon. Soon he grew drowsy again, and before he knew it he was asleep.

* * * * *

After waking up he quietly exited the closet. The sun was barely out. He desperately called his mother, hoping for a response other than the monotone, "I'm busy right now. Please call me back later." He finally mustered up the courage to leave his room and explore the house. Right after Max locked all the entries, he heard another growl. This time from his stomach. He had not eaten anything since lunch yesterday. He went to the fridge and devoured some cold steak. He scanned the house for a weapon in case he had another encounter with the beast.

Half an hour later he had put together a spear he made from tying a kitchen knife to the shaft of a broom. He did not know if that was enough, so he also took a Swiss army knife. As he walked back up the stairs, his phone buzzed. He jolted so fast, he nearly stabbed himself. His phone read, "ALL SURVIVORS. COME TO RAVEN ROCK MOUNTAIN COMPLEX IN PENNSYLVANIA. AFTER THE BROADCAST, DIRECTIONS

WILL BE DISPLAYED FROM YOUR LOCATION!! DO NOT STAY OUT AFTER SUNSET AND DO NOT USE GASOLINE!!”

Max was extremely happy to finally have contact with others. The happiness was immediately followed by fear due to the final sentence. *Was that what was in his room last night*, he thought. He looked back at his phone and saw the directions. His house was eighty-seven miles from the complex. He needed to figure out how he was going to be able to travel that distance without a car or gasoline.

Max ran upstairs and dumped his backpack out. As he ran around the house, he scanned for useful items. He ended up with one bag full of canned tuna, canned chicken, a loaf of bread, and a few chocolate bars. The backpack ended up full of a Swiss army knife, a can opener, a sleeping bag, a change of clothes, a portable water filter, and his favorite book of all time, *The Chosen*. He did not think much of the playing cards, but brought them just in case. With that, he took one last look at his house and left.

* * * * *

The first hour of walking was easy. Morale was high and exhaustion was far away. The walk got more frightening once he left his neighborhood. Five hours later, Max looked at his phone. Raven Rock was only sixty-six miles away. He didn't want to run, or even jog, because he would use more food that way. Night was approaching, so he needed to find some abandoned shelter.

One mile later, Max reached a neighborhood of mansions. He wondered for a quick second whether or not to take the detour, but after one growl of his stomach, his feet walked toward the houses without his approval. These mansions could have food, better safety equipment, and most importantly, a place to take rest. Max didn't know which house to go to until one caught his eye. A modern-style Italian villa. The door was locked but the sky was losing its color. Max grabbed his Swiss army knife and opened the smallest blade. He stuck the blade in the keyhole and applied pressure until he heard three clicks. The large oak door popped open.

Max quickly walked in and locked the door. He felt slightly giddy with a whole house to explore. He walked to the kitchen and pulled open the fridge. The shelves were full of fresh-cut fruit, leftover cuts of luxury meats, and the freezer was stocked with ice

cream. He wasn't able to stop himself from indulging. He didn't have the patience to warm anything up. He finished a few steaks before pulling some chocolate ice cream out.

He went to find the living room and stumbled upon silk couches, antique furniture, and a massive television. The whole room exuded comfort and the couch called to him. After walking for so long, the soles of his feet felt stiff. Sinking into the couch felt like a warm hug.

* * * * *

Max woke up with a start. He quickly realized that each limb was tied to a bedpost. A burly man was pacing around the bed mumbling to himself. Max tried to keep calm and pretended to be asleep so he could figure out what was going on. Max tried as hard as he could to hear the mumbling. All he could make out was, "*Stole my food...he is going to like you...*" It came out in a low scratchy voice.

Max squinted his eyes to try to see if anything useful was in the room. All he could see was a family picture hanging. Max assumed the man broke into the house like Max did, but the more he looked at the photo, the more he could see a slight resemblance between the man towering over him and the man in the photo. Then, he looked ready for business; he was wearing a suit with a bright inviting smile. Now, he was wearing a torn white shirt with what seemed like blood and dirt smeared on it, faded cargo pants, and trench boots. Finally, the man realized that Max was awake and said, "Why did you break into my house?"

"I didn't think anyone was here, if you let me go, I'll leave," Max mumbled. The man let out a slight hiss followed by a frightening smile that matched his clothes. "I have much better plans for you," he said.

After blindfolding Max, the man cuffed Max's hands together, followed by his feet. Then he started to drag Max down the stairs.

"Where are you taking me?" Max shouted. The man replied with nothing but a cold laugh. Max felt his body scrape against probably a hundred stairs. As Max got lower, he heard growling. The lower he went, the louder they got. Finally, the sound got so loud, he could feel the vibrations off the floor. Then all at once, the man stopped pulling him and threw Max into a chair. He pulled his blindfold off and Max felt the growling

could not come any closer.

When he opened his eyes, standing before him was a towering hunk of reptilian flesh being carried on two stubby legs. The arms were disproportionately long. The most terrifying part was its face. The majority of the face was a jaw containing sharp, bullet-like teeth. Once Max realized what he just saw, he let out a shriek so loud that even the monster hesitated. After the shock of the scream wore off, the monster continued to growl. It pulled at its chains so hard the walls seemed to shake. The man went to untie Max to give him to the monster.

“You will like this one,” the man said to the monster.

The man didn’t realize that Max would fight back. The second after Max had both of his arms untied, he pulled the man’s dirty shirt and threw him towards the creature. Max looked away, but it was too late. The moment when the creature ripped the legs off the man burned into his memory. This was quickly followed by horrifying screams.

“STOP, JAMES!! IT’S ME—DAD!! STOP!!” the man howled.

The pleading did the opposite of stopping the monster. Max quickly untied his own legs. As he ran up the stairs he could still hear the crunching of bones. He quickly stopped by his bag and backpack and snatched them up as he ran out the door.

By now the sun had started to shine and the birds had started to chirp. Max sprinted out of the neighborhood but a few minutes later, his lungs needed a break. The majority of the day was walking, with two quick stops for the bathroom and sandwiches. Now the sun was starting to plunge downward through the sky.

This time, Max was much more careful with his resting spot and chose an empty barn with no buildings nearby. His eyelids felt extremely heavy, but he decided to check how much of the journey he had left before going to sleep. He was surprised to see that he only had seventeen miles left. After that, he swiftly fell asleep.

Once again he didn’t have restful sleep, but this time for a different reason. His dreams were filled with the image of the mangled legs. His ears couldn’t hear a noise other than the screaming of the man. After he woke up, he checked to make sure there was still light outside. Then he started to walk for what he hoped was the last time. Today his feet ached, and everything but his want to see his mother and brother told him to stop. Four hours later his phone started to buzz.

He was finally here. The convenient signs on the road helped him to the entrance of

Raven Rock. Once he got to the final sign, he found himself standing in front of a large tunnel on the side of a mountain.

After walking through it, he found a guard. Max was extremely happy to finally see normal people.

“Who are you and why are you here?” the bigger guard said in a monotone voice.

“I’m Max Fax, and I walked eighty-seven miles to get here. I think my family is inside,” Max said. They sprayed him in some substance that smelled like hand sanitizer. Then they opened the doors. His ears were met with many conversations at once.

What looked like thousands of people sat in a large cafeteria-style hall and talked with one another. Max immediately spotted his brother with some other kids. Although his feet pained him, he sprinted toward his brother. Something was wrong. Why wasn’t his brother smiling?

“MAX! Where have you been? How did you get here?” his brother exclaimed. Max responded with a hug. Once the silence got extremely awkward Max asked, “Where’s Mom?”

David said, “She didn’t make it. She’s the reason I’m here. Once we were a few miles away from here, the sun started to set.” David started to tear up but he continued. “We should have gotten off the road but she insisted on continuing since we were so close. One of those creatures came at us and she pushed me away. As it attacked her, she screamed for me to run. I was overcome with fear but ran toward the base. Once I got here, I told them about it but they said it was too late.”

Max started to cry. He couldn’t believe he had just traveled eighty-seven miles to hear that his mom died. He wanted to beat his brother up, but after he remembered what the monsters looked like, he understood why eight-year-old David chose to run.

The next day when Max woke up, a guard told him that the monsters come out at night and have a very good sense of smell, they are also attracted to gasoline. Max didn’t know what to say. He was in the same room as his brother so once David woke up, they started to talk. First they spoke about their mother, but that was a mistake because it was followed by streams of tears. They decided that their mother would have wanted them to live their lives well and be strong in her memory.

Max and his brother decided that no matter how long it would take they would find

a way to destroy these creatures. Little did they foresee that this talk would catalyze their growth into the two most renowned authorities on the war against the monsters who sought to dominate their world.

THE SHADOW

Abby Letney, 12

A street.

A dark, lamplit street.

At the end of the street, a Shadow.

The Shadow has a shape. It is a familiar shape, a human.

A chill runs down my back. I rub my eyes thinking that it's just the light playing tricks on me, but no.

The Shadow is moving towards me.

It seems to be just floating off the ground.

It's a human shape, but it's much taller. Seven feet at least.

It's moving towards me slowly, and yet too fast at the same time.

I can't move. I'm paralyzed. There seems to be a face on the Shadow, but it's moving so fast that it's too blurry. I can't see it.

The Shadow is coming closer, and closer.

I can't move.

The Shadow approaches me. I trip, but I don't land. I'm falling through the Shadow.

Falling.

There's no end.

I'm falling through an abyss of darkness.

I'm falling, but not moving.

I'm screaming for my life, and yet, no sound could come out.

There's nothing but darkness.

Pitch black, but there's a shadow.

But it's not my shadow.

The Shadow from before.

I seem to be falling closer and closer to the Shadow. I almost come into contact with it, then...

I'm back on the street. Only now, it's the middle of the day.

No Shadow.

Only the ones of the people bustling around.

How long was I falling? Are people looking for me? Do they know where I was or what happened to me?

Suddenly, I hear something. A Whisper. A Whisper only I seemed to hear.

It was calling my name.

I turn around, nothing. Only the busy people crossing the street.

I hear it again. Still, I see nothing.

I'm in bed now. I'm asleep, but my eyes are wide open.

Suddenly, a chill enters the room.

The Whisper.

A light flickers.

When it does, I see something in the corner.

The Shadow.

This time, no face.

Just a body of darkness.

It glides past the floor next to my bed.

Then I hear it.

The Whisper.

The Whisper was the shadow.

And It called my name.

I start panicking.

Sweat is running down my face. I can't move.

The Shadow is getting closer.

It reaches its dark, crippled hand towards my face. Then...

I'm outside in a tree, reading a book. What's happening to me?

I choose to read my book while I'm actually peaceful and calm.

I get to the best part of the book, but I catch something in the corner of my eye. It looked like a big black blur.

I go back to reading my book.

But I see it again.

I look around. I see something in the field nearby.

A Shadow. It's just standing there. Without a care in the world.

I decide to go inside and read there instead. I go to my room, open my book, but I see something again.

I thought to myself.

So far, I've only seen it here and outside. If I go out somewhere, maybe I won't see it.

I go to the supermarket to pick up some groceries I've been meaning to get for a few weeks, then I go to the park to sit down and rest a while.

I almost dozed off. Then I see it again.

I ask someone next to me if they saw what I did. They looked at me like I was crazy.

I then go to the library to return my book. I go to one of the aisles to find a new one, and when I'm looking, I feel queasy all of a sudden. I turn around. It was right there behind me the whole time.

But I've felt this kind of presence before. For the past three months.

Had it been following me all this time? But only now it decided to show?

Suddenly, the lights go out. All I see are the green lights glowing from the Shadow.

It calls me.

I looked up to acknowledge it, but it was too late.

It grabbed me by the hand, and merely touched my face.

I'm asleep.

And I can't wake back up.

MIRRORS

Ava Blankenship, 14

That house. It all started with that...*hell*-house. Ever since I took a step through the door frame...and the *musty* air clogged my throat, I knew that it was the house. Of course, I didn't realize what would happen there.

H-how could I have known?

It was mid-November when I saw the *For Sale* sign in the yard of the house on Lancaster Road. It was a newer house, so it looked cleaner than the others around...but...the best way I can describe it is that it...i-it had an odd...*eeriness* to it. Like it made the hair on my neck prickle in anxiety.

The house was your typical brick and wood house; two floors, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and so forth. It almost seemed like the builders were going for a rustic look. Along with the look, I had also heard some things about the area around, about how it was a hotspot for ghouls and ghosts. My wife, Clara, being a fan of all that kind of stuff, loved it. Soon enough, we were filling out paperwork and shaking the hand of the dealer. I remember smiling at Clara when we walked into the house after the contract was signed. Her face was filled with all sorts of beaming emotions. She...she always made me smile...a-anyway, we settled in the next week, and there were still some boxes lying around when...when it all began.

It was a cool night, and Clara and I had been out for a nice dinner with friends, so we were both pretty mentally worn out when we got home. It was about 11, I think, and she had called the first shower, so I waited in the dimly lit box of the primary bedroom, scrolling through my phone. The room was bigger than our old flat's room, and the smooth wood floors contrasted to the cream carpet we were used to. It had been a nice change.

A creak from the floorboard temporarily distracted me and I noticed the water from the shower was off. I realized then it would soon be my turn, so I got up and grabbed my towel from the bed. It was as I stepped towards the door, the lights started to flicker. The lights had done this since we moved in, but this felt different. It felt *wrong*. I felt this...*fear* creep over me. I-I didn't know what from, but the feeling made the hairs on

the back of my neck prickle. The lights flickered again, and...and then there was a scream. The dread and confusion were overwhelming as I ran towards the bathroom door, instinctively toward the sound of my partner's cries. The door burst open, and I found Clara lying on the floor in her bathrobe, shaking violently. I fell by her side and tried to get her to talk, but she was...too shaken by...*whatever* had happened.

Now, something to know about my wife is that she is a very headstrong woman, and is rarely scared of anything, and to see her like this...it was almost like watching a different person who *wore* my Clara's skin.

I then picked her up off the floor and put her in bed, demanding that she stay there while I made her some of her favorite hot tea. It wasn't until we were curled up under the warm blankets together with our tea that she calmed down and...very slowly told me about what she saw. She told me...when...when the lights flickered, something came out of the mirror. I remember staring at her, my mind twisted in confusion. She clearly saw my look, but her mouth opened and closed like she couldn't figure out how to put words on her tongue. I remember bringing her head close to mine and pressing my lips to her soft skin. It...i-it would be one of the last times I would...kiss her.

The next few weeks we stayed away from that bathroom. I-I actually think...I think we stayed away from all mirrors in the house. We even went so far as to cover some of them up with sheets. It was weird, not looking at my own, clear reflection for that long. It almost gave me a sense of...*anxiety*.

After a month of rare, whispered flickers of the lamps, we decided to take the covers down and began to start using the mirrors again. This...was a *horrible* mistake. It had only been a week since we wiped the dust off the reflective glass...w-when it happened, when it took—

I apologize for the messy handwriting, I always get shaky thinking about this.

