

A Halloween-themed poster with a purple background. At the top left is a large, full moon. In the center, the text "SPOOKY STORY CONTEST 2024 RUNNERS-UP" is written in a stylized, orange-yellow font with a dark outline. The text is framed by ornate, swirling yellow patterns. The bottom of the poster features silhouettes of various tombstones and crosses in a graveyard, with some tombstones having "RIP" inscribed on them. Bare, black tree branches are visible in the background.

SPOOKY STORY
CONTEST
2024
RUNNERS-UP

Schusterman-Benson Library

presents

Runners-Up
for the
Spooky Story Contest
•2024•



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FOREWORD

In 2024, we received an incredible amount of wondrously unsettling and unique stories. We wanted to additionally honor five runners-up from each age category by offering this bonus mini-anthology.

* * * * *

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 eight to eighteen; 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.64.

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

* * * * *

Some stories have been formatted for adaptation in this document.

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.



UNINVITED GUESTS

Max Earickson, 10

LYNWOOD, CA – 2008

DAY 1

His heart was pounding. He was sure he had seen the doorknob turn. Mike was curious. He walked down to the door, put his hand on the knob, began to turn it and...it was all a dream. Mike was startled by the experience. He burst out of bed with his heart pounding. He eventually calmed himself down with a nice cup of coffee. He drove to work. As he was talking to his fellow office workers, he saw a shadowy figure outside a nearby window, stalking him menacingly.

DAY 2

Mike woke up and went to work. After work, Mike decided to look in the attic for an upcoming garage sale he planned to have. He went into his attic and saw an oddly familiar family picture that he didn't remember having before.

DAY 3

Mike woke up with a strange feeling of guilt, but doesn't know why. Throughout the rest of his day he felt like someone was always watching him.

DAY 4

His heart was pounding, he gripped the knob and began to turn. The door opened. He saw the oddly familiar family from the attic photo immersed in fire. He stepped closer. Mike felt a painful burn crawling up his arm and... it was all a dream. Startled once again, Mike woke up abruptly. He noticed it was darker than normal outside. He

knew something was not right. Mike got dressed and prepared for work, and assumed it was just a cloudy day. He approached the door, but the handle wouldn't budge! There was a sudden burst of heat behind him...it was fire. A painful, hungry, burning fire that took him, along with his house, down to nothing but ashes. Mike finally remembered what he had done, his terrible crime he had committed. After all the years of telling himself lies, he finally remembered. In his final moment, he remembered.

POLICE DOCUMENT #267

SUBJECT: MIKE WYZENHOWER

CAUSE OF DEATH: FIRE

DATE OF DEATH: SEP 28 2008

INSPECTORS REPORT: After close inspection, it appears that the victim had committed serious crimes in his past, which were arson and murder. The death was very unexpected, as there are rarely ever fires in this area. We suspect it must have been an improperly used home appliance, like a stove or an oven.

DON'T LOOK AWAY

Scarlett Cole Luetkemeyer, 10

When we moved to a small town right outside of Wyoming, I knew something was off. It didn't look right. When we got to the house, it looked like it came from a horror movie! The paint was chipping off and the house was MASSIVE! When I walked inside, I saw a book. It was in French, so I couldn't read it, but, when I opened it, shivers went down my spine and it was like I let something out of the book. Once we got everything unpacked, we ordered dinner; however, when I was about to go to bed, I saw a door knob on the ground. There was no door, no keyhole in the wall. It was just sitting there. When I went to sleep that night, I felt like someone *or* something was stalking me. I woke up early the next morning, so I could see if I could find the door with no doorknob, and see where it goes, but every door had a doorknob. That same day, I did find something even better, because I found a hidden room! In the room, I saw a book, and this one was in English! It said, "Beware the thing that lurks in the shadows, the thing that stalks you in your sleep, the thing that will not rest until the owners of this house are killed. Don't look away. You may never know when it is watching." I didn't know what it meant.

As I read it, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Something white. Something was in the shadows and I didn't know what to do. When I saw it, I was so scared I couldn't move! As I went to sleep that night, I still felt like something was watching me. It had always been my greatest fear that something would kill me in my sleep. I thought about the book, the doorknob, and the thing that lurks in the shadows. I thought of things it could be: a ghost, a vampire, a zombie. There are so many things it could be, but, I'm afraid that it is much, much worse. I am afraid that it is living in the shadows, watching me, at this exact moment.

I feel weird that something is watching me. Why? Why is something watching me? I think I'm a good person. I do good things. So, why is something stalking me? Anyway, I need to find out what it is. I feel like it's waiting for the perfect time to strike: when I'm distracted. The book did say it would stalk down the owners of the house and stalk you in your sleep, and, I'm scared! I keep thinking, "*What will it do? What will it do when it kills me? What will it do to my dead body? Will it eat my guts? Will it stuff my*

body and hang me as a trophy?" I can't answer that, and that's what scares me. The same night, I had goosebumps as I kept hearing voices saying the same thing over and over, "I am coming for you." in a very low voice.

That night it was family movie night. It's Halloween, so we were watching a scary movie about something stalking a family. "*Great, just the movie I need to watch,*" I thought. Later that same evening, I saw a keyhole in the wall, but no doorknob. I ran upstairs, grabbed the doorknob from my room, and tried it. When the door opened, I wished I hadn't opened the door. There were so many bones and dead bodies. There was a sign that read, "You are joining my collection very soon." I ran back up to my room and the monster was there. Right when I opened the door, I saw it. It was as pale as a ghost, but quite yet not transparent. It looked like it had blood on its fingers, but it didn't have any eyes at all! It was like looking into a pit of nothingness with no escape; the darkness was swallowing me whole. When I tried to touch its face, (because I am the idiot that I am) it just disappeared.