It took her. It...it happened while I was getting ready for bed. We had been binge-watching TV and we lost track of time. I remember having no thought in my head about what lurked above me as I splashed water onto my dry, tired face. It wasn't until the lights flickered again did the dread return. Something, like before, felt different. The hair on my arm stood up along with the hair on the back of my neck. I looked up just as the light flickered on, but nothing was there. Nothing. I-I couldn't believe it. What had Clara screamed about? What was the whole charade about the mirrors? My

thoughts were interrupted as something caught my eye. A ripple. In the glass. It was very subtle at first, like a single drop of water landing on the surface of a lake or pond. The waves grew bigger. It lapped at the side of the wooden frame like an angry tide. The lights flickered brightly, causing me to shut my eyes and step back. It was then the lights blew out in that bathroom, and everything was plunged into darkness.

I remember feeling nothing but irrational fear at that moment as I pressed against the bathroom door, unable to look away at the almost invisible, no, *impossible* waves on my wall. Then, something poked out of the middle. I almost didn't see it at first, but as seconds ticked by in painful slowness, the small dark shape twisted into what looked like a clawed hand. I think it was then I tried to scream, but I'm not completely sure anything came out. The hand stretched out and revealed a long, twitching arm. It dripped thick tar that smelt like bile onto the white countertops.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I wouldn't realize how much it actually smelled like blood until later, b-but...the next thing that emerged from my distorted reflection was a dark head. The first thing I noticed was its eye. It only had one...one...shining white pupil that burned into my screaming soul, and as it stared back at me, in the dim light coming from the bottom of the door, I could swear I saw a long, sharp-toothed grin stretching from side to side. Two more arms followed the first as it pushed itself out towards me, reaching a jerky hand out to my face. Fearful adrenaline suddenly surged my brain and I grabbed the door handle behind me and threw it towards the...*thing* that was coming for me. I slammed the door behind me, my whole body shaking as if in a freezer.

It *had* gotten colder.

Another thought then entered my mind, and soon enough I was running through the house, calling desperately for Clara. A silence answered my call, but before I could call out again, my foot caught on a box in the hallway and I tripped. My head hit the corner of the box, barely missing my eye but raking my temple. I looked up and saw her. The whole world seemed to slow down as the moon lit up the scene. There were small dust particles flying around her, and her blond hair looked icy white in the pale beams coming through the window in the living room. I remember...t-they reflected off the wide mirror hanging on the wall next to her. Her head...slowly turned to face me, and my heart ached as concern filled her eyes. It was then she reached out her hand

towards me. I opened my mouth to scream in protest...b-but...I was too late. The scene turned alien as Clara's face shifted to horror, and the drenched monster reached out from the rippling glass next to her and wrapped its *wet* fingers around her forearm.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Time then snapped like a rubber band, and before I knew it Clara's wrist was submerged in the now-dark hallway mirror. I cried out to her, pushing my body forward with surprising strength. When I reached her, her forearm was below the surface as she continued pulling and screaming. I gripped her arm and pulled her. I pulled with all my might, but the thing was stronger. At some point, my hand slid into the mirror. I-I...I don't know how...h-how to describe this part, but, it was like...it felt like if you reached your hand...i-into someone's stomach...into their *intestines*.

It was then that it dug what I guessed were its claws into my arm. If I would have held on...she might still be here...if I held on, it might not have...

But I let go. And for that mistake, it breathed her in. I'm not...I know what that sounds like, but I'm not...it's like she *melted into rubber*. Her body...i-it warped to fit the mirror's size as she slipped from my grip. Her scream was cut off and the room was filled with sudden silence. I watched in pure shock as the mirror's surface slowed, and soon returned to its original state. I stared at my bloody reflection, my breaths barely noticeable. I gingerly reached out and brushed the surface, but it was solid. I hit it. Then hit it harder. Soon I was pounding on it, screaming for the...*Thing* to give me Clara...m-my Clara...the cops found me crumpled up on the floor, mirror shards embedded in my hands and littering the ground around me. It took them over ten minutes to get me out of the house. Now that I look back, it's almost funny how one moment I desperately wanted to escape, and the next I wanted to rot away in those halls.

Waiting. Hoping.

Apparently there was a lot more blood on the ground that could have been mine, so I was almost accused of murder but...

I keep hoping to see the ripple again. And this time I won't fight it. I won't. I'll step towards it, I would even go as far to say that I will invite it. I-I just want to see my Clara again. I just want to hold her in my arms...and tell her...

I'm sorry.

BENEATH THEIR SKIN

Chevelle Jang, 14

If they had known who I was, all of this wouldn't have happened. The blood could have stayed kept inside, instead of spilled upon my carpet, staining it. The dark weight of guilt wouldn't be eating at my very being if they had just gone to the next door. But, per the usual, fate was messing with the world yet again, laughing as we scrambled to hide our heavy secrets. However, thinking about the past would not help me right now; I had nowhere to go but up. Looking up through heavy eyes, I didn't need a mirror to tell me they were bright violet, burdened with the mere thought of moving from my seat on the cold floor. My long sleeves draped to my sides, unable to hide lengthening fingers. Sighing, I took one last look at the home I had lived in before all this had happened, and slipped outside the door.

As I stepped over dry leaves into the cursed forest, the thing that scared me the most was the lack of sound I made.

* * * * *

Five hours earlier...

My mother was arranging the home security system over the door, rambling nonsense about nosy neighbors, mostly the one two houses down. Her raven-black hair was pulled back in a hasty ponytail, flyaways sticking to her sweaty forehead. She looked extremely stressed, and I knew tonight would be hard for all of us, but mostly her. Lost in my thoughts, I was absently eating a red apple, casting lazy glances at my bored father, who was closing all the curtains, checking his watch constantly. Itchy with tension, I turned my gaze to outside the window, trying not to think of tonight, and saw bright red and orange leaves drifting lazily from old maple trees. Looking at the street, I saw a few early trick-or-treaters, mostly little girls in glittery, gaudy princess costumes, and little boys in spray-painted knight costumes. The parents followed along, necks illuminated by glow sticks, and faces shadowed by the streetlights. Probably the young parents who thought their kids needed eighteen hours of sleep, and had a million allergies. I wish I could sleep. It got terribly boring at night, with

nothing but the wind and the occasional owl to keep you company. And shadows bleeding into your room by the open window, shifting as the moon rose and fell...My attention to the outdoors, however, was diverted when I heard my mother curse under her breath.

“Nia, darling, I have to go to Home Depot again. Do you think you’ll be okay, home alone, for a half hour?” my mother asked me.

I tilted my head, weighing the odds. My father, the only one having a license to drive, of course automatically had to go. I didn’t really want to be left alone, but it wasn’t exactly like I could go out today. Halloween was the hardest night of the year for us. My parents, being older, could resist our nature; but I was only sixteen, still too young to fully resist it. Some nights, when rebellious teens were out on the streets, smoking, I would dream of what it would be like. Being normal. But that was impossible; the smell was alluring, intoxicating, irresistible. Being banished from our homeland, we could survive without that dark, sticky liquid beneath their skin, but that didn’t mean we didn’t want it. We craved it. Nearly driven insane with want. However, contrary to popular belief, the liquid was nothing but a poison, meant to turn us into mindless drones, sent to haunt abandoned mansions and dark forests. It scared me, thinking of what I could become. However, if I just stayed inside, like I had for so many years, everything would be fine. Besides, this was the one night I absolutely could not worry them.

“Of course. I haven’t had a craving all week. Besides, I’m almost eighteen. I can survive,” I said, jokingly.

I could tell my mother really wanted to argue with me, but she also really needed to finish this security system. All the same, she still asked once more. “Are you sure?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything, in fear that she would just see her sixteen-year-old daughter as a helpless child, needing constant supervision. Thankfully, she didn’t push it further and grabbed a vial of fiery red liquid from a nearby table, and drank it in one gulp. The animal’s blood would sustain her for a little while, just enough for her to go to the store, and then lock herself up in the house once more. My father didn’t have to take it, however, because he had never fed before. He just reached for the keys on the countertop near me, and put on a sweater. My mother walked over to me, planted a kiss on my head, fangs slightly scraping against my

temple, then put on her own coat.

“We’ll be back soon. You can open the curtains if you want,” she said, not turning around.

That was the last thing I wanted. For more reasons for people to watch us. This was the whole reason we had the security system, it was for suspicious people who might come after us with knives or guns. It happened once when I was really little. This is why my mother had to take the animal blood, to satiate her hunger, because she killed the man who came after us, exposing herself to human blood. Causing herself to transform. Only her smart wits and quick thinking saved her from completely transforming. Ever since that fateful Halloween Eve, we have had to put up the security system, so as to not be caught off guard again. And here we were, yet another year, setting the alarms up once more. Looking at the closing door, I heard the garage door open, the car start, drive out, and close once more. Then the house was silent. For a while, I didn’t move, just listened to the retreating car, closing my eyes and straining my ears for anything else. After sufficiently deciding it was safe, I went up the rickety stairs to my bedroom, wiping dust off the banister as I went. Reaching my robin egg-blue door my father was always talking about replacing one day, I placed my hand on the cold handle, and opened the door. If I hadn’t, what would’ve happened?

What if I had just stayed downstairs, and watched TV?

What if I had grabbed a snack instead, and did my homework?

Instead, the unthinkable happened. I walked inside my room, and instantly, I knew something was wrong. My room was a disaster, papers were thrown everywhere, objects shattered on the floor, and the rug was stained with...blood. From the mirror across the room, I saw my eyes go nearly black in hunger as I started trembling. The sharp, coppery smell reached my nostrils, making my mouth water.

It was everywhere: on the walls, in my bed, on the ceiling and the floor.

In the middle of my room were the two men, one dead, the other looming over him, knife in hand. The blade was slick with that intoxicating red, red liquid, soaking into my gray carpet. Upon hearing the door open, the man looked up, eyes with a mad glint in them. I stepped back—this man was psychotic. He dropped his knife, and stepped forward, reaching me in two long strides. I scrambled back, but all too soon I felt the cold wall against my back. I was terrified, but the life pumping under his skin smelled

too good. He planted two meaty hands beside my head, efficiently blocking any escape. His pupils were nearly as large as mine, both hungry for blood.

“They said you would be hard to kill, girl. Shall we test that theory?” he hissed in my ear, breath stinking of spirits.

I wrinkled my nose, disgusted. “Uh, can we not?” I said, mouth thick with saliva. It took all my willpower not to lick the blood off his arm.

The man chuckled, and leaned in close. “Do you see that man on the floor?”

The smell from the blade was making me dizzy, so I couldn’t respond. The man leaned in closer, lips brushing my cheek. “I killed him. He came with me to kill you, but he just wanted to keep you for his show of oddities. After all, who wouldn’t want a beautiful, pale, blood-sucker? But I have different plans. I plan to torture you. Make you wish you were dead. Prolong your suffering. After all, that’s what you do to your victims, isn’t it?”

I angled my head away from his lips and closed my eyes, sweating and panting. My fingers ached from keeping them clenched at my sides. Opening one eye, I saw the throbbing vein on his jaw, pulsating and pumping that life-giving liquid through his body. My eyes rolled back, and a shiver ran through me.

It was too much.

He needed to back away.

I couldn’t, I can’t...

No, think about what could happen...

The man cackled and brushed my lips in an almost gentle caress. I was sweating heavily now, nearly hyperventilating, squeezing my eyes shut in effort. I could not. I would not. Do not...The blood roared in my ears, eliminating any sound, almost like I had been thrown underwater.

Sinking.

Down.

And down.

And down.

When the man brushed the damp hair from my face, I couldn’t hold myself back anymore. With an agonized roar, I yanked his forearm to my mouth and sank my lengthening fangs into his soft flesh. He yelped in surprise, and tried to twist his arm

out of my grasp. My fangs clamped down firmly, nearly reaching the bone, that red, red, red liquid spraying everywhere. It was all over my face, my clothes, my hair, and I shuddered at the warm, red liquid streaming down my chin.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

It hit the carpet, stains blooming from the tiny drop, spreading further and further. The man tried in vain to wrench his wrist away again, but I clung on. After sixteen years of ignoring the possessive urge, I felt relieved. Like I could drink this man dry.

Drink him dry...No, I had to stop. I couldn't kill this man.

I had to stop.

The world began making sound once more, and the first thing I heard were the man's screams. I looked at him through reddened eyes, and saw him looking at me in absolute horror. His eyes were wide, pupils no longer dilated. Filled, I lifted my mouth from his emptied wrist, and he recoiled at the red liquid staining my mouth. I swiped a hand across it, only smearing it across my face, and jerked as my fang caught on my stained sweater. Drawing in a sharp breath, I closed my mouth, and ran my tongue over my teeth, horrified to discover fangs. Opening and closing my jaw felt wrong, uncomfortable, unnatural. My transformation was already taking place.

In a matter of hours, I would become the mindless hunter of the forest. Luring sweet victims into my arms, bleeding them dry to satiate my everlasting hunger.

Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror opposing me, I saw a monster hunched over the man's wrist, dark circles under her eyes, fingers gripping the arm like a vise. Looking at the man, his face had gone bloodless, pale, and he struggled to breathe. Horrified, I realized I had taken too much from him.

He wasn't going to make it out of this room alive.

Taking pity on this man, I tilted his chin up, bared my fangs, and quickly sliced the vein on his neck. He only gave a small whimper before he fell to the ground, motionless.

Heaving, I fell on all fours to the ground. Looking around at the mess in my room, the quickly-disappearing human part of me found myself retching. I vomited until there was nothing left in me. My sweater was filthy, this room stank of vomit and blood, and I had to leave. Regaining my senses, I stood up. I had to leave. Someone would be here

soon. Horrified at the mess that had been made, I stripped myself, ran to my tiny bathroom, and took the quickest shower of my life, only pausing to quickly wash my hair. When I ran out, I threw on a hoodie, a pair of jeans, and my underclothes. I was so flustered I put them on wrong, and had to slow down and redo it. Finally, I pulled my hair back in a not-fashionable messy bun, and looked for a bag to throw some spare clothes in. How long did I have until someone came? Ten minutes? Five? One? Trembling, I hastily stuffed things into my bag, not caring if it was important or not. Why had they come? Out of all days, why today? All this wouldn't have happened if they had only gone next door. Suddenly I caught a glimpse of my shaking hands. I saw my fingers turning black, lengthening like claws, meant for gripping victims.

"After all, that's what you do to your victims, isn't it?"

I looked down at the man, and stood over him, mocking him as he had done to me a few minutes ago. "No. You were the first. And because of you, not the last."

He didn't respond, as one who is dead shouldn't. I took one last look around, and slipped outside my back door, making no noise as I crossed over dry leaves. I ran with my almost-weightless bag for what felt like forever, terrified to stop, not wanting to be caught. Finally, when I couldn't take another step, I fell to the ground. For a while, I couldn't hear anything but my heartbeat.

Ba-dump.

Ba-dump.

Ba-dump.

Because of one moment, I couldn't go back.

I was cursed to live here forever.

Alone.

With nothing but the prospect of lone hikers to lure in.

Guilt bearing down on me like a million pounds, I wearily rolled onto my back.

"You just fed, haven't you?"

I jumped, looking around. In the clearing, stood a young man of about eighteen, with bright violet eyes similar to mine, black messy hair, and skin the color of moonlight. He was dressed in a strange outfit, a burgundy high-collared coat, with gold trim, and wide cuffs. His tailored pants were a sleek black and paired with knee-high shiny boots, giving off prince vibes.

“Who are you?” I asked, a chill raising the hair on my arms.

He laughed, a rich sound filling the dark coldness of the forest, sending a delicious shiver down my back. Bending down in a chivalrous manner, he reached out a black-fingered hand to help me up. His violet eyes were half-closed, making him look devastatingly handsome, and dangerous.

“The better question is, what am I?”

I couldn’t help but smile at his catty remark. “Fine. What are you?”

“I’m just like you. A vampire,” he said, still reaching for me.

Taking in a sharp breath, I reached for his hand. As his cold fingers wrapped around my wrist, I realized two very important things.

One: I wasn’t going to be alone.

Two: I was becoming very hungry again.



DAYDREAMS

Ben Wasserberg, 15

Bolanto's Pizza Parlor has always been a happy place, I make sure of that. From making sure the restaurant is clean, to keeping the place up and running, to having the food hot and fresh, I do it all. I made this place so that way kids could come and enjoy themselves, in a carefree getaway. I never had that when I was young. The only place I could go to was my house, which was the home to that monster. So, I went and got a job, I saved up, and I bought this place, "The home of fun-filled delight."

However, what I don't agree with is people not appreciating what I do. While running a pizza restaurant may seem simple, doing every job by yourself is not. So that's why when a kid came in and insulted my legacy, it would not leave my mind. For everything I did around there, this child dared spit on me? He didn't even fathom what I had to do daily! The thoughts of this cascaded around my temples, banging against the sides of my head like a bouncy ball let loose at the speed of light. It bothered me for days, and weeks, filling me with a hatred of this kid. If I ever saw his face again, I would make sure that no one else did.

It was at these moments that I started seeing the flashes. The flashes of red, of gore, of unimaginable horrors. It felt like the devil was right upon my shoulder, giving me the ability to gaze into the demon's realm where the dead rested. Every time I had them, I could feel my blood chilling in my veins, my eyeballs almost burning to the touch. I went to a therapist for them, and I went to a doctor, but nothing helped. "It's all in your head," they told me. All in my head, I'll show them. They're just doubting me, doubting my ability. Doubting whether I can run my restaurant, doubting whether I can do anything. Doubting whether I can live up to the legacy of the household, doubting whether I can be a man. The flashes would continue, growing more and more. It almost seemed like I was peering through a glass into hell itself. The hands, the tortured souls, the screams, it was all too much. It was happening so much that I was beginning to confuse the flashes with reality. But still, I went through. I still managed to pay the bills, to make the food, and to be a friendly face to all.

But then one day, it happened. The very same kid who came in and slandered my

name came in for a party. A party? A party. Well, I'll show him a party, a party he'll love. "Of course!" I said, "I'll even begin on your cake right at this moment!" I went into the kitchen, but it looked ghostly, ghastly. There were webs in the corners and rodents around the walls. No, it's just the flashes, bring yourself together. And all in a moment it went back to the normal sight; the materials all put up, the counters cleaned. I soon set my sights on making the cake. I convinced myself that the best choice of action was to show this kid what I could do, and make him the best cake he's ever seen! I went about grabbing the ingredients, even though some of them had spilled onto the floor. No matter, I'll just wash them off and as good as new! After it was done, and I had frosted it, I brought it out to the birthday boy. I set it on the table and gave the cutter to his mom. "Well, take a look!" They cut into the cake, and their smiles were so wide! I bet you could hear their laughter from all over the state. They loved it! They truly did! It was hard to focus on it though because the flashes kept popping up. The flashes showed the kid screaming, and in the cake was a...dead rat. However, these certain flashes didn't seem normal. These flashes didn't have that red in them, I could hear everything a lot better, and it seemed so real now. No matter, just keep ignoring them.

They were so happy, but they ran out without saying thank you. How dare they! After giving them the best cake they ever had, they don't even congratulate me? Well, I'm not letting them get away this easily. So, I took after them. Turn by turn, street by street I followed. Soon enough, they took me straight to their house. It was night now, with a thick mist around the air. The family went inside and seemed very giddy, probably all joyful about ruining my name once more. I was going to go up to the front door, but no, that seemed too obvious. If I went straight up there, they would be able to plan their next move. Around the back it is. Slowly, foot by foot I made it across. Once I fully wrapped around to the back side, I noticed a dog. That must be the family pet. It occurred to me that if I was going to get any sort of apology, it had to be just from the kid. If the parents were involved it would surely rob the glory of the moment. So I devised a plan. I walked up to the door and was about to whistle for the child when that dog started yapping. The bark ran through my skull, whispering to me that he was going to alert everyone and ruin my plan. I had to get him to shut up. I walked over to the dog and gently hugged him. If anything was going to work, comforting would. I hugged and hugged, but he just wouldn't shut up! So I hugged greater, more

and more. Finally, the dog broke to my kindness and relieved my ears of the piercing screech.

That's when I heard a noise. I hastily turned around to see the child. He was smiling. Seeing this, I remembered why I had made my restaurant in the first place. I made it to see the joy on the kids' faces, not to tear it down from them. I sat down on the ground and apologized. I apologized for everything I did. During this process, I saw myself taking something out of my pocket. It felt like I wasn't doing it, however. I saw myself take out a knife. With horror, I realized that it was the knife my father had. No, no, NO! It's just the flashes, it's not real, it's not real. It felt so vivid though, the rough wood on my palm, the cold steel on my fingertips, the sickly warm blood on my hands, the shocked pale face of the child in front of me. No, just ignore it, ignore it. I kept apologizing to the kid, more strongly than before. I apologized for coming to his house, I apologized for hating him so much, and I apologized for being such a disappointment. Finally, I felt better. I could no longer feel the warmth of the blood. Suddenly, I felt like I had a connection to this kid, a bond. I spent the next hour just talking to him, even if it was mostly one-sided. No matter, he's probably just shy. We talked so much, the flashes began to die away. I could no longer see the dead, mangled corpse of the dog, I could no longer feel the cold, heartless body of the kid. Finally, getting back to reality.

I woke up. It was another dream. I looked about the bleached white cell I was in. I tugged against the restraints another time. I sat my head against the wall and took several deep breaths, trying to get my startled and frightened body under control. I needed to talk to the staff about stopping this. They say that the more drugs that they give to me, the less I'll remember the past.

Maybe then I'll stop having these daydreams.

THE MAIDEN

Olivia Serio, 15

What? No, it's not related to Jefferson's death. It's been weeks since then. I swear on my mother's grave to you! I am *not* a maniac, nor am I a schizophrenic! Those rumors they tell you—Dear Lord, the things you hear these days...people are growing far too superstitious. Tell you what: I'll start from the beginning.

I'm nothing but a lowly cleaner; anyone with eyeballs in their skull has sight enough to figure that. I work in the Umbra's mansion, tidying the halls every day or so. To tell you the truth, their kids can fool you with their looks. There is no chance that those spoiled ghouls ever learned any manners. Well, that is, except for the eldest. Desdemona, her name is. I tell you, that girl could make any eye turn, effortlessly gliding along the marbled floors, locks always braided in styles that take *hours*...French, Dutch, fishtails—the girl has skill. And skin. Pale as an eagle's belly feather, but *oh-so* clear. Have you heard of Snow White? Their description is similar. Given her appearance, you could imagine my surprise when the girl started to approach me. I scarce saw her in any room in the house. She never ate with the rest of her siblings, nor her parents, and she never left the house with them, either. I only ever saw the girl in the halls, watching my work around corners or hiding behind plants and curtains.

It started maybe a month or so ago, her getting closer. Every new day, when I saw her, she would have moved maybe an inch or two closer to me, until, one night, when the family was asleep and I was left to do my duties amongst the dusty moonlight and crickets' calls, I found myself standing—frozen, awkward, and staring directly at a dainty hand wrapped around the handle of my mop.

So, why me, you ask? Honest, I would give you an answer if I had one. I never really understood why The Maiden chose me. I don't even know how she ended up noticing me at all, but, nevertheless, she did. The girl never spoke, either, so, honestly, I doubt I ever *would* have been able to find out.

Looking back at her, I asked, "Are you alright?" Not speaking, as I mentioned, she

shook her head at me. *No.* I furrowed my brow, squinting at her. “Do you...need help?” A nod. *Yes.* I nodded as well, in understanding. I felt a tug on the handle. “Are we going somewhere?” Another tug. Hesitant, I moved along with her, leaving the bucket of mop water and half-clean tile behind.

She guided me—The Maiden did—using the broom, through the shadowed corridors. I followed, stumbling, my breathing strangely shallow. After being in silence for some time, I fumbled for conversation: “How have your parents been treating you?”

She gave me a bizarre look in response, one of repulsion and disgust. I won’t lie to you, I wasn’t shocked at her distaste, regarding her family. They didn't treat me very well, either. The Maiden turned her gaze away once more, continuing down the lengthy hall.

“They don’t treat you very well, do they?”

No.

“Do you ever eat? Do they feed you?”

No again.

“How do you eat?”

Her hair slapped against the far side of her cheeks as her head spun back to me. She made a horizontal swiping motion near her neck with her hand.

I don't.

“*She doesn't eat?*” I thought, contemplating the alarming discovery. How did she go without food and not turn out a ghastly figure? She seemed perfectly healthy, without any terrible signs of starvation or lack of nutrients at all. Perhaps the moonlight was playing tricks on my eyes.

Speaking of my eyes, I began to grow more confused, as strange happenings began poking out to me around the walls. It started as a tile out of place, a pot missing a plant, but, soon, grew grimmer. Once, I even jumped back because I thought a tarantula had climbed onto my face! I’m not quite sure why, as nothing appeared to be there when I ran my free hand through my matted dreads. Though, that wasn’t the worst of it. I began to notice many cobwebs, critters, and pests. The air grew heavy, as though the shadowiness of the stairs we had begun to descend upon encouraged an eeriness in the very atmosphere of the building.

After watching The Maiden’s braids bounce against her back once, twice, thrice, I

checked my watch. Midnight. We were growing ever closer to the crypt, I noticed, leading me to assume that this was the source of her troubles. I stopped a few steps down, releasing the handle of the mop. The Maiden stopped as well, not turning, yet somehow, strangely, sensing my hand's absence.

“Is this where you want me to go with you to?”

Without turning still, a nod. *Yes.*

“Why?”

Slowly, creepily, her skull began to spin, inch by inch, second by second. I could hear the bones pop and crack and I could see, through the dim, flickering light of a lantern on the wall (which, now that I'm thinking about it, I'm not sure how it was lit), her muscles tear and the ligaments break away from her spine. My jaw went slack as I watched, petrified from the gruesome performance, as her face, somehow a full one-hundred eighty degrees off of the orientation it was meant to be at, opened its mouth. The Maiden produced a morbid, hideously dry croak of a voice when she spoke for the very first time:

“Corpse.”

All at once, the grisly haunt emitted a bloodcurdling howl, leaving my ears ringing and my head pounding. She dropped the mop and let it clatter down the stairs. The Maiden, no longer a fair or feminine girl, but instead bearing little-to-no muscle mass and eyes sunken in, pounced. Reflexively, I swung my arm up in front of myself in a futile attempt to block her lunging at me. I say it was futile because she dissolved into ash as soon as she jumped.

I stood, bewildered, my hands shaking from the fright. I found it, suddenly, hard to see; the haunt's episode had extinguished the lantern that lay close on the wall. I patted against the smooth mosaic design of the tiles, figuring I might as well continue my journey down the stairs. Luckily, she had only put out around three of the lights, leading me to fall back into the dim glow of flames as I moved further down.

I stepped off of the last stair and into the maw of the crypt soon after, raising a cloud of dust as I put my foot down. I guess I might not have been breathing normally still, as, once I exhaled a long sigh, I felt relief as my chest moved with my lungs. I bent down and reached for my mop, having located it near the stairs before I entered the room.

The space was lit better than the stairwell; four of the same lanterns rested in each corner. The space was laid out less like a tomb and more so as a mausoleum. There were rusted, brassy plates that acted as gravestones lining the rectangle of walls, all with names, dates, and a small flower carved out of the same material that was welded into the center. There was also a single, larger coffin lying in the center of the room four more dim lights set on its corners. I walked slowly along the walls, first, carefully examining the nameplates as I went along. “Juliette Rome, 1508-1550.”

“*Forty-two*,” I calculated.

“William Rome, 1504-1548.”

“*Forty-four*.” I continued.

“Marceline Rome-Bridger, 1532-1588,” “Nathaniel Bridger, 1524-1570,” “Harilenne Bridger, 1549-1601.” I skipped a few. “Linus Bridger and Caroline Bridger, 1570-1623, 1568-1630,” “Roselline Marcus, 1613-1682,” “Royland Marcus, 1608-1683,” and so on. The list lined back the history of the family for over two hundred and fifty years. The thought was a bit disturbing, though perhaps those were just the emotions I was already experiencing, as the things I kept seeing in my mind were still plaguing me.

Once I had made my way around the edge of the room, I turned my attention to the larger grave in the center. I laid my eyes upon the figure just beside it, feeling my heart skip a beat. There, just as The Maiden had said, lay a corpse; its eyes looked just like hers had before she disappeared on the stairs: ghoulish, gory, and unnerving. They were horrible. I don’t think I’ll ever forget looking into those grotesque spheres. She looked lost, longing.

Very soon, I understood what she had gargled out of her throat previously. *Corpse. Her corpse.* In the crypt. How fitting. I couldn’t help but chuckle; however, my grin was soon broken as I examined the contents of the room once more. Everything seemed...garbled, as if you had taken a vat of bleach and poured it over the whole room, and then the room began to dissolve like stains in a washing machine.

The unearthly images I had continued to see were even more realistic, then, as more bodies began to litter the dirty floor. Spiders, bats, snakes, and other beastly creatures penetrated my ears with hisses and snarls, and I swear there must have been at least a small earthquake because the room began to quake tremendously. I tightened my grip on the mop’s handle to steady myself as I quickly scrambled over to the crumbling

wall. Leaning against the graves, I found my face very close to one of the markers, except I couldn't make out the words. My eyesight was so terrible at that point that I couldn't make out anything, really.