When I woke up the next morning, I went downstairs to eat breakfast. When I got downstairs, I saw my mom, my *dead* mom! She was hanging by a rope with marks on her stomach. When I rushed to her side, I started to cry. There was a sign right next to her. It read, "DIE! I will kill you like I killed your mother... a long and painful death. You will not know what hit you." When my dad came in, he dropped to his knees. He looked heartbroken that my mother had died.

Weeks later, surprisingly, I'm still alive. My dad is depressed. He said all he wanted was for him and my mother to be together, once again. He'd become depressed, heartbroken, a sociopath, and killed himself. I became an orphan that day. It was October 28, 2013. The worst day of my life (so far). I know I always need to look at the bright side because I could always have a worse day, but I was uncertain. I couldn't understand why my parents had picked this house. They knew we didn't need a big house. Anyway, my Aunt Louisa came to move in, and as soon as she arrived, she said, "Why don't we go out for dinner?" I replied, "OK, that sounds good." We headed out to get macaroni and cheese, with a bit of Pepsi. When we got back home, it was about 9:35 pm, and my aunt told me that we needed to hit the hay. When I woke up the next morning, my aunt was dead! There was a knife in her head and scratch marks on her stomach and arms. After her death, none of my other relatives wanted to come and

watch over me, but they did send me money to help.

The death of my aunt, mom, and dad had made me depressed, anti-social, gloomy, and paranoid. I was scared the monster was going to come out of the shadows and kill me on the spot. I was struggling, but I desperately needed food. I went to the closest store and ended up getting kicked out because I didn't have a parent with me, so I didn't get any food. When I went back home, I ordered takeout, so no one knew how old I was. I ate some dinner, watched a horror movie (a great idea on my part), and then went to bed. I woke up in a puddle of sweat.

My dream was about a thing made of shadows, like a science experiment gone wrong. It was coming for my family and killing them all. I was driven mad in the house, so I got in the car and drove to the middle of nowhere. When I arrived, I was relieved. I finally felt safe, but no, the monster just had to keep haunting my dreams. I continued having the same dream over and over again, about a monster that lurked in the shadows and kept following me wherever I went.

When I woke up, it was freezing (it didn't help that I wasn't using my favorite blue and pink patterned blanket). I looked around to see if there were any animals that I could hunt and kill because I had forgotten all of my leftovers. I kept feeling like something was following me, something demon-like. *"I wish we were back in Oklahoma City, where we lived before we moved here. My parents and aunt would still be alive, and we all would be in our old and happy house,"* I thought to myself. Anyway, I was out of gas and there wasn't a soul for miles. I felt like I was in a ghost town but without all the buildings. I felt like I was going to wake up any minute and this would all be a dream, but I know that will never happen. This is real life. I know that there's no fairytale ending and I won't ever find my happily ever after, because this is real. I *will* die soon. I am like a sitting duck. I will get murdered soon, so I just want to get it over with. Then, finally, the monster struck. It had finally murdered me. It took me by the arm and drowned me in a nearby lake. I was trying to get out, but then it stabbed me.. I thought it was a bit heartless, thinking, *"Why would this monster just kill me and my family?"* I didn't think it was the worst way to die, yet I also wouldn't say it was fun going insane. BUT, what if this was just the beginning, what if I'm really just a pawn in a bigger game?

The End?

MISSING

Mia Potter, 10

It was the day after Halloween. Sarah Myers was scared. Her parents had gotten in a car crash and died the day before. She was sad and crying, she missed her parents, and she wished she had also been in the car. Her mean, ugly grandmama, with a terrible smell and rotten yellow teeth, was coming to take care of her. She hated her, she was so mean.

Sarah wanted to just cry, but she hated crying. When tears dried up on her face, it hurt her skin and made her break out so bad. She had to cry though, and she cried until she fell asleep. She had not eaten since Thursday, October 31st, and it was now Wednesday, the 6th of November. She was starving when she woke up, so she ate some french fries from the night before, but they were soggy and tasted terrible.

Sarah's grandma asked her what was wrong and she said she was fine. She did not want to talk about it. She came up with a plan to run away. She did not know any details, like, *When? Where would she go?* She decided she would go at 3 am. She knew her grandma would be asleep by then, so she set an alarm and went to sleep. At 2:50 am she woke up from a deep sleep. Sarah packed up her things two pairs of socks, one T-shirt, and a pair of shorts. She waited until 3 am, and then she opened the window and snuck out.

In the morning, her grandma got up and started to make breakfast. She called her down, but she never came. This scared her grandma. She went and looked for her, but she wasn't there. She went to the police and they asked her when she had last seen her granddaughter. She said, "Well, I saw her last night." They asked her what she had seen in her bedroom when she went to look that morning. She said, "The window was cracked and the wind was blowing through harshly, so hard it made it blow open." She said it was a sinister site. Her grandma was scared. The police put out an amber alert for a five-foot-tall girl five foot tall, with long brown hair that went down to about her hips, blue eyes, and a birthmark on her shoulder. She is very loved by her parents.

While was walking through the alleyway, her parents always told her not to go in, she was thinking about where she was headed, but she did not know. All she thought

about after that was how her parents were probably watching her down from heaven. She knew they were proud of her. She also knew they probably were not happy that she ran away.