That is, anything other than my hand sliding down the wall. Still shaking, I slipped onto the floor, wincing at the feeling of insects upon my scalp. I scratched and clawed and picked, but never once did the feeling leave me. It hasn't left me still. My limbs were buzzing with adrenaline and my breathing was frightfully labored. Because of this, I also, gradually, felt myself drift away. Room still spinning and thoughts still frantic, I watched, wearily, as it faded to black.

Now, I'm sure you wonder, sir, if this is the end of my prolonged story. But! Fear not, for there is still more! You see, when I came to, after the whole event, the building was gone!

No, I'm serious; I promise you!

I woke up later that morning in a field of green! There was no crypt, nor were there any mosaic tiles or maidens or even the Umbra family themselves! None of it!

BUT!

Look, see, I promise you, yes, I promise you sir—do you want to know why?

Because, sir, you see,

When I came to,

The mop was still there.

* * * * *

Thank you so much, Mrs. Brown.

UNTITLED

Madi Green, 18

My brother was a feverishly imaginative boy, with frills of brown curls, not soon off from kindergarten. As such, he would strike up a half-babble conversation with just about anything: an advertisement at the grocer down in town, crows making quick work of our mulberry bush, a back-and-forth with the jazzed-up radio man, roaring like a tiger to his own reflection in the blurry metal toaster. So it was really no surprise, when on his third birthday, upon receiving a set of walkie-talkies, he would speak for long hours with the static. We were not alone in our cul-de-sac, just a little out of the way, along a narrow street with a one-lane bridge. He had plenty of folks to gab with, nearly a dozen if I can remember correctly. There were the twins down the way, a little older, sandy blonde—Betsy and Bonnie. The eccentric woman with the parrot, prairie dresses, and the smell of cigarettes—Judith? Eh. The religious elderly couple catty-corner us. Never much for chatting about the weather. Then there was Otis, the man across the way. A jolly fellow, always so kind, tinkering away on his project of the week. Even with so many possible companions, my brother always seemed to prefer the people in his head.

I had the opposing walkie; I would sometimes loan it to Betsy, she was always good for returning it. That was until one day she didn't come home. A runaway at thirteen, they called it. Quick case, no frivolities. It felt of no importance then to get back a trinket, when their family had just lost their youngest to the rough-and-tumble world of the city-of-lights dancing scene, or a jungle explorer eating beans over a fire. Or whatever else an eight-year-old chock full of age-appropriate adventure novels would think a barely-teenaged girl could do on her own. With no shoes, coat, or visible struggle. There was a week or so where we all would gather on a search of our own. We knew the woods, but when nothing else came up, the only-Bonnie-and-parents house dimmed down in mourning. Neighbors I never saw brought pound cakes, roasts, and hearty soups. Help them change a tire, be a shoulder to lean on. Otis, with all his heart, brought Bonnie a big plushie rabbit he made; rabbits were the favorite of Betsy. So spoiled, all the attention they're getting. With no one else in range and the walkie's

other half surely turned off, there was no harm in letting my brother jabber away with the static. Not long after, he made a friend in the static.

My brother would speak at length about his new friend, a kind friend who talked all about wildlife and nature. A very fancy explorer man. Figuring it was just another whimsey, we paid it no mind. Our room was small with a curtain drawn down the middle. I was a big brave boy who didn't want to sleep with a starry night light in my eyes. So my parents fixed us up with a muslin sheet, and I sort of had a room all on my own. My brother half-faced the window, with a small stand, various books on wildlife, and especially tigers tucked beneath his four-post wooden bunk. A few wooden alphabet blocks, a sprawled-out grandmother's quilt, and the starry night light finished up the scene quite well. My side was about the same, more of a wooden truck guy, far more interested in the stars than anything on Earth.

That night we were snug in our ragged, warm, mint green and blue striped footie pajamas. The thin muslin sheet left me the view of my side and my brother's dark silhouette from the single streetlight down the block. Our room situation allowed me to see; I wasn't supposed to. That night I woke up, foggy but aware of my brother yakking on and on with his walkie. So late at night, or possibly the wee-before-sun morning, it was almost frustrating. That's when I heard the quick, light-but-deep whisper, never a sound my brother could make.

"Can I come in?"

Paralyzed by fear, I saw through the muslin and the dim shadows a very large figure. There was a person. The window, a person, frozen in my place, a babble, soft clinks of the window latches, the giggling roar of my brother, one too many people breathing here, frozen. Then he's gone.

* * * * *

It's so vivid in my mind, but also a blur. The next point I have of a memory is cryin', hugging my mother's thigh. Now we were the receivers of the pound cakes, and roasts, and watery soup. Parrot lady would help us plant a garden. Bonnie and I would sit around for long hours in an unnerving but comfortable silence. Otis would bring by a medium-large tiger plushie I would hug close. It was almost like my brother was there.

The police questioned, no leads really, just we know now that Betsy was most likely

not a runaway, and they may be together, my brother and her, out there somewhere. I heard through the unspoken-to radio that things like this happened in other neighborhoods, a few counties away. I would flip the station. I didn't want to think much of it. My brother was out there surely, safe and warm.

* * * * *

I was no longer a big brave boy. I would sleep between my parents most nights for a while, a nightlight till my mid-teens. I feel like I still can't sleep fully comfortably in a room with a window. I cherished every piece of my brother, although the walkie went with him to wherever he may have gone. His blocks, books, the tiger, and nightlight sit alongside my old trucks and trinkets, in a cedar chest by my favorite armchair. I always believed I'd get on a talk show sometime and find Betsy, and my brother, and every other kid on a beach somewhere living it up. We'd catch up and laugh and love.

I am a father, a husband, and a grandfather. My grandchildren come to stay, and I let them go through the old things. Seeing the kids that have his face, his imagination. Building and smiling and laughing fills this room with love and warmth. I would have so many things to tell him about; I was sure he'd have the same. No longer the brown-headed toddler babbling around in his footie pajamas. Most likely a silver-haired man with so many adventures under his belt. That was a small fantasy I kept close till just today. My youngest grandchild, tossing Otis's tiger to-and-fro, when the leg stitching gave out. A quick repair never hurt anyone, but what was inside—in tight little bundles of twine, all cut up in evenly proportioned wool chunks—are mint green and blue striped footie pajamas, and brown ringlets of curly brittle hair.

THE BOYFRIEND

Heaven Stephenson, 16

There lurked a boy in the shadows, a boy I thought I knew. We were entwined in a sinister bond, perhaps even more than mere friendship. But whenever his gaze pierced through my soul, a venomous surge of electricity coursed through my body, searing my brain and tormenting my heart. He was the one who held the key to my affections. Little did I know, the price for my magnetism for this enigmatic figure would soon manifest in the most ghastly of consequences.

His name whispered through the shadows, a chilling echo that sent shivers down my spine. Silas, once a gentle soul, now cloaked in spite that tainted his every move. He prowled the halls of my school, a haunting presence that left a trail of unease in his wake.

His appearance, misleading in its allure, concealed the darkness that lurked within. His eyes, pools of abyssal darkness, held a sinister glint that sent a chill through my bones. Black strands of hair cascaded over his pale, gaunt face, framing features that were sharp and hauntingly chiseled. His expression, marred by the weight of his wickedness, bore the mark of an eternal frown.

Yet, to my dismay, I found myself drawn to his haunting beauty. A twisted fascination gripped my soul as I gazed upon his face, captivated by the allure of his malevolence. Little did I know, my infatuation would lead me down a path of terror and despair.

Silas, with his ghastly countenance that sent shivers down the spine, concealed a sinister secret. Beneath his seemingly kind demeanor towards me, lurked an insidious obsession with the macabre realm of death. His abode, a chamber of horrors, was adorned with a grotesque collection of tomes and the skeletal remains of unfortunate creatures. All who beheld him were consumed by an overwhelming sense of dread, for Silas was perceived as nothing less than a diabolical embodiment of evil. My heart still yearned for him, even though I knew he was not the man one should love. His eyes had turned dark and hollow, his touch cold and lifeless. But I couldn't help the way I felt, as if I was under some kind of spell. I knew I should run, but I couldn't resist his

pull. I was trapped in his grasp, a prisoner to his twisted love.

Despite everyone's warnings that I should stay away from such an evil entity, I continued to stay around with the sureness of him not hurting me. Little did I know he was on a prowl for my blood.

One chilling night in October, I decided to hang around Silas and his bedroom of horrors. I had a feeling something was wrong but as usual I ignored my intuition in ignorance. I sat at his desk tinkering with his things until I came across a book which seemed to be stitched in skin. As I shakily creaked open the book, I felt the overbearing presence of Silas over my shoulder.

"GET OUT OF MY STUFF!" he bellowed, his voice echoing through the dimly lit room. The intensity of his anger sent shivers down my spine, but I couldn't rally any tears. Suddenly, his demeanor shifted, his face contorting into a twisted semblance of kindness. With a delicate grip, he tugged at my trembling hand, his touch sending a chill through my veins.

"Let's take a walk," he whispered, his words dripping with an eerie sweetness. Relief washed over me as I heard those words escape his lips. The atmosphere within his abode had become suffocatingly ominous, and I yearned for the solace of the outside world.

When we finally left the home, we ventured westward towards the park by our childhood homes. Little did we know, this time our path would lead us astray. Into the depths of the park's forest, where darkness loomed and sinister secrets lay hidden. Over the years, countless children had vanished within these haunted woods, their fates unknown. I couldn't resist the allure of Silas's eerie presence. Drawn towards him, we found ourselves venturing deeper into the chilling woods, with me unknowingly leading the way.

A sense of impending doom gnawed at my gut, freezing me in my tracks. Suddenly, a bone-chilling sensation slithered down my spine, as if a sharp blade caressed my very soul. Silas's presence loomed over me, his voice echoing with a sinister tone.

"If I were you, I would run, honey."

Realizing the gravity of the situation, fear propelled me forward, my heart pounding in my chest. The only sound that reached my ears was the deafening crunch of leaves beneath my frantic footsteps. Desperate to escape, I dared to steal a glance behind me,

only to be met with the horrifying sight of Silas's grim reaper-like visage, brandishing a menacing machete. Panic consumed me as I turned my gaze back ahead, only to find Silas's malevolent face staring back at me.

In an instant, the blade sliced through my stomach, sending searing pain coursing through my body. I crumpled to the ground, my blood staining the earth beneath me. Silas, a spawn of the devil himself, reveled in his sacrificial ritual, offering the blood of a virgin to Satan. My body grew cold and weak, trembling from the loss of blood. This was to be my final resting place, where darkness claimed my soul.

THE ENDLESS CIRCUS

Lauren McCormick, 17

The children's cries never stopped.

No one smiled after entering the circus grounds. They begged to be let out of the labyrinth of tents and games. The children would eventually stop crying, but their wailing would be replaced by other curious children who wandered in through the gates surrounding the circus grounds.

Iron trapped the children. There was no chance in seeing the outside; it was as if there was a dome of smoke obscuring anything past the gates. Children who had given up trying to escape wandered around the grounds in an endless loop. They watched the show, played games, and ate food. No one grew up, yet cold lifeless bodies could be found every day in the ring of the big top.

I had been stuck here for what seemed like hours, or years. My life is unknown to me, I can't remember when I got stuck here, how old I was or am, or what my life was like before the circus. Sometimes I am able to remember some things, like how my dog used to greet me when I got home, or how my friends dared me to go through the gates when we saw the circus appear. We are, or were, seventeen, but that did not stop me from crying with the youngest children.

The performers never spoke to one another nor smiled. No one ever smiled, not the children, not the performers, not the vendors. Normally, the circus appeared to kids between the ages of four and eight years old. I discovered that I was allowed to see the circus and enter the gates because they needed a new performer. Someone to take up the aerial performances.

Only one other teenager has been permitted to enter the circus, he was eighteen, the limited age permitted to enter the circus. He cried too, but stopped faster than all of the others, including me.

No one talked after they stopped begging to be let out. Our conversations were spoken through gestures and even then, we barely did that. Colors died when the children lost hope. Their clothes lost color, and they all wore the same things they entered the circus in. Only the performers received new outfits.

Everyone had their own theories about what happened to those who wound up dead. No one spoke about them, but you could see it in the way everyone avoided certain areas of the circus, or how they would get a certain number of things from the vendors at certain times. I had theories myself.

As I walked around the circus, I found that the only people in sight were the new children that had shown up today—or tonight, whichever it may be. It was strange, since the trapped were always wandering around the circus. I started winding through different areas of the circus grounds, but still, I found no one. I turned the corner near the rotten candy apple cart when I felt the hairs on the back of my neck begin to rise. I felt as if something was behind me, as if something was following me.

I started to speed up my pace, eventually running through the empty midway until I got to the big top. The presence behind me did not go away. I walked into one of the pits, trying to bring my pursuer into the light. Looking around, I found only the dark shadows around the performing equipment. I let out a shaking breath. That was when I felt it, a burning pain as if my life was being ripped away. There was still nothing around me, yet it felt like someone was clawing at my skin. I didn't cry out. Not having spoken in so long, I didn't even know if my voice would work anymore. A puff of air was my last attempt to call out for rescue. Nothing. A void wide and empty consumed me whole.

* * * * *

I shook my head when I heard my friends calling my name.

“What?” I asked. My voice came out all scratchy as if I hadn't used it in years.

“Look over there,” one of them said, pointing to a circus that had not been there just moments before.

“What is that?” I asked, as curiosity filled every part of my mind at the sudden tents and music that seeped out from the gates.

“I dare you to go in,” another one of my friends said to me. I huffed my annoyance but it was only fair I go investigate. Out of all of my friends I had never been the one dared to go into any of the interesting, yet terrifying places we had seen. I had always been the one to dare them to go into the places we found. Now it was my turn to go into a place that sounded lively. The dare was pathetic; all of the places they had to go

into were abandoned and dead. This place had music, bright lights, and the smell of fresh buttery popcorn and carnival food that floated through the air.

“Fine,” I said, getting up from where we all sat. We walked toward the circus together. My friends stopped when we got to the gates. I wasn’t scared and the smell of the popcorn lured me in. The gates were open as if in invitation and no one stood at the door expecting money or tickets. I smirked. *Perfect*, I thought before stepping through the gates. As soon as I passed the gates, they slammed closed and a smoke-like mist blocked the outside of the dead gray iron. I walked over to the gates and shook them, trying to get out. Screaming and begging as tears began to race down my cheeks until there were no more tears left in me to cry.

* * * * *

The begging stopped soon after the crying. All I knew now was that the circus was all there was. An endless labyrinth where time was irrelevant. I stood up and began to walk around the cold dead world.

There was no more music. The only sound was the crying. The smell of popcorn was gone as soon as the gates closed...now there were no more smells at all. There were games where masked people stood holding empty stuffed animal carcasses. Surprisingly, people walked up to the booths to take a shot at winning the beat-up rags of matted fluff the masked people held.