It had been two nights since she ran away. She was officially missing, and no one had found her. She heard a man's deep voice. He sounded mad and she was petrified. She did not dare look from her hiding spot. She was huddled up in a corner. He started yelling at someone. She did not know if he was yelling at a person or an imaginary thing. He came close to where she was. He heard her breathing. She knew he heard her. She looked up at him and she was never seen again. No one knows what happened to her. Was she kidnapped, murdered, or ditched? No one knows because she's still *missing*.

The End

FEVER DREAM

Cash Curry, 11

I was in a taxi, determined to get to the restaurant where all of my friends were meeting up. The driver had a white-as-snow mask on, the rest of his body was covered with quilts and blankets. I had dared to ask his name. He responded with an unrecognizable groan. He bobbed his head side to side, groaning things that were probably meant to be answered but I just pretended like I was asleep. I checked the map on my phone, looking at the destination and locating where we were. We were heading towards the airport. *That's not where I told him to go*, I think. The driver looked in the mirror and saw my troubled face.

“Good luck in—” I could hear that part, but before he finished his sentence, a big contraption wheeled out of the headrest and grabbed my throat. I still feel the pain of the cold, metal claws sinking into my veins.

When I woke up, I was in a claustrophobic box, I couldn't tell if I couldn't see anything because I was just knocked out, or if I was actually in a tiny box. I wiggled back and forth, trying to find a way out. I try to put two and two together on why I'm in there. Then it hits me. The masked driver was headed towards the airport. So, where else would I have been than on a plane? That's rhetorical. I

grasped the latch of the box, tugged on it, and eventually pulled it open. I made sure not to make a noise, to go unnoticed. But, when I peeked my head out, all I could see was a dark room, with a bunch of suitcases and bags.

I was in the cargo compartment. I sat down quickly, maybe there were security cameras. I hid myself under a leopard patterned bag. I looked in the bag to see if there was anything resourceful, but all I saw was makeup and clothes, nothing there. I tried to comprehend the reason behind this. *Why would I be on a plane? If this was a kidnapping, why wouldn't I be sitting on a chair with my hand tied up? If the goal was for me to get murdered, wouldn't I already be dead?* The thoughts scared me, but were very reasonable.

I scrambled my way over to a dusty window. The outside, dark and foggy, with the bright ocean below. It must have been the same night, since the sky was getting

gradually brighter, and when I got in the sketchy car it was evening. My legs collapsed like jelly. I never thought sleeping would make you tired. Maybe it was the shock. I stare at the ceiling and make out two words among many. "We care." It was at the beginning of the words. *If they really cared, then they would make sure a full grown child isn't in the depths of an airplane.* Then, I have a realization. *What if this isn't a regular plane? What if I'm here on purpose?*

I stand up on my numb limbs and make my way to a small door. Of course, it's locked. I kick my leg against the door, noticing the hinges getting more and more loose. After about ten kicks, and double the tears, the door breaks down. A captain sitting on a chair, controlling the plane, I assume. The captain had a simple goal with his outfit: To make me recognize him. He was the driver with a mask. He calmly looked back and pointed a sharp weapon, hinting that he was going to flick it at me. I sprinted to him, not thinking about the dangers of the weapon. I grabbed his mask, tugging on it to the point where I could hear his loud voice, "Stop!" he screamed. If I got tortured to the point of getting knocked out and getting transported to a hijacked plane, then he should get the chance to have a little tug on his mask. Once the mask loosened, I looked at his evil eyes and slapped him on his face.

I know I shouldn't have done that, but I knew I would die anyway. He *did* get knocked out. But I wasn't alive to see if he died. Once I slapped him, he fell to the floor, the plane was flying uncontrollably. I grabbed the steering wheel, although my sweaty palms didn't agree with my decision. I didn't even know how to drive a car, let alone a plane. I knew those were the last hours I would live. Another secret door that was hidden behind a big metal cart with food and drink on it flings open. The food and drinks splash all over the floor. A figure in a green jumpsuit looks down at the guy I just knocked out, and then to me. The figure runs, with a skinny, sharp weapon. The next thing I know, the weapon dug into my heart. There's nothing anybody can do to save me.

So, now I'm a ghost. Invisible to everyone I see. When I died, I woke up in a white room that looked like it could be a whole country. The smell was vile, but there was no source of smell I could locate. A screen that blended in with the walls opened to reveal a glass door with a green blob standing behind the screen. I couldn't tell what the blob was, but it was alive. It had a face, although deformed. It picked up what seemed to be

a remote behind him. He pointed toward the opposite side of the room. Then, a television appeared. It looked dated, yet futuristic. A logo appeared on the big screen. A green *G* and a pink *H* linked to each other. A robotic voice appears.

“Hello, friend. You are dead. Now, don’t panic! Mr. S. Potlite, behind you, will sing a soothing lullaby.”

What? I think Why would someone sing a lullaby to me?

Mr. S. Potlite pressed his slimy face onto the window. My body shook up, my hands sweaty. It felt like a fever dream. To have someone sing a lullaby feels like a story straight out of wonderland. Mr. S. Potlite opens his mouth. The sound that comes out is a light, high pitched voice.

Ring around the rosie, pockets full of posies.

Ashes, ashes we all fall down.

Ring around the rosie, pockets full of posies.

Ashes, ashes we all wake up!!

I scream ferociously as my mind whirls into a dark state. A headache appears, trying to live rent-free in my body. As the song says, I wake up. In a bed I don’t belong to. An old lady stands at the frame of the door, repeating the song in the same voice. *Am I still dead?* The old lady waves her arm while keeping the same smile. She turns around. A rusted doll attached to her back jumps off onto the floor, screaming manically. I hide my body with a blanket, trying to cover myself from whatever the doll is trying to do to me. The next thing I know, the same doll jumps onto me. She picks me up, taking me to a dark basement. “Good luck! You’ll stay here for the rest of your life!”