A body was dragged out of the big top as I walked by. A golden masquerade mask covered their face, but I could tell they were about the same age as me. There was no color on this person except for their eyes. They were bloodshot around the edges but were a deep blue like the sea, just like my eyes. I looked at their nails and at the chipped purple and black nail polish that was on them. I looked down at my own nails, noticing some chips in the purple and black polish as I continued walking.

An outfit was shoved in my hands by a masked performer, along with a note explaining my assigned role and the age system here. My role was to take up the aerial performances. I had never heard of that before, but I knew that I would be able to perform all of the tricks. I had no idea why. I continued walking.

The children's cries never stopped.

BURNING THROUGH TIME

Cole Moore, 17

My life began and ended like most. My body flung out a window, my mind shattered on the pavement, nothing left but cracked bones. Even my blood escaped me. The car crash was my fault, I drove too fast and didn't stop fast enough. I shouldn't have been drunk, I knew it was a bad idea, but I did it anyway. Just because, and now I'll die just because. In my last words, I beg for help, from God or the devil or anyone who can help, but it can't be heard. I know it can't be because my vocal cords were ripped and my screaming was non-stop.

But then it does stop. Everything stops. Is this the afterlife? An eternity of void and silence? It's so quiet. My thoughts, I can't tell if I'm saying them out loud or in my head. Wasn't I just in a crash? I can't feel any pain, but I can't feel anything. My body, which was so broken moments ago, seemed to vanish and I'm left with just my thoughts and the agonizing silence.

And that too is broken, shattered by the loud tap of heels on wood, though I see no floor.

She appears before me like a dream, I'm not sure if I'm physically there, but she is. She's hauntingly attractive, and I can see myself being flustered by her in any other situation. A hand reaches up to me, and caresses my cheek; I'm honestly shocked I still have them. She scares me, her hand isn't smooth like it looks, instead it burns me like a gasoline-fueled fire, and I wince.

"You called?" Her voice slips down my neck and around my spine. It burns like her hand.

I don't need to speak before she responds, "Of course you did, didn't you? You want me to help you, right?"

I nod. She inches closer to me, the closer she gets the more I see every crack in her beauty. She looks uncanny, like the generated image of a girl I'm supposed to love. I feel her heat up my neck. "I'm a sweet woman," she claims. Her body feels like a sack of mud, her sculpted figure seems unfinished, never meant to touch, but she touches me anyway.

“A kind, kind individual indeed. I won’t make you a deal, I’ll give you what you want for free,” she pauses, “Hell’s hot. You wouldn’t like it there, would you?” I shake my head.

“No you wouldn’t. Instead, I’ll show you all my kindness, and give you exactly ten more years, alright?” Ten more years? For what?

“Free of charge too, your soul is already damned, might as well put off the inevitable eternity of suffering, right?” She rests her chin on my shoulder; it suddenly aches with nothing but pain and flame. I want to run away from her, but this feeling of something, anything, keeps me close.

Whispering, ever so quietly in my ear, as if anyone else was in this void, she says, “Then it’s decided. You’ll come back here and die, same time, same date, same place, ok? A little extension, just for you.” I can see her smile out the corner of my eye, it reaches far beyond her cheeks. It seems to crawl up and die on her face rather than be placed there. I felt afraid suddenly, but whatever I did it’s already too late.

Suddenly, my eyes barely blink open, I try to get a grip on anything physical but it all seems to slip away. I feel some hard thing on both my sides, it traps me in like a coffin, but there is nothing above me. I try to breathe but something decides for me, some massive hunk of rock feels as if it’s trying to rip apart my throat. I hear yelling. I try to move what feels like a million weights, my body declines. I couldn’t even feel the world below my waist.

* * * * *

Something about me. “They’re awake! They’re awake!” I can’t think about anything. So it’s better I go back to sleep.

* * * * *

It’s been a year since I lost both legs, but it’s been good, y’know? I started school again pretty soon after and graduated high school in the spring, college life as a freshman ain’t so bad. Hell, there’s even a cute girl I’ve been flirting with on the low.

The hardest part hasn’t been getting used to the wheelchair or college or even the crash itself. I worry, is ten years enough time to enjoy a life? I still have nine left, and right now the world is moving as slow as it can go. I didn’t even want to go to college, I

wanted to skip and try doing everything fun in life, but my parents didn't believe me when I told them what I saw. They'd thought it was the hallucination of a drunk idiot that wrecked their brand-new Mercedes. Maybe that was just a dream, but the question of whether I'm properly living my life... is a fear I don't think I'll drop as easily.

* * * * *

I learned something awful today, it's another "anniversary" of the crash. I don't want to call it an anniversary though, that makes it seem like something good or pleasant that day happened. Nothing good happened, not to me, and apparently not to the girl I killed. My parents didn't tell me until now, they thought it would ruin me, it is ruining me. I never meant to hurt anyone, but I was at a party and wanted to leave because some guy was getting handsy, I didn't even realize how drunk I was or how fast I was going until it all suddenly stopped.

I never knew someone died in that accident. I want to talk with the family, apparently, the reason there wasn't a trial was because they didn't press charges and I was a minor. My parents tell me they didn't want to ruin my life, but couldn't bear to meet me. I can't bear it either, I feel so sick, I feel like an even more disgusting monster. My girlfriend holds me in her arms but I just keep sobbing.

My mind races around; is this what that dream meant when it said I was already damned? My stomach lurches, I'm an awful person for thinking of my own hell when the family, that girl, they're suffering far more than I ever will. I truly don't think I should've survived, and I don't think eight years is going to be enough to make up for this girl's life.

* * * * *

Today is the third year since the crash. I—I guess it's been better recently. After last year's incident, I had to be hospitalized, I just couldn't stop crying. My girlfriend was worried about me, and she took it upon herself to get me some professional help, and it did help. I still cry, but it's a lot less often now, and I don't do it in front of my girlfriend. In the past few months, I've really managed to accomplish some good. I got a job as a teaching assistant, I'm on track to graduate college a year early with my

bachelor's, and my girlfriend, well, she might be more than that soon.

She told me just how happy I make her, and that she loves me more than the world itself. Occasionally, I worry she resents me for all the baggage I have, but she always reassures me that it doesn't matter. Of course it matters, but if she says it doesn't, then I'll listen to her. Life has been good. I wish I knew it would stay that way. I always question whether that fateful meeting was actually real. I used to believe it without question, but now I'm not so sure. I told my girlfriend about it before I got admitted to the ward, and she told me I was probably hallucinating. I probably was. I hope I was, but if I say that, doesn't that make it all the more real?

* * * * *

I'm sobbing again. My wife, she's pregnant. I'm so happy and so scared and everything at once hit me like pavement. I was waiting, praying, and dreaming that this would happen but now that it has, I'm not sure either of us are ready.

Especially me. I'm not all that mentally stable, and children need stability. I don't think five years is enough to see my kid grow up, and I don't want to burden them with my past. It's all a whirl of emotions, even more for my wife. We got married right out of college about a year ago, and she's two months into her pregnancy. Our roles have switched in a way, she seems to be crying all the time and now I'm the pillar of this relationship, but I guess that's how things go.

* * * * *

It's been seven years since the crash; my son is one, turning two. He's sweet. He deserves a better parent than I can be. Most days though, I can't bring myself to look at him, he looks too much like his mom.

Rest her soul.

She died in the birth. I constantly weep over her, I don't know if I'll ever stop. Sometimes my son comes crawling in and it's all I can manage to not kick him away. I don't know if I can love him. I only hear crying now.

I have three years left, three, maybe I should give him up while I'm still ahead and

run off to the Bahamas or something. Anything would be better than suffering here. His birthday was on the date of the crash, and now all I want to do is throw another two lives away: mine, the girl's, and now mine and my son's. I'm an awful parent, but I don't think I can bring myself to care.

Do you think I could trade his life for mine? Take his life away and get some more years for myself? I wonder that too. I don't know what I'd do with more years, but I wouldn't waste it this time, I'd party and live and drink and travel and whatever else I wanted, no hangups or baggage, and no strings to hold me back.

* * * * *

I can't die, not like this. I have two years left but every day I struggle to breathe thinking about everything I've lost. My wife, the girl, the future I should've had, everything is lost to me. The only thing left is my son but even that will leave me. Or, more accurately, I will leave.

I've moved, I've bought pills, I've told people, I've hidden away and yet I get this dragging sense that no matter how hard I fight my life will still end on that day two years from now. All I want to do is enjoy life, but when I wake up I just want to go back to sleep. My work fired me last month, it's not even at the top of my list of concerns. I'll probably be kicked out soon but even to that, I've become numb. It's not like it matters what I do, I'll just die anyway. Even if I tried to rebuild a life for myself and save whatever I have left, it's all pointless since I won't have enough time to enjoy any of it.

Time, it means so much to me but no matter what I try to do I can't get it back. Daily I see my child, blissfully unaware of the pains of life, I envy him. I hate him. I've tried so hard to love him but it's all in vain, now I simply sit and watch. One day, when my life is over, hopefully some loving family can give him the life he deserves, but for now, he'll suffer with me.

* * * * *

My son barely manages to get on the bus; I have to help him, I hate to even touch the thing. I feel so guilty and at the same time like I'm about to lose the biggest weight I

ever had.

I have one year left, for now. I know the woman I spoke to was real, if I could just talk with her again, exchange this kid's life for mine, I'd be able to actually enjoy my time. I'm sure of it. I'm putting a backpack on the bus right now, the trip is long, and the kid thinks he's going to some lodge. It's an obvious lie, but he's four and I don't care to come up with something more convincing. He tries to speak with me, but every time he talks I block him out. He begs me for something or another, but again I block him out.

We've been on the road for a couple of hours, he's gone silent. Whispers sneak into my ear and caress my collar. The same ones I heard from so many years ago. I shake, she burns me to the touch. It's almost like I can feel her hand burning my back, she whispers oh-so-quietly to me, "You're early."

I don't speak out loud, me and my son already get strange looks. I can't think of a response, all I want to do is fall into the body of this strange woman, I know I'm getting closer to her, I know I'll see her soon. I wonder if my wife was also damned? Probably not, she was a good person, much better than I ever will be. At this point, I give up, if I'm already going to suffer eternally, I might as well enjoy what little life I have left.

So tired.

* * * * *

I pulled the emergency exit, screaming about how we needed to leave or something. The driver asked a little bit, why some wheelchair-bound dad and kid were fine being left in the middle of nowhere at some odd hour of the night, but it's not like he cares that much.

We get off the stop, no cars are out, not like the night I crashed. Nobody's here but the whispers of the ever-elusive succubus that burns my skin and covers my ears. She guides me. I hear her so clearly that I can no longer perceive the world around me, the nature, my steps, my child, everything just flows away from me in an instant. But I still can't see her or touch her. Maybe... maybe only ghosts can perceive her.

There's a nearby rock, some cracked piece of the street nobody cared to fix; I pick it up. For the first time in a long time, I stare my child in the eyes. He's covered in dirt and his eyes are red and yet he's unable to cry any more tears. I walk to him.

The cracking sound only lasts a moment, and then she appears before me on the road. Her hand traces up my stomach to my neck, she's covered in blood, and she burns me wherever she touches. "You're here?"

I am. I'm here for you.

"Why?"

You...you and a plea, please, I need more life. I know it's so much to ask after I wasted all I was given, but—

"But what? That's it. You got one last chance, no redos, dear." Her hands reach my cheeks, like she's cupping my soul in hers.

I—I just need more time, I thought you'd give me more time for his—I—

"Who told you that? Wasn't me. You've still got a year, and you're gonna live it through." She lifted her hands off me, and began to back away. Slowly but surely she began floating out of my vision.

No wait—that's not what—please don't leave me! Please!

With a flick of her hand she was gone, the only thing left being the body of an innocent child, brutally and senselessly murdered. I fall to my knees, I'm an awful person, I've been an awful person, and I continue to be an awful person.

* * * * *

Tomorrow is the day I die.

I know how.

I've been in prison for the last year, and haven't enjoyed one bit of it. They said I was a madman who killed their child and went insane after the death of my wife. I guess I am, and so when the trial came I pled guilty. I am guilty.

I don't mention that tomorrow is the day I'm supposed to die. I thought about it, about telling the guards, but they don't care. They shouldn't have to. We're doing an overnight transfer tonight. We'll be right back on that road. I know what will happen.

I'm not sad or scared though, Hell doesn't seem like an unfit punishment anymore. It seems like it's just what I deserve. A burning eternity of what I chased so hard to have and yet never got. It's so fitting it seems ironic.

As the bus continues to drive down such a nice unsuspecting road, there is a car

that swerves like a bat out of hell. It hugs the cars next to it then violently scratches the next, and then it comes towards us, too fast and too unexpected for the driver to account.

My fate is sealed, my hell is eternal, and it is deserved.

THE SOLDIER AND THE REAPER

Theresa Rabara, 18

Part 1

The last memory of my home life was that of my husband. I had just given birth to our daughter, Abigail. I was holding her fragile body in my arms, cloaked with the warmest blanket I could find. Then I remember feeling a sting on my cheek, my neck instinctively braced for the slap. Tears began to well in my eyes before I looked up at him. This man was pathetic.

I came from a wealthy family, but I was the youngest daughter; my marriage was of little importance to my father so I was given to this swine of a man. He was everything I hated in a person. He was arrogant, selfish, abusive, and an alcoholic. His name was Edmund, although I referred to him as the devil incarnate. We lived in a run-down shack just outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Edmund called it a home, while I called it a prison.

“Are you ignoring me again? Stuck-up woman.” He spat in my face, ignoring Abigail’s presence. I simply kept quiet, knowing that my remarks could put Abby in danger.

“I’m leaving you. There is another woman who is the opposite of you. Much more of a lady.” He scoffed. *You mean more submissive? I feel bad for whatever woman is forced to deal with you.* My face was hot with fury.

Suddenly I felt a pressure on my arm. I glanced to see what was going on; he had held a knife and dragged it across my skin, revealing the layers beneath and oozing blood. My grip loosened as he hoisted the child from my arms, my eyes went wide.

“What are you doing?!” I tried to yell, but my voice was scratchy and unconvincing. He let a grin creep across his face.

“She’s my property. I have no interest in you. Get out.” Edmund seemed to be serious. Though he was never kind to me, so I suppose this was not out of the ordinary.

I didn’t respond. Or rather, I couldn’t. Edmund was still holding the knife. Even if I leave, there is still a good chance I will see her again. I was hopeful. With my family I would be fine, actually; I was relieved. Relieved to finally be out of this godforsaken

prison. I was hopeful. The sight of my daughter in his arms dashed my hopes. He would never let me see her again. My own child. I pushed her out of me and this is the thanks I get? This *MAN* was just going to take my life like that? It's not just him. My father would never take back a daughter who had failed in marriage. He didn't even like Edmund, he just wanted to get rid of another mouth to feed.

I simply nodded my head and gathered a small bag of things. As I walked towards Abigail to say goodbye, Edmund shot me a glare. Tears pricked at my eyes again.

“Goodbye, little one. May your life be more fruitful than mine has been.” I choked back tears as I turned my back. I was done. I was alone. I was *free*.

* * * * *

The streets were a dark and dank place to be. Most of the street rats spent what little they could on alcohol, a temporary comfort in the hostile reality of life here. I was a stranger to the rabble that wandered the alleys and traded behind buildings. It was a strange place to be. As a child, I was never watched over as closely as my older brother and sisters. After all, I was unimportant. An insignificant appendage of our family tree. I shook those thoughts aside as I cautiously wandered the alleyways for a suitable place to sleep. This would be my life now but, seeing as how I was a woman in the 1850s, I had one option for work. Selling my dignity and my body for a small amount of coin was worth the trade in my opinion. Survival was my priority.

* * * * *

I think it's been four years since I was forced out of my home. I didn't eat most days, the little work I could get was only enough to pay for a small, meager—hopefully not moldy—piece of bread. Soup and meat were a commodity that I hadn't enjoyed for months now. I was thin. Thinner than I was, anyways. My face was sunken in and I looked sickly. Well, I *was* sickly, always on the brink of death.

I don't recall my death, though; I suppose no one remembers how they died. The last thing I felt was my heart giving out on me. I suppose I had also given up. Life, at this point, had no meaning. I had lost everything I had cared for. I remember just

wanting to hold my daughter; four years away from your first child does a number on your mind. I know I didn't spend a lot of time with her, but still she was but a babe when Edmund took her from me. I remember feeling my hatred for Edmund flooding my mind, or what was left of it. Then, I finally decided to let go. It wasn't worth the pain of holding on to this life.

Part 2

I suppose it had been decades since I passed. The old city that I remember was no more. The old cobblestone streets, now smooth and paved with bright lines dividing them. I had no idea where I was or what I was doing. I only had one thing on my mind, *revenge*. It consumed me. Flooding every corner of my mind so I could think of nothing else. Suddenly I was inside. The space was large and dimly lit by a single window. Strange, I didn't recall this place.

"Where am I?" I said out loud, my voice echoed in my mind. I reached out to touch one of the many boxes, my hand simply passed through it as if it were unbothered by my presence. A door creaked open behind me, my mind screaming to hide as if I was the one trespassing here. The first to catch my eye was the woman. Stunning, no older than twenty-nine, and just above average height. She had her hair in an elaborate braid that complimented her clothing. Clearly, this was a different time. A woman wearing pants and a shirt *that* low-cut would have been a scandal, but she seemed to be comfortable.

Finally, I looked to where her hands rested. It seemed to be some type of chair. Resting in it was, I assume, her father. He looked familiar. He looked like Edmund. Dark brown hair, a scruffy beard, and the same resting facial expression, that of annoyance and contempt. I could feel my blood boiling and my nerves setting themselves alight. Something was different though, his eyes seemed to glaze over at the sight of the containers in front of him as if he was trapped. I knew that feeling all too well.

"Look Ed, we have to go through Mom and Dad's stuff. It's been sitting here for fifteen years." The woman spoke. *ED? AS IN EDMUND?* My face visibly cringed at the nickname.

"Look Taylor, I know, but I'm busy today." Strangely, his limbs never moved.

“Doing what?” she asked playfully.

That’s when it hit me. He was paralyzed. This man was trapped in his own body, unable to make a decision for himself, unable to care. The perfect host. I left my thoughts for a moment, redirecting my focus on the pair of people in front of me.

“Well, I was going to have James help me with more research, but *someone* had to come pick me up last minute.” Ed rolled his eyes.

“Oh, wait, that’s actually important.” Her eyes widened slightly, “Well this is more fun anyways, so why don’t we get started?”

“Fine,” Ed smiled, his frustration melting away. Perhaps she’s a sibling?

I moved closer to them, my curiosity got the better of me. Taylor began to open boxes. I sat next to Ed for a few hours before she opened ‘the box’. It was crinkled and clearly worn out. There was a small box that I immediately recognized. It was adorned with leather and dyed a beautiful navy blue, the small metal accents seemed muted and dull.

Taylor began to open the box, coughing as the excess dust rose from its perch. The ring was smaller than I remembered. It was in no way expensive or extravagant. It was a simple band made of bronze, suitable for one who comes from little.

“I love this ring!” Taylor’s eyes lit up at the sight of the simple band. It made me smile slightly; after all, it used to be mine.

“It suits you,” Ed seemed to smile, though I couldn’t quite tell.

Taylor took out another box. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was *his* ring. It was thinner than I remembered but the “E” engraved on it was unmistakable. The color in my knuckles began to fade as I gripped tighter than I ever thought possible. She gave the other small box to Ed as a smile grew on my face.

“Here, we can match!” Taylor smiled as she set the box in his hand. *Take it*, I whispered in his ear. His eyes widened as he quickly looked around the room. *Put it on*, I commanded. He followed, placing the ring on his thumb. A perfect fit.

I felt a strange pulling sensation in the back of my mind. I tried to ignore it, but it kept getting stronger despite my resistance. My body became one with the ring while my mind melded to Ed’s. It was an odd feeling; his sight was sharp but his thoughts were running a mile a minute. Thoughts of a war settled in the forefront of his mind. I felt the slightest bit of sympathy for him, but it was short-lived. His eyes flashed to the

ring, probably noticing the guest occupying his brain. He seemed broken. The sight of the ring seemed to summon a feeling of uncomfortable ease.

“Edward? Earth to Edward!” Taylor waved her hand in front of his face, snapping him out of his trance-like state.

“Hm?” He raised an eyebrow. *Hm, Edward huh?*

“Are you okay? You spaced out on me again.” She looked more annoyed than concerned.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just...” His eyes glazed over, zoning out once again. I felt a sting in his chest, a pain that persisted for quite a while. It felt as if his heart had dropped and a knife placed in its stead. That was when I realized, I had control. I could do what I wished with this man.

While the epiphany hit me, I heard another voice occupy my mind.

“*Who are you?*” The voice was faint. It sounded sheepish and scared, as if I had taken control of a child. I did not respond.

I felt a resistance, not enough to drive me out but enough to make me give in. I think it was pity that saved him. He was a broken soul. He was weak. He was the perfect victim. The problem was, I did not know what was me and what was him. Were my thoughts really my own or was he in control of those? The thought filled me with rage.

“Ed, we are leaving, okay? This place gives me weird vibes,” Taylor’s voice broke the focus I had, pulling Ed back into control.

Ed simply nodded as Taylor maneuvered the wheelchair through the room. I was free. Well, trapped, but free nonetheless.

Part 3

When Taylor and Edward arrived at their home, I was immediately in awe. It was huge. He had three whole bedrooms and a full kitchen. I suppose his sister lived with him, but my statement still stands. I felt a shove.

“You need to get some rest,” Taylor said, lifting and situating her brother into his bed.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Ed’s voice felt like it was coming from me, as if I was the one speaking.

I don't know what Taylor said after that. I do know that Edward was livid. I could not pin it down but somewhere deep down, he was angry. I assumed it was something that she had said and left it at that. Taylor seemed abrasive and rude, so of course anything she said would be an unbridled truth whether you wanted to hear it or not.

Ed had fallen asleep and I was now in full control. He did not dream, as I would not allow him that respite. He was stuck with me. He was stuck in his mind with me. I took advantage of my moment on stage and awoke his body. He could see but could not control his movements. I willed his legs to move, and they did. I heard a whimper escape his lips. He was crying. I felt cold tears flow from his face. I gave his legs the strength to stand and move. He was now independent. Well, not quite.

His body was awkward to move. Perhaps my absence from a body of my own has caused me to forget its natural movements. After a moment I moved his body back to the bed and allowed his mind to rest. Not because I knew he needed it, but because I knew I would need him to rest.

As the sun through his curtains, I felt the control I had slipping. Then, a knock at the door awoke Edward.

"Morning, sleepy head," Taylor rubbed her eyes, her voice sounding deeper.

Ed simply groaned, then remembered the miracle of the night before.

"Taylor," he paused, his eyes flooding with tears, "Tay, I walked last night," his voice cracked.

She simply scoffed, "That's impossible,"

I felt the tears run down his face. "Yes I did,"

"I think you need to find friends. This whole isolation thing is not good for you," Taylor laughed as she walked away. "Walked? Please."

Edwards' heart raced. Pumping rage through his body. His face heated up. *Good, feel the rage. She thinks you're crazy.* I pushed those thoughts through him as Taylor walked back in. His eyes shot to her.

"What?" Ed's voice cracked.

"Show me."

"I thought you didn't believe me?" His eyes began to sting again.

"If you can do it I'll believe you," Taylor crossed her arms and leaned against the door frame.

“Okay,” Ed tried to mimic the feeling from the night before, but he could not move.

Taylor raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Edward’s heart broke. I could feel the sinking in his stomach, the tears in his eyes, and the overwhelming anger. He was embarrassed. He was confused. *Why? Why can’t I move them? How did they even do that?* His thoughts raced frantically past my own.

He looked up at his sister, his face covered in tears. “Get out,” his teeth began to grind against each other.

Taylor rolled her eyes. “Fine,”

The day flew by rather quickly. I guess that’s what happens when you choose a paralyzed man as your host, but I digress. He simply sat in his bed, brooding. His thoughts were racing, the memories of his past became too much to handle for me. There was a lot of death. The sight of his friends dying became too familiar. I pushed the thoughts aside, asserting my own will over his body. I think Taylor had left for the day, though I’m not sure why. It was time.

I willed his body to move, his limbs jerked awkwardly as we stomped towards the kitchen. I noticed the knife block. It sat just next to the stove, standing proudly. By this point, Edward had given up on resisting. He simply let me take control. With a newfound freedom, his limbs moved smoothly. I walked to the edge of the counter near the knife block and grabbed the small fruit knife. Edward shuddered, an unfamiliar cold air ran down his spine.

Knife in hand, I walked back to Edward’s room. I placed it gently under his pillow, the same way I used to when Edmund was out too late. Those memories came flooding back. The days when that knife was all that stood between me and freedom. Just one thrust into his chest would have been enough to get me out of there, alas, that time never came.

The front door creaked open, “Hey Ed, I’m home.”

I allowed Edward to speak, listening carefully to every word he spoke. “Hey, welcome back,” he smiled.

Taylor wore a similar outfit as the day before. Sleek and subtle, but ostentatious and decorative. She set her bag down and hung her coat on the hooks behind the door. I forced Edward into submission, pushing his mental squirming into the abyss. From then on, I never responded to Taylor. She tried to talk to her brother but she didn’t

know that I was the one she was speaking to.

The sun began to set, its final rays of the day stabbed through the curtains. When the sun finally took its place below the horizon, I could feel the exhaustion hit me. I lay down, being careful to avoid the knife that rested under the pillow. Taylor walked in and scoffed at the sight of her brother.

“Why did I get stuck with you?” she whispered to herself as Ed and I listened. I suppose she didn’t know that I was still awake. I was careful to position myself the same way I was when she left. As she turned to walk out of the room, I took full control.

Part 4

“No!” I heard myself scream. That voice in the back of my head came back.

This should be good. My arms raised, I had no control. For the first time in nearly five years, my limbs were able to move, but I didn’t want this to be my memory.

My hands were covered in blood, a small knife in my hands. My little sister, Taylor, laid in a pool of her own blood. Her eyes watered as the pain hit her. She couldn’t speak; one of the puncture wounds was through her lungs. I fell to my knees—more like forced to my knees. The knife pushed itself into her flesh. With each thrust, I could see the life in her draining. I screamed and pleaded with whatever was in control of me to stop. She was all I had left. She was my baby sister. Even with that, my body continued to mutilate her until she gargled, the blood in her lungs bubbling in her mouth. Suddenly my body went limp.

I had just killed my sister. Her blood stained my hands, my hair, and my clothes. The knife fell inches from me. I screamed. I cried until my lungs gave out. Then, I screamed some more. Praying that someone would hear. Hoping that someone would help. My cries gave me no such result. I heard a chuckle in the back of my head.

“Well then, there it is,” it said.

Rage was the only thing I could feel. Sure, I was angry at this thing for what it had done, but I couldn’t feel anything else.

“I can read your emotions, silly. There isn’t an ounce of remorse in your heart.”

“You’re wrong! That was my sister! She was all I had left!”

“Aw. You are already saying ‘was’. All you are is a bitter man bound to a chair and a bed for the rest of your pathetic life.”

“Why?” I don’t know what I was asking, it just seemed like the only thing that made sense. I got no response. Instead, the presence in my mind left. I was alone. I was alone with my thoughts and the corpse of my sister, her face a mix of pain and sadness. I was there, covered in the blood of my baby sister, my world. I began to laugh. I laughed hysterically. There I was, a soldier who had survived hell on Earth, a brother who did whatever he could to protect his sister, a son who tried to pick up the pieces of his parents’ past. Suddenly everything was meaningless. Everything I loved was gone.

OUR FALLEN FEATHERS

Wade Shackelford, 15

Liam had been taking pictures of the abandoned boarding school all day. Without realizing it, it was almost 9:30 at night and he was still there.

At 10:00 p.m., he realized how long it had been. He pulled out his phone to call his mom, but he didn't have any service. *Strange*, he thought to himself. Gray Horse was a small district in the middle of miles of land in Fairfax. His phone usually had enough bars to call someone despite the lack of Wi-Fi. He tried again, but still no service.

At that moment, he became eerily aware of how quiet it was. It was the beginning of autumn and usually cicadas were still out. The tree line was silent. He became acutely aware of how beast-like the swallowing darkness surrounding him was. He felt cold. The stillness was unearthly.

A bloodcurdling feeling came over him. Liam could hear the horrific screams of children and the sound of lashings. He was frightened. He fell to the ground on his knees crying, wishing the revolting sounds would stop.

Then everything went blank. No feeling, no sound, no vision. Sleep, he knew this feeling. Sleep was peaceful.

* * * * *

A beam of light danced through a stained glass window and the screams of an older woman woke him. She was dressed in black robes and had a rosary around her neck. Her fingers were long and slender, almost skeleton-like. In her right hand, she held a wooden paddle that looked like it had carved through a couple of kids.

Liam wiped his eyes as he yawned. He looked down at his legs. He was wearing white trousers. *How bizarre*, he thought. *People haven't worn these since the 1800s*. He didn't remember wearing these, yet he had them on. Liam was dazed and confused. He was so caught up in the moment he didn't notice the older woman coming towards him. She loomed over him. He didn't have enough time to evaluate before...*CRACK!*...the paddle she had in her hands came down on his back, leaving welts behind in its wake.

Tears gathered in his eyes. He didn't know what to say.