THE DEATH

Aadhya Duggirala, 11

It was a Halloween night, and Ruby and her family were eager to watch a spooky, horror movie together.

“Hurry up!” her 18 year old sister Lilac, hollered impatiently, already clutching the remote.

“Okay, okay calm down,” Ruby said, settling on the couch.

Give me that, slowpoke!” Ruby’s brother, Max, yelled, as he snatched the remote from Lilac.

“Guys, settle down,” their mother said calmly, placing a bowl of hot, steaming popcorn on the table.

Once everyone got cozy on the couch, Max browsed through Netflix and selected a horror movie titled The Death.

“This is interesting...” Ruby muttered under her breath.

As the movie unfolded, Ruby felt a strange sense of familiarity. The car crash, the murders, and the bloody ghosts—images flickered in her mind like distant memories. Her heart raced.

“This feels so familiar,” Ruby whispered as she reached out for her brother’s hand, but didn’t feel a thing.

“Um... guys? GUYS!” she screamed in terror. Her family sat there, but something was horribly wrong. They were motionless, blood dripping from their necks, eyes white, like lifeless dolls.

Ruby was drenched in sweat, panicking about what to do. She whipped her head around and froze. A skeleton loomed over her, its hollow eyes gleaming with malice as it whispered one word, over and over again.

“DIE.”

The room seemed to darken as tarantulas started to creep on her back. Ghosts circled her, their voices joining the skeleton’s eerie chant.

“DIE...” DIE... “DIE...”

Suddenly, zombies burst into the room, their cold, dead hands wrapping thick,

metal ropes around her body, wrapping her tightly.

“DIE...” DIE... “DIE...”

It was all she could hear. It filled her mind, drowning out everything else.

“No! NO!” Ruby screamed, breaking through the ropes with desperate strength.

She bolted from the house, her legs pumping furiously, blood oozing from cuts on her arms. She ran and ran, until she stumbled into a graveyard—an old, cursed, and haunted place.

Then, she saw it. Her knees dropped to the floor.

A headstone, her headstone. Carved into the granite were the words: Ruby Willow Swift.

Tears blurred her vision as she reached out to touch the cold stone. A cold sensation spread through her body as realization hit her like a cold gust of wind.

She was already dead.

And she had been all along.

THE END



UNTITLED

Savannah Walker, 12

“I fear my grandpa.” Luke thought to himself as his dad was taking him to his Grandpa’s cabin. “I don’t like the way he looks; an old boney man, with clear gray eyes that look like he’s blind, and skin as old as a mummy’s with brown decaying spots. I especially don’t like how he talks, gasping for air for every sentence, wriggling his lips after every phrase.” Out in the countryside stood a pine forest, and in the forest, was his grandpa’s cabin.

“We are almost there!” his father said gleefully. “Why do I have to go, why can’t I stay home all alone while you go to your anniversary with mom?” Luke paused to think. “Or why can’t I stay with grandma?” His dad sighed when Luke stopped talking. “Come on, you hardly ever see grandpa.” Luke just stared and muttered. “That’s how I want it.”

As Luke got out of the car, he could see the front porch of the cabin. And on the porch’s rocking chair, was his grandpa. Staring at Luke with his blank eyes, then smiling with his wrinkly, liver lips. Luke gulped.

“Good evening, Feduleis.” Luke’s father greeted. “Mr. Luke.” His grandpa mumbled with a small, bright smile. “It’s been awhile, how’s your granny?” Luke couldn’t help but shake. “Ah, no problem then.” his grandpa sighed while patting his grandson with his bone-baring hands. “Come in!” his grandpa opened the greasy door. “See you in the morning son!” Luke’s father cried out while entering his car. Luke just glared as he entered dark cabin.

It was dark outside, as the moon rose up. His grandpa was smiling while he was brewing a cup of tea, then frowned when he saw Luke drowning himself in the thick pile of blankets to pretend he wasn’t here. “I waited to tell you a story since you were born.” his grandpa said blankly. Luke poked his head out of the blanket; surprised. “What?” They both saw each other eye-to-eye. “Oh yes, something you should know about this forest.” his grandfather gasped for air. “This place, this house... is haunted.” Luke just stared down seriously, showing no emotion, but inside he was swelling with questions. “Oh yes, and it all began in 1928, when a curse was sent upon us.”

"This area was once a village, and filled with lumberjacks; and I was one of them. We were chopping this place to the ground, in favor of an urban city. We were just grinding stumps with our all new 1929 square grinder, until the day came." Luke's grandpa paused as he stared blankly at the wall, then continued. "I was just digging up a stump till the little girl came along, staring at me hugging her teddy bear."

"The girl was wearing a white dress, with flower designs sewed onto her dress. Her hair was as black as ebony, flowing in the wind. At that time we didn't know she was standing on a cliff. RIC-TIC-TIC! RIC-TIC-TIC! The sound of the grinder sizzled. RIC-TIC-TIC! RIC-TIC-TI...The edge of the cliff crumbled under the puny girl. A few seconds later, the grinder shredded, and the girl was gone."

Luke froze, as a silent pause blew through the air. "Are you saying that she..." His grandfather interrupted cough. "Died, the lumberjacks found her dead. Shredded. The news spread like wildfire, then suddenly, everyone knew about the girl's death. And didn't care. Her grinded body was there to rot. As a young man, in my 20's, I was also a little selfish and turned my back on that tragedy. But I just knew that my life was going to change. That day, only the girl's fluffy brown teddy bear rested on the crumbled edge of the cliff."