"Hurry up and get dressed!" screamed the old woman.

"Get ready, for what?" he asked with tears in his eyes.

"Don't play stupid, boy! You know you have a prayer service every morning. If you don't get ready in a hasty fashion, I promise there are more lashings where that came from," she hissed. He got up very quickly, fearing the lashings that would come if he didn't. The woman glared at him and then left the room. A feeling of relief came over Liam as she walked away.

He shuffled to the closet, still tired. He pulled out a military-looking outfit and slipped it on. The icy gray outfit clashed with his warm-toned skin.

He didn't quite know what to do or where to go, so he followed the flow of kids out of the common room's door into an old-looking sanctuary. This is where Liam would come every morning to pray, then head to the horrible classes about how to be "civilized" that followed.

He had many altercations with the older woman, whom he had found out was named Sister Anna, who no one seemed to care for—since most of the time it wasn't a conversation she was having with people, it was lashings she was giving them. Liam had many normal classes that he took, like English, science, and math. But then there were the classes used to change him, assimilating him into white American culture, and *How to Bathe*, which was the most embarrassing class.

* * * * *

Months had passed at the gruesome school, and Liam's life before this was now nothing more than a distant memory of a time when he hadn't suffered beatings and abuse. He had scars on his legs and back from being scrubbed with iron wool, and welts from being hit by the nuns and the priest. He was tired and could no longer handle the mistreatment. Liam was positive he would die here and no one would remember him. A little Indian boy, forgotten by history and covered up by the guilty.

Liam had gotten in trouble days before for speaking in Osage, which by no means was he fluent in, but still, they hated the students for speaking their tribal languages. They put Liam outside in an outhouse-like box. It was the beginning of winter, and the

days were cold and the nights even more so. He hadn't had food in days, and he had frostbite. Even worse, he knew they would use iron wool to bathe him when they let him back inside.

He had no hope left. No morale. Despair was a well-known spirit in the following days outside for Liam, until one night, a wave of strength came over him. He didn't know why, but he felt Wah'Kon-Tah had blessed him.

It was freezing outside and the metal of his shackles was cold. He slammed his cuffs against the bars of the building until the shackles snapped, freedom now gathered in his eyes. Liam opened the cage's door and ran into the cold moonlit night. Free of all the pain and suffering, he didn't know what to do or where to go next, but he was free. With this swelling of hope and freedom, visions of his life before. Images of his family and friends came back to him then...*BOOM!*...someone fired a gun near him.

That's when he felt the cutting of a bullet entering his chest.

He fell to the ground as Sister Anna and the priest walked over to his almost lifeless vessel. He heard an owl calling him to death. The last sound his ears heard was Sister Anna's motto, "I was sworn to kill the Indian in you."

Everything went white. The feeling he had once had came back. Peace. Quiet.

* * * * *

As he was feeling content, he suddenly jolted awake into the mist of the November morning, grabbing at where he had been shot. Liam looked around, confused at the fact that he was back at Gray Horse. It was abandoned again. He was in the present.

Liam had been on the ground. His camera and the film in it were still with him. He picked it up, then he checked his phone. He had nine missed calls from his mom. He called his mom back to come get him.

When he got in the car, he tried to explain what had happened, but she dismissed him and said that he must have passed out and had a nightmare. She took Liam home to get ready for school. He got ready and grabbed his book about Gray Horse Boarding School. He walked into his class and sat down at his desk.

Liam looked at his hands. They were frostbitten. He opened the book to the chapter he had left off. He turned the page. There was a photo on it. Liam looked down at the

book. His body froze cold as stone. A grim feeling washed over Liam, drowning him in the nightmare of the past.

It was him.

He became frantic. That's when he heard Sister Anna in his ear. He could hear her whisper her famous words. *"I'm sworn to kill the Indian in you."*

Everything went dark.

THE RIVERFORD CULT

Danika West, 15

As I sit and watch my parents be placed into the earth, everything in me breaks. I physically feel my heart shatter, like a foundational shift or tremor inside, and I know I'm crying, but I don't feel anything anymore. How could I? How does one continue after this? How am I supposed to go to school, or play volleyball anymore? I had everything with them, and now...I have nothing.

* * * * *

"Are you sure you have everything?" the social worker asked.

"Yes," I reply tonelessly. "Could I just get a quick second to say goodbye?"

"Of course, dear," the social worker said softly as she slipped out the front door.

As soon as the social worker was gone, I bolted. There was no way I was going to my grandparents'. All my memories of them were tinged with their strangeness. Their weird obsession with things that freaked me out wasn't something I wanted anything to do with. After all I'd been through, how could anyone expect me to go there? So, *nope*, I decided. *I'm getting out of here.*

As I hitched my stuffed backpack up and moved quickly towards the familiar back door of what was no longer my home, I ran straight into a perfect example of how things just didn't seem to be working out in my favor anymore: a police officer. It's like they expected me to run, which is completely ridiculous. I only ran that one time, and I came back, so they were paranoid for no reason.

"Where do you think you're going, Alice?" the police officer asked.

"Oh, you know, just trying to get a quick jog in before the long car ride," I replied sarcastically. "My legs always get so tight on long car rides. Got to stretch 'em out."

"Of course. I totally understand," he said condescendingly, "but why go by yourself, when I'm completely free to go with you?"

"You know what," I said in my fakest happy voice, "I think I'll be able to just sleep this ride, so no need for a jog."

“Alright then. Let’s hit the road.”

I flashed him a phony smile as I jerked open the door of the social worker’s tiny Volvo, quickly shoved myself into the backseat, and barricaded myself with my backpack and the rest of my meager belongings so I wouldn’t have to talk to or look at anyone on the long ride to the crap town of Riverford.

* * * * *

I did get to take a nap, which was pretty surprising because since the accident, I hadn’t been able to get any sleep. However, my failed escape attempt and the nights on a bumpy cot at the girls’ home I stayed in that first week after my parents’ accident must have caught up with me, because the next thing I knew, my nostrils were being assaulted by the musky scent of cow manure. As I glanced out the window, I saw a twelve-year-old kid putt-putting down the side of the road on a tractor. Riverford. Just as I remembered this crap town: stinky, small, and full of weirdos.

As we pulled into my grandparents’ driveway, I was assaulted by a strong sense of déjà vu. It reminded me of when I was younger and my parents and I would take our yearly trip here, until a couple of years ago when all of a sudden we stopped. I didn’t complain. I had a lot going on, and I never liked it here. There was just something about Riverford that always set me on edge.

I walked up and knocked on their old, rickety door. Almost as soon as my knuckles touched the weathered wood, the door swung open.

“Alice! You’re here!” my grandmother exclaimed excitedly. “Come in! Come in! It’s chilly out. Your grandfather and I don’t want you to get sick.”

It was an awkward interaction between us as the social worker muttered some meaningless words and dropped my bags by the front door. I shuffled nervously in and gave my grandmother a quick side hug. She grabbed my arm and steered me through the entryway to take me to see my grandfather, blabbering on about how much I’d grown and how long it had been. As we entered the living room, my grandfather rose stiffly from his well-worn armchair and nodded in my direction. My grandfather had always been very reserved. He would talk to a few people, but mostly, my grandmother did the talking.

“Hey, I missed you guys,” I finally said to them.

“Oh, we missed you so much, Alice,” my grandmother said.

“Yep,” my grandfather added in that rough voice I remembered from our visits. “It’s good to have you here.”

“Here. Come on. I’ll take you to your room,” my grandmother said, bustling me out of the room. “Let’s get you settled in.”

As I walked into my room, the starkness of it took me by surprise. It was completely white. Actually, everything in my grandparents’ house was white. The walls, the bed, the carpet, and all of the religious relics that they owned. Which was a surprising number, and I’m not even quite sure what actual religion they practiced. Along with the normal crosses and statues, they had pictures of spiritualistic beings that I’d never seen before. They’d never tried to explain any of it or push anything weird on me, but I couldn’t help but think, *If I wake up and see them doing some mumbo-jumbo Satanic worship, I’m out of here.*

“Well, go ahead and get settled, and we’ll have dinner in a few hours,” my grandmother said. On her way out the door, she whirled suddenly and added, “You should go explore the town later. You’ve never gotten to before because you and your...well, you always leave so early.”

So, that’s what I did. My grandparents lived in an old colonial in the middle of “town.” The city of Riverford boasted a population of 427 people (425 and my grandparents). Main Street consisted of a pharmacy and a few thrift stores and rundown shops. As I headed down the “strip,” my shopping trip was definitely underwhelming. Riverford’s sights were exactly what I expected. It stunk. It was small. And, it was crappy. But I did actually spot one store I thought that I would enjoy. It was a little boutique, and as soon as I walked in the doors, I felt a curtain of happiness glide over me. I felt safe in it and it gave me a sense of familiarity. Then, all of a sudden, I saw the strangest boy.

His short light hair had natural waves with sun-touched highlights while his tall, athletic frame seemed completely at ease leaning near the boutique shop’s counter. He looked mysterious and powerful, like the world around him was being careful not to disturb him. His white t-shirt and light jeans showed a casual comfort and his white Air Force 1s were a nice touch. But, it was his aura of calm and confidence that had

me enraptured.

Since he was obviously engrossed in the book he was reading, I had time to creep a little more and noticed the way his blue-gray eyes flickered over the page, intently focused on every word. My heart started to flutter, and as I got closer, he shifted a little. The title of the book became visible: *Pride and Prejudice*, a book I never expected an utterly attractive guy my age to be reading, especially in this town.

“I love that book,” I said out of the blue, surprising even myself.

I’d never been that confident or self-assured about anything in my entire life. However, something about this kid made me feel the need to at least speak up about something. Ever since my parents died, I knew I’d been quiet and reserved, but this moment was different.

“Oh, hey,” he said, a little startled. “I didn’t see you there. Uh, yeah, this book is amazing.”

I just smiled at him and continued to look around the boutique when all of a sudden, he said, “Sorry, but you just look familiar. Do I know you?”

“Um, no. I don’t think so,” I said warily.

“Oh, okay, sorry about that,” he said, with a sheepish look.

When I finally decided on a cute knapsack and pair of oversized ivory-colored sunglasses, I walked up to the cashier, and it was a little bit of an awkward experience. My dependence on Apple Pay didn’t go over well in this podunk town, so I had to dig for my debit card, which had been mangled a bit when I’d tossed it haphazardly in my volleyball bag last year. The cashier doggedly fought it to get it to work before having to type in the numbers and enter my name. Finally, I paid for my things and with my ears and face flaming, I tried to slink out the door. Suddenly, I heard the boy ask, “Hey, I know this is weird, but would you like to hang out tonight? My friend is throwing this party, and I’d love it if you came.”

I stopped in my tracks with one hand on the door. I don’t know what came over me, but the words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them: “Yeah, sure, I’ll come.”

“You’re staying out at the Henricks’ place? They’re your grandparents, right?” He must have caught the questioning look on my face because he hastily added, “I caught your name when you gave it to the cashier when you were paying. Alice, right?”

“Oh, yeah. I just moved in with them today.”

“Cool. It’s just a quick get-together with some friends from school. It’ll be at the blue house back behind this shop on Asher Street. You know it?”

I nodded, mumbled, “See ya,” and slipped out the door.

* * * * *

As soon as I got back to my grandparents’ house, I went and looked through my clothes, or at least the very small amount that I’d brought. I found the perfect dress. It was white and flowy, perfect for a casual night out. I didn’t want to look like I was trying too hard, but I also wanted this guy to notice me. I felt this unnerving link to him that somehow made me feel like I needed to make a good impression tonight. Plus, this was the first time that the numbness that had surrounded me since my parents’ death seemed to fade away. I needed this one little piece of normal.

After I changed and sat through a quiet dinner with awkward small talk with my grandparents, I realized that I had a lot of time before the boutique guy—who I later learned was Carl—was supposed to arrive.

I couldn’t believe that I’d agreed to go to a party with a guy that I had just met, but something had drawn me to him, and I couldn’t say no.

It was only 5:45. *Jeez, old people eat early.* I figured I could kill some time and ease my nerves by exploring the house. I went into every room, and just like my room, every room had this eerie feel with the unbroken all-white interior and the religious-looking artifacts. Just as I stepped into my grandparents’ room, the last door left unopened, my grandmother swooped in.

“What are you doing?!” My grandma hurled the words at me like an accusation, all sweetness gone.

“Oh, I’m just looking around,” I spluttered. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes!” she screeched. “You are never to go in this room! You understand? You are invading our privacy.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” I said, shaken and embarrassed. I turned towards the door, but a sudden image of my mother smiling gently flashed into my head, and I found the strength to ask, “but, Grandma, what *is* all of this stuff?”

She looked like she wasn’t going to answer. The severe set to her lips tightened for

a moment. I could almost see her come to the realization that the conversation was going to have to happen sooner or later, since I was living with them. She sighed and took a deep breath before she replied.

“These are the gods your grandfather and I worship. Your mother used to feel the same way...until she met your father. Well, anyway.” She shook her head. “Now you know. You look gorgeous. Go have fun with Carl.”

I could hear the anger in her voice when she talked about my mom, and it struck a chord with me. As I walked down the hallway away from her unsettling outburst, I replayed the tense conversation in my head. As I gathered up my new knapsack and packed a few things for the evening, it hit me. She knew I was going out with a boy. But...I never told her I had plans.

I thought about that the whole way to the party. How would my grandma know any teenage boy here? It didn't make any sense. As I was walking, I felt the tiny hairs on the back of my neck start to rise. I had this sensation of being watched, by not just one person. Lots of people. I looked around, and to my surprise, I did see people looking at me. As I walked down the street of the neighborhood by my grandparents' house, I glanced away from the sidewalk to the first house on the block and saw a man, a woman I assumed was his wife, and two young children standing silent and unmoving at their window, staring at me. I sped up with my head still turned and saw another line of people at the bay windows at the front of their house, standing statue-still with their eyes following my movements and no words being spoken. When I looked across the street, the silhouettes in the window told the same story. They all were watching me as I walked down the street. This shook me to my core, and I took off running faster than I had ever run before.

Suddenly, I crashed into something hard. I bounced back, placing my hands up to ward off what I knew was going to be my end. As I looked up between my shaking fingers, I expected the worst, but it was just Carl.

“Carl, thank goodness it's you,” I said shakily, exhaustion and fear making my voice quiver. “The people in those houses were all staring at me.” I leaned over to catch my breath. Carl's warm presence was already calming me down. “Surely, that was just my imagination,” I said, talking mostly to myself. “Maybe I just dreamed it, if you're here.”

As I told him this, he didn't show any emotion. He just stared at me, blank and

emotionless, and cold seeped into my bones.

Finally, he blinked and said, “Yeah, you were probably just imagining that. I get that experience sometimes, too, especially in a new place at night.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I said with a quiver in my voice.

“Come on, Alice, I’ll take you to the party.”

He reached out and grabbed my forearm as his eyes turned dark and empty again. He started to drag me to a giant, gleaming white house at the center of town. There were no cars and no teenagers drunk outside like there normally are at high school parties. It was completely void of life.

When he pushed me stiffly through the door, I stood in shock. It looked exactly like my grandparents’ house; it was all white, and nobody was there.

“What’s going on, Carl? I thought this was a party?” I backed myself towards the entrance, groping for the doorknob.

He didn’t say anything, but his light eyes flickered and turned dark and an unearthly strong hand shot out and grabbed my wrist. He started running, dragging me across the dining room, into the kitchen, and we flew down the stairs.

Rough hands grabbed me from behind. A blindfold was tied unceremoniously around my face.

“Carl, what’s going on? Please stop this.”

“Oh, don’t worry, dear,” I heard someone say, but it wasn’t Carl. That husky voice was familiar. My grandpa.

“You’re going to be just like us,” he said. “Don’t you want to be like your grandparents and Carl?”

“No!” I screamed. “I want out of here. I want my parents back, and I want to go home!”

“Well, sorry about that, darling, but that’s just not possible. Turning from our gods made what happened to them inevitable. What is possible, is you becoming one of us.”

Monotone chanting started quietly around me, growing louder and stronger. More voices joined in and the air around me seemed to pulse with power. My hands were pulled behind me and rough bark scraped my back. The rope tightened, pulling me closer, holding me in place.

The ominous chanting was at full volume but the words sounded ancient and

foreign to my ear. My blindfold was ripped away from my face, and all I saw was a sea of faces in a black cavern below the house. Every man, woman, and child in the whole town weaved together, closer and closer to me in white robes, chanting in their coarse and powerful unknown language. The glowing white stump I was tied to twisted above me, ending with a jagged broken point. It seemed to be throbbing with the words, waiting for something more.

My grandparents approached, reciting their ancient verse. I tried to squirm away, but my grandmother cut apart the rope and grabbed my hand. She held it in a steely grip and before I could even register the gleam of the knife's edge in the light, my grandfather cut down my palm in one swift stroke. As I screamed in fear and agony, my grandmother grabbed a bowl and caught my blood. Through my tears, I watched as the ritual-possessed crowd ended their otherworldly hymn and in perfect synchronization, cut their own hands.

Every person came forward to add droplets of their blood to mine, creating a pool inside the bowl full of the town's blood. Others came forward, adding other liquids and dark, infested-looking herbs. When they finished, my grandparents appeared with twisted smiles on their faces. My grandmother grabbed my jaw while my grandfather poured the liquid down my throat, and then I saw black.

* * * * *

"I'll be down in a minute, Grandma!" I screamed from my room.

"Okay, hurry up, we have to get to the meeting place soon. We're leading the ceremony today!"

I remember everything. Every single detail from that night. Being dragged. Blindfolded. Tossed around. The rough rope tightening on my skin. The sharp cut. Every word of their dark chant in a language I'm beginning to understand.

I'll keep deepening my connection to their world. And, I'll use it all. I'll make myself stronger. I'll learn the dark words, perform their rituals, and grow my power. And, I'll keep using the flashes of smiles from my mother and the soft voice I hear that I know belongs to my father to hold their true power at bay. And, one day, I'll get out of here. And I'll use all that they gave me and all that they took from me to bring them down.

THE MAN BEHIND THE CRYPT

Ariana Reeves & Haiven Weems, 16

It was well past dark, and families had already ushered their younger kids back into the warmth of their houses. Even many of the older kids had filled up their candy bags and headed home, but some still wandered the streets. Three elaborate clowns walked down the sidewalk, their bags sagging from the weight of the candy they held. As they were walking, they passed by a cemetery. A black metal fence surrounded the gravestones and crypts, and a worn-down church loomed tall in the middle of the cemetery.

“You know where the perfect place to be on Halloween is?” Jonie asked.

“Don’t even think about it,” Amanda responded, “I hate being scared.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of because it’s an empty cemetery. It would be fun to walk around,” Garret said.

“If it’s empty, why would it be fun to walk around? We would just be walking around a dark cemetery,” Amanda replied. Jonie thought and said, “Yeah, but tonight is Halloween, so it would be in the Halloween spirit.”

“That is the dumbest reason ever,” Amanda argued.

“Fine, you can stay out here alone, then,” Garret stated, as he and Jonie made their way to the gate.

Amanda sighed. “That is an even worse option. Have you ever seen any horror movies? You have to stay together in these types of situations.”

“The non-existent situation where there is a killer after us?” Garret sarcastically asked.

“You know, the people in the movies probably didn’t know there was a killer after them either,” Amanda said.

Jonie opened the gate and stepped through. “Well even if there is a killer after us, there are three of us.”

“Like that has ever stopped a killer,” Amanda muttered, tense as she entered the cemetery.

Suddenly Garret lunged toward Amanda, causing her to flinch back.

“Don’t do that!” Amanda shrieked. “Gosh, why do I even hang out with you guys,” she commented as Jonie and Garret roared with laughter.

The three kids started stepping around gravestones, walking toward the church. When they tried the handle of the church, it was locked. As they started to walk back towards the front of the cemetery they heard a creak. Turning around, they saw that the previously locked door was cracked open.

“Uh, no, we are leaving,” Amanda demanded. “Like, right now, because that is creepy.”

“Maybe the ghosts opened it up for us because they want us to go inside,” Jonie said, following Garret, who had already started walking towards the door.

“Don’t be a scaredy cat,” Garret said, though anyone looking at him could see he was on edge.

“Great, my cause of death will be from giving in to peer pressure,” Amanda huffed as she followed the other two.

The church was a simple building with a few rows of pews facing a podium. There was a doorway on the back wall but it looked like it led to a storage closet or office. After deciding that there was nothing interesting in there, the three clowns headed outside. They had made their way to the front, when they saw that the gate they had come in through was closed.

“Okay, I’m switching sides. I agree with Amanda,” Garret said. “We shouldn’t have come in here.”

“Calm down, someone probably just closed it for the night,” Jonie reasoned.

“How come we never saw anyone, then?” asked Amanda, who was clutching Jonie’s arm. Suddenly, they heard a bang from near a crypt beside them. They jumped backward, looking at each other nervously. Amanda was still clutching Jonie’s arm and Garret was standing slightly in front of them. Then from behind them, they heard something zoom past. Amanda screamed as she searched for what had made the noise. Garret was now clutching his candy bag close to his chest, his face pale. Jonie only seemed slightly affected as she bit her lip.

“Okay, we can leave now,” Jonie squeaked.

They scurried back towards the gate, but they heard something coming after them. Looking back, they didn’t see anything except the dark outline of gravestones and

crypts. Another couple of bangs sounded behind them, each one seeming closer and closer. Now the three kids were full-on sprinting towards the gate.

“Open it, open it, open it,” Amanda yelled at Garret as he was the first to reach the gate. Garret fumbled with the gate latch but opened it and scampered out, holding it open for Jonie and Amanda. As soon as they were all through the gate, Garret slammed it shut. They took off towards home, still on edge, nervously looking around.

“That was the *worst* idea,” Amanda bit out.

“Yeah, next time we’ll listen to you when you ramble on about horror movies and murderers,” Garret confessed as Jonie agreed.

* * * * *

As the three kids sped away, two figures emerged next to the gate.

“That was the most fun I’ve had all year,” an old man said to his dog. “It’s usually very boring watching over the cemetery, isn’t it, boy?”

The dog wagged his tail as he sniffed his owner’s pockets.

“Go fetch,” the man smiled as he threw a treat.

The dog bounded after the treat and the old man laughed as he recalled how frightened the children were. Maybe it would teach them to stay out of the cemetery and not cause trouble. Although, there would probably be another group of kids that entered the cemetery next year. Oh well, the man thought. Maybe he could plan for next year and scare whichever kids came in even more. It was in the Halloween spirit, after all.

Content Warnings

Stories are listed in order of appearance

* * * * *

Spind:

Abduction, loss of autonomy, spiders, body horror

The Deep Deep End:

Description of a monster, drowning

The Curse of the Red Moon:

Abduction, loss of autonomy, reference to torture

Willy the Ghost:

Ghosts, witches, goblins

The Hallway That Never Ends:

Bullying, censored swearing, reference to mental illness, threatened violence, forced captivity, medical experiments

Bloody Nights:

Car accident, blood, gore, reference to parental death, reference to demons, description of dying

The Midnight Monster:

Description of a monster

The Carnival Director:

Clowns, blood, spiders, snakes

The Monster Within:

Recurring nightmares, cursed object, monsters, reference to a war

Crucifix:

Reference to boating accident and death of a nun, possible haunting, near drowning

* * * * *

Stationary:

Body horror, gore, reference to cataclysmic worldwide disaster, humans-turned-monsters, shapeshifting

The Messenger:

Bullying, gossiping, shape-changing monster, loss of autonomy

Top Shelf:

Missing child, bullying/peer pressure, reference to bodily burning, loss of autonomy

You Just Can't See Them:

Reference to death of family and friends, abduction, light swearing and rude gestures, body horror, violence, blood, firearms, home invasion, mental illness

The Woman from the Bush:

Missing child, reference to abuse, human remains, reference to being drugged and loss of autonomy, imitation of family members

The House:

Haunted residence, sleep deprivation, ghost

87 Miles:

Reference to mistreatment of a child, forced restraint, humans-turned-monsters, reference to a human being eaten, cannibalism, gore, parental death

The Shadow:

Being followed, loss of autonomy

Mirrors:

Haunted house, blood, gore, body horror, description of monster, loss or death of romantic partner

Beneath Their Skin:

Blood, reference to consuming blood/vampirism, description of dead people, reference to murder, reference to torture

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Daydreams:

Dissociation from reality, mental illness, references to hell, the devil, and dead people; spiders and rats, animal death, child death

The Maiden:

Parental mistreatment, starvation, body horror, crypt/tombs, reference to death and dead bodies; spiders, bats, snakes, insects

Untitled:

Child disappearances, reference to child death, loss of a sibling

The Boyfriend:

Toxic relationship, references to emotional abuse and verbal abuse, violence, blood, description of death

The Endless Circus:

Peer pressure, loss of autonomy, captive children, reference to dead bodies

Burning Through Time:

Driving under the influence, car accident, gore, dismemberment, reference to hell, death in childbirth, grief and depression, child neglect, filicide

The Soldier and the Reaper:

Toxic relationship, physical abuse, neglect, starvation, reference to alcohol use and prostitution, loss of autonomy/possession, blood, death of a sibling, references to a war

Our Fallen Feathers:

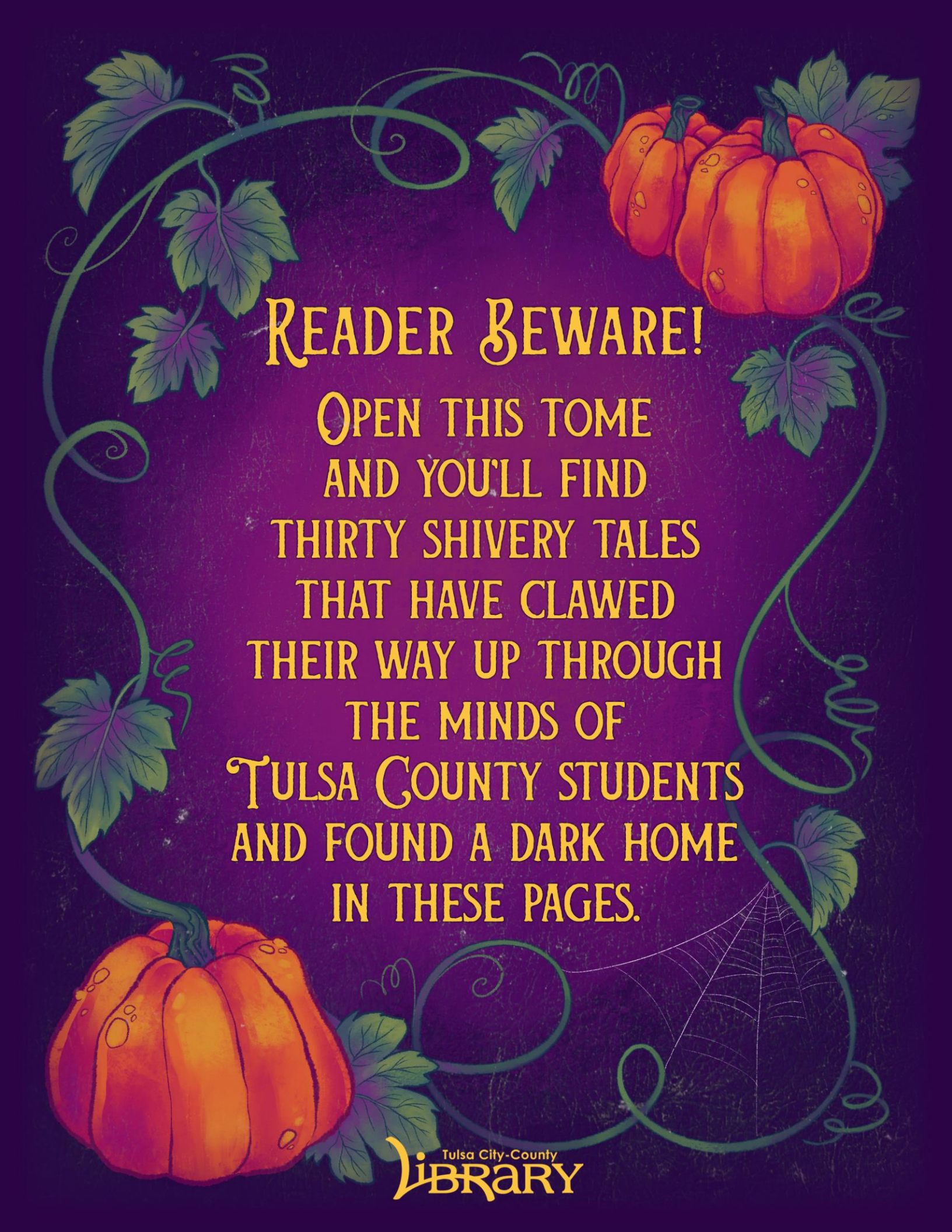
Physical abuse of children, cultural and religious oppression, racism, forced captivity, starvation, firearms, reference to being shot

The Riverford Cult:

Parental death, grief, reference to possibly Satanic worship, forced restraint and blindfolding, violence, performed rituals, blood and consumption of blood

The Man Behind the Crypt:

Peer pressure, clowns, cemeteries



READER BEWARE!
OPEN THIS TOME
AND YOU'LL FIND
THIRTY SHIVERY TALES
THAT HAVE CLAWED
THEIR WAY UP THROUGH
THE MINDS OF
TULSA COUNTY STUDENTS
AND FOUND A DARK HOME
IN THESE PAGES.