It was the evening, and I was resting in my chair, removing the thick, black sawdust of my overalls. I might've looked calm at the time, but since the little girl's death, I was keeping a wide eye on that cliff. The sad-looking teddy bear was still there. No one was brave enough to grab it. Suddenly, KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK! The door creaked I stood up and opened the door like nothing happened. It was a short postman, the newsie-man as I liked to call it. "Big news, big news!" the short man yelled out "What is it?" I asked. "Just read for yourself! It's barbaric!" the man cried out, sticking his shivering hand out, passing the newspaper. Just as he gave it to me. He closed the door as hard as the crippled man could close. "Rude." I mumbled. Just as I opened the clumped newspaper, I dropped down to my knees. The news said: <28 lumberjacks were found disemboweled and shoved into the tree hollows.> In my group, there are 29 lumberjacks including me. That meant that I was the only man left alive."

The grandpa stared back at the wall, this time very intense, till Luke realized that he was staring at the window, facing the cliff. "Then, a roar of thunder swept through my ears. The first thing I could do was to stare at the window. A flash of lightning scarred

my eyes, and the teddy bear vanished. *KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!* I looked at the door panicky. “W-who’s there!” I yelped. The door shook with the wind. The only thing I could do was no other than to open the door.

CREEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAKKKK! Another flash of lightning filled the room. No one was there, except two little paws... teddy bear paws, leading into the hallway of my cabin. “I grabbed my lantern to go deep in my own home. The hallways got darker every time I stepped forward, creeping and crawling darkness. Till I could only see my lantern. *CREEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAKKKK!* One of my doors creaked wide open, and so did my mouth open in awe. Inside the room, was an eerie hallway, and there was the little girl’s teddy bear. And inside of the teddy bear, a small tune bursted out. “Mmmmmm... want a hug?” the bear hummed along with the melody.

I was shocked when I saw the bear’s appearance. The bear didn’t look like it once was. Instead, it was ripped apart and the it’s forepaws were holding a cute bear mask, covering his face, which I believed looked hideous. “Do you want a hug?” the bear continued. I stepped back. “Oh, I don’t think you want one, what about NOW!” the bear cackled and roared as he removed his mask. Under the mask layed a terrible set of sharp jaws, and a pair of bright, scarred, yellow eyes, scarred by the stump grinder. I yelped in panic till another flash of lightning passed. Everything turned dark. The teddy bear was gone, and that’s all I could’ve hoped for.

Until...” Luke interrupted with a gasp. “Grandpa, is there more to this story!?” he said knowing this could be a prank, even though something was odd about this tale. The grandpa didn’t answer, he was in the story. “Until I felt something cold on my shoulder. Oozing, dripping on my shoulder. I turned around slowly and I saw a tiny, chopped-off, white hand grabbing onto my shoulder. I jumped and screamed like I was losing my soul. The hand fell off, leaving a scar of blood on my shoulder. I was a brave lumberjack at that time and I went to grab the lifeless hand. And then I heard her.

“I wouldn’t get that If I were you... It bites.” I turned around and I saw her, the little girl. She didn’t look like she used to, she still still had her long, ebony hair, but much more changed. Her skin was as white as ice, her eyes as black coal, and her dress was ripped by the grinder. And the biggest change of all, was the huge chainsaw that impaled her small chest with her boney ribs showing. “Why don’t you come and play with me, in my new home?” she smiled as with one hand she hugged her possessed bear and with

the other she pointed outside. Pointed across the prairies, till it rested pointing at the cliff.

I howled and screamed as I tried to run away from the girl. The hallways got longer and longer till the hallways turned into trees. And in each tree lay his fellow lumberjacks, disemboweled inside the tree hollows. I ran and ran and I noticed that I was getting longer. Long enough so that the girl could grab my long legs. Then I ran into a dead end, all trees were filled with corpses except one. The tree was big enough for me to hide in. So... I jumped in the hollow. Everything was dark, but I could still see the little girl skipping along her melody.

"La la la, la la la." And then she spotted me, and began to laugh like a maniac. But lips weren't moving, but instead her face ripped open revealing a big bloody void with big, yellow jaws. She truly was shredded. I felt like I was choking, I could breathe calmly. I was panting and gasping for air. She was getting closer and closer, till everything went dark."

The grandpa stopped staring at the window and stared back at Luke. Luke's teeth chattered in the end. "Luckily I survived, the town heard my stories and abandoned the place." his grandfather muttered. "Wow, so that's why he looks that awkward. Big white eyes, blinded by lightning." Luke thought in surprise. Then, he got curious to ask: "Do you still have a stump grinder?" His grandpa glared then smiled. "Sure!" he said with honor as he guided his grandson out of the cabin.

The moon shone bright as Luke used his to see in the dark. "Here, isn't it a beauty?" the grandpa asked. "Sadly, one of these killed the girl, her father did tell her to play on the cliff. I guess that girl obeyed to what her father wanted." Luke stared at his grandpa, then the grinder. "Wow, it's bigger than I expected-" Luke stopped as he read the inscription. "1929 square grinder..." Luke gasped. He now realized that someone was responsible for the innocent girl's death. "YOU- you!" he yelled. "Yes... It was me..." he grinned as he turned on the grinder and grabbed Luke, rising over the chopper. The grandpa laughed as he dropped Luke in the grinder. Just like the girl, the boy was gone.

The next morning, the police came to the cabin to arrest the boney man. One of the policemen came to him and asked why he killed the boy. The old man answered, "I let him go, just like I did with my little Ava.

MOONLIGHT MENACE

Austin Scharnell, 13

On a rural farm in Bayfield Wisconsin Duff, a 13 year old boy stared out the window at the dog house. Made of white painted planks and a red slanted roof, it looked like the house you'd see in children's books. He could remember the day during summer when he and his brother Jeremy painted the house. Duff never stopped blaming himself for what happened to Charlie.

"Duff! Jeremy! Go feed the sheep!" hollered their mother. Jeremy, only a year older than Duff with messy curly blonde hair, begrudgingly left his room with a sour expression on his face.

"C'mon Duff, don't try and get out of your chores now" Jeremy grumbled.

"Hey! I wasn't, I'm just getting my shoes!" Duff retorted.

The two boys went outside and to the sheep pen. The sheep pen was about the size of a large living room. The fall months had given the sheep many colorful fallen leaves to snack on before their daily serving of hay. Duff went into the fields and balled up some wheat.

"Two, Four, Six, Eight...Nine." Jeremy mumbled to himself. After counting again his face made a grave expression like he'd seen a ghost.

"What's wrong Jeremy?", Duff asked, noticing his demeanor.

"We've lost another." He said grimly, walking about the rim of the pen.

"Wait... you don't mean that right?"

"Why would I joke about something like this!"

"W-well...Well maybe the sheep...the sheep just," Duff rambled on trying to make an excuse while Jeremy bent over and picked something off the ground.

"Ran away! Maybe the sheep ran away and..and.." Duff stopped as he noticed what Jeremy was holding, wool. Wool covered all around in blotchy red spots.

"I don't think the sheep ran away Duff" Jeremy said solemnly. Jeremy and Duff went inside to tell their mother what had happened. Their mother of course was mortified and fearful.

"You're sure the wolves are back? The sheep didn't just run away?" Their mother

questioned.

“No, the sheep just disappeared.” Jeremy curtly said.

“I don’t need your attitude, young man!” their mother ranted.

“Mother, we found bloodied wool and claw marks.” Answered Jeremy.

“Well...Well then we need to reinforce their pens but..” their mother stopped.

“But what Mother? Duff inquired.

“Your father, he has his surgery tonight. I’d almost forgotten. Oh dear me, I haven’t got the time to find someone to watch you, you two are going to have to stay home alone.” Their mother abruptly said.

“Us! Home alone! And with the wolves back you can’t expect this of us?!” Jeremy blurted.

Oh it will be alright Jeremy, the wolves won’t be back for a while. But if they do, you boys know where and how to use your father’s rifle correctly?” the mother asked.

Both boys simply stared back at her, with blank expressions.

“Correct?” their mother exclaimed.

“Y-yes mother” both whimpered. The two boys listened to their mother about how to heat up the leftovers but Duff paid no attention, he simply dreamed of the worst possible outcome. Violent and gruesome images pertaining to wolves raced through his head.

After saying goodbye their mother and father left the boys.

“I guess I’ll be responsible and start dinner, could you help?” Jeremy asked but before he finished the question duff already had raced to his room to cower. Jeremy with no zeal went to start dinner. Though he never admitted it, Duff was terribly afraid of wolves. Ever since that night, the night that changed his whole life.

It seemed like a normal evening. His father had invited friends to play cards. Mother was making dinner. Jeremy was doing who knows what up in his room, and Duff was outside playing with Charlie, the family dog. His mother had called him to eat and Charlie decided to explore.

After dinner though, Duff raced outside to find his companion but wasn’t where Duff had left him. Duff ventured deep into the forest until he found him, this wasn’t uncommon as Charlie explored a lot but tonight was different. Charlie was sniffing twigs, bark and the ground and then took off in an almost random direction.

When Duff caught up to Charlie he tried to bring him home but Charlie was still staring off into the horizon, then all in a blur a wolf lunged atop Charlie. Duff could barely remember anything that happened. He simply awoke in his bed with the terrible news that Charlie was dead. Once his father heard the scream he went running into the forest but it was too late.

One thing that Duff could clearly remember was the eyes, filled with so much character, were unlike any wolf eyes Duff had seen.

Then Duff heard it. The howl. It sounded more like an unholy shriek than anything.

“JEREMY! I’m scared!” Duff cried but no response came. Tears started to run down Duff’s face as he frantically searched the house. After searching the whole house Duff started for his room when he heard again, this time louder. Duff stopped, his hand trembling so much the banister was shaking. He raced to his parents room and into their closet when he saw it, their fathers gun. Duff’s hand gripped it tightly.

He slowly made his way to the door and slowly turned the handle. He quickly stepped outside and shut the door behind him to not let anything get in. Duff was a turtle as he made his way around the house and to the sheep pen. When he got there he was relieved to see the 9 remaining sheep. Shivering and breathing loudly, Duff raced to the front door when he saw Jeremy. Surprised

Duff clenched his fist and stomped over to Jeremy and began yelling

“HOW COULD YOU! You just left me here? ALONE? Some brother you are!” Duff exclaimed.

“Duff you’re fine sto-” Jeremy started but Duff cut him off.

“And what If the wolves got me huh? Then what?” Duff ranted.

“Gee sorry I don’t know what a baby you were” Jeremy snarked. Blood boiling Duff pushed Jeremy to the ground and started yelling some more. However, what Duff didn’t know is that his brother had a secret. Just then Jeremy started contorting. Spazing and shaking aside, Duff noticed that Jeremy’s eyes were darting all around.

“Jeremy what’s wrong! I’m sorry I didn’t mean to hurt you!” Duff cried. And then Duff saw his brother’s eyes twist and roll and turn into the same ones he had seen that night. Then came the screams. In the morning their mother returned.

“Jeremy! Duff! Where are you?” Their mother hollered.

“Your father had to stay overnight but I came back to check on you!” She explained.

Their mother looked around the whole house until she found Jeremy in his room.

“Mother,” Jeremy started emerging from his room, “There was an accident with the gun and, the wolves they, they..” Jeremy started to cry.

“What’s wrong honey? Oh my goodness you’re bleeding!” she shouted as she comforted Jeremy. Jeremy, still crying, leaned in to whisper in his Mothers ear and an ever so small smirk crept upon her face.

THE CROW

Maryn Smith, 14

Madison sat on the window seat in the living room, waiting for her father to come inside. He had been out dragging all the fallen branches on their land into a giant pile. It was getting dark already, and Madison wished he would hurry. She saw a crow fly past the window. It startled her, and she jumped. Madison's mother walked into the room carrying a cup of hot chocolate. "Here you go Maddie," she said, handing her the steaming mug. "Are you all right?" she asked, a look of concern flickering across her face.

"I'm fine," Madison said quickly, not wanting to worry her mother. "I just... I wish Dad would hurry and come inside." She said this quietly, embarrassed by her own concern.

"What? Honey, I'm sure he'll come inside soon," her mother reassured her. "Why are you worried about that? He's always out at this time of night. Is there something else I should know?"

Madison hesitated, not sure how to put what she was feeling into words. "I just have this feeling..." she said. "This feeling like... like something bad is out there. It's stupid, I know, I just...I really feel like he shouldn't be out there. Something bad is going to happen." Madison suddenly felt very self-conscious. Why was she worried about this? *You're just scared because of that movie you watched at your friend's house last night,* she told herself. "Never mind," she told her mother, shaking her head and taking a sip of her hot chocolate. Her mom sighed, and her brow wrinkled in concern.

"Listen, Maddie, your dad is going to be fine. If you want to go and check on him, you're welcome to." Madison silently pondered the offer. No, she decided. If she went to check on him, then she would have to give an explanation for her worries, and be embarrassed all over again.

"That's ok," she told her mom. "I'll just wait." Madison's mom nodded and stood, leaving the room.

Madison sat for forty-three more minutes, and then she heard her father opening the door. She jumped up and ran to him, throwing herself into his arms. "Hey, Maddie!"

he said. His voice sounded tight, like there was something squeezing his throat. He stepped further into the house, and took off his coat, hanging it on the hook. The skin on his arms was covered with goosebumps, and when Madison grabbed his hand to lead him into the kitchen for hot chocolate, it felt cold and clammy. Madison shook her head, ignoring it. *It's just your imagination*, she told herself.

Later that night, Madison's dad walked into the living room to sit by her. "I think you left your soccer ball outside. I was going to tell you earlier, but I forgot. Would you mind going to get it?" Madison nodded and walked slowly to the front door. She still had a feeling that something evil was out there, waiting.

"Can you come with me?" She asked her dad, hating the way that sounded.

"Sorry kiddo, I'm not feeling so well. Might be coming down with something. If you want, you can take Sam with you. I think he's in his bed." Madison nodded, and left to find their dog. He was tossing and turning on his bed in front of the fireplace. He seemed uneasy.

Madison got him up and led him to the door. The dog whined, starting to shake. "Hey, what's wrong, Sam?" she asked, trying to ignore the dread seeping into her skin. She opened the door, and stepped out onto the porch. Suddenly, a wave of pure terror ran through her, coursing through her veins. She couldn't move. She was staring into the woods that marked the edge of their land. Standing in front of the trees was a strange figure. It looked like a woman. Her skin looked like it was swirling; like she was made of mist. Madison gazed in horror at her. Somehow, she knew this was the bad thing she had felt. The woman stared back at her. Her eyes were completely black, but they were clouded with billowing mist like her skin.

Madison suddenly regained control of herself. She let out a cry of fear, grabbed Sam, and ran back inside, slamming and locking the door behind her. She ran to the back door too, locking it, and pulled all the blinds closed. Her mother quickly appeared at her side. "Maddie, what's the matter?" she asked her, frantically trying to grab Madison and slow her down. Madison stopped struggling, and fell to the ground, shaking from fear. She started to cry.

"There's something out there," She gasped between sobs. "I don't know what it is, but it's here to hurt us." Madison's mother looked genuinely concerned.

"Maddie, you have to tell me what you saw. What did you see? What's out there?"

Madison tried to explain the ominous woman but was somehow unable to recall what she had looked like. “It was...It was...” She desperately tried to tell her mother why she was so afraid. “We have to leave, Mom!” She cried, “We have to leave now!” Madison’s mother wrapped her daughter into an embrace.

“Madison, listen to me. You are going to be okay. I’m sure there’s nothing out there. It was probably the dark. You know how shadows can look like things that aren’t really there. I’m sure your imagination didn’t help either.” Madison longed for a way to explain to her mother that it wasn’t shadows, it wasn’t her imagination. Something really was out there, and if she couldn’t convince her parents, then there was no safety.

At that moment Madison’s dad walked in. “What’s going on?” He asked, looking at Madison’s tear-streaked face. Her mother stood, and pulled Madison to the couch, sitting her down.

“Madison, I want you to stay right here. Me and your dad are just going to...get you some things. We’ll be right back, okay?” Madison managed to smile a bit and nodded slowly as her parents left the room. She stood and stealthily tip-toed to the doorway, hoping to catch a bit of her parents’ conversation.

“Listen, Dave,” her mother said, addressing her father. “Madison really is afraid. She thinks someone is outside, waiting for us or something. I don’t know what’s the matter. She’s never been afraid of the dark or anything like that. You know how she loves to go outside at night. I just don’t understand.” Madison heard her father sigh.

“I’m sure it’s nothing. You know how kids go through phases. It’s probably just one of those. This is her ‘scared of going outside in the dark’ phase. But...listen, Sarah. This is going to sound stupid, and I know it’s probably nothing, but, when I was outside, something felt...off. I started to feel sick, and scared. It’s like some sort of weird atmosphere.” He paused, rethinking this statement. “No, it’s nothing. I’m just imagining things.”

Madison walked back to the couch and collapsed there, sobs wrenching her body. She knew that her parents would never believe her. *Maybe it’s just your imagination. They’re probably right. It’s nothing*, she heard in her head. Was that her own voice? Or was it someone else’s? She leaned her head against a pillow and closed her eyes.

She opened them again when she heard footsteps entering the room. Her mother walked to the couch, and knelt next to her, handing her another cup of hot chocolate

and a blanket. "It's going to be okay, Maddie," she said. "You're just having some anxiety. Why don't you finish up that hot cocoa, read a book, and then go to bed early. You're probably just tired." Madison nodded, agreeing with her. Maybe this whole thing had just been a mistake.

Madison woke at midnight in a cold sweat. She had heard a loud crashing coming from downstairs. She sat up in bed. There it was again! This time the crashing was louder, and she heard it coming from her parents' bedroom. Then she heard screaming. It was her mother. She heard her father yelling, "RUN, MADISON!" She felt a wave of terror go through her, just like what she had felt when she saw the mist-like woman outside that evening. She jumped out of bed, grabbing her phone off its charger, bolting downstairs and out the back door. She stumbled down the slope of land, heading for the treehouse they built years ago out in the woods. They had established a plan that in case of emergency, she should run to the safety of the treehouse, and then call 911.

She burst through the trees, stumbling to the treehouse. Once she was there, she swiftly climbed up the rope ladder she knew so well. She made it up to the top, and collapsed on the wooden floor, desperately trying to hold in loud sobs. Her chest was tight, and as she tried to grab her phone from her pocket, her sweaty palms let it slip, and it fell from the treehouse to the ground with a terrible crack. She already knew it was broken. There was no way to get help now.

She curled into a ball, and tried not to let the panic take over. *Just take one breath at a time*, she told herself. *One breath at a time*. She silently asked herself questions. *What do you feel? What do you taste? What do you smell? What do you hear? What do you see?* As she asked herself this last question, she opened her eyes, and to her horror, she saw the hazy woman standing below the treehouse. Madison let out a stifled shriek, shaking violently. The woman started to levitate, her eye contact with Madison never breaking. Madison, without thinking, stood up and jumped out of the back window of the treehouse in the opposite direction of the woman. She could feel the adrenaline coursing through her as she fell, and she felt her arm fracture with a disturbing crunch when she landed. She cried out, grabbing it with her other hand as she struggled to get up. She was too slow. The woman, seeing her chance, flew to Madison with alarming unnatural speed. Madison was still on the ground. She braced herself as she watched the woman's ghostly hand come closer and closer to her. Then,

just as the hand was about to touch her neck, the woman shrieked, falling to the ground in pain. Behind her was Sam, tearing at her leg with his teeth, viciously shaking his head, not letting go no matter how hard she kicked. Madison didn't have time to wonder how the dog was able to physically grasp the vaporous form. Just as Madison was about to stand, the woman grabbed her leg, her long, sharp, and very real fingernails digging in, tearing her flesh. Madison, still on the ground, kicked the woman in the face with her other leg. She felt the grip on her leg loosen, and then let go completely.

Madison watched as the woman disintegrate into dust. Madison stared at the pile, horrified. Then, a breeze blew the dust away, and underneath the pile was a dead crow. Madison looked closer. For some reason, she felt like something about its eyes looked...familiar. With a shriek she realized whose they were. Her mother's. She jumped up, grabbed Sam by his collar, and ran.

THE MASK

Tori Thomason, 14

Elizabeth just took the chicken pot pie from the oven as she heard the front door open and close. She took off her apron and hurried into the living room to greet her husband.

“Honey! How was your day?” Elizabeth asked as he wrapped her into an embrace.

“Fine, fine.” He sighed, pulling out of the hug more quickly than usual.

Elizabeth frowned. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, fine. Where is dinner?” Martin asked, looking around the living room. “I hope you didn’t make that wretched pot pie again,” he said, making a disgusted sound.

“I thought it was your favorite,” Elizabeth said, her spirit weakened.

“Whatever, just bring it out. I’ll make the drinks,” Martin said as he walked over to the bar cart.

Elizabeth hurried into the kitchen to cut him a big slice of pot pie. She brought the plates into the dining room and quickly set the table. Martin came in holding two glasses of dark red liquid.

“New wine?” Elizabeth asked, as they have always drunk white wine.

“Yes, I saw it in the market on my way home and thought we’d try it,” Martin said, setting down a glass in front of her.

“Cheers,” Elizabeth said as she took a sip of her wine. It tasted funny, like normal wine but with a sickly sweet aftertaste. “It’s good,” she said, letting out a small cough.

“You like it?” he asked hopefully. “I picked it with you in mind.”

“Yes, yes,” she said quickly, setting down her glass.

“Eliza, you won’t guess what happened to me this morning before I left for work,” Martin said, also setting down his glass and staring at her with wide brown eyes. “All the cabinets were open and a headless rat was in the middle of the kitchen. How bizarre?” he told her, drinking more of his wine. “And there was a headless squirrel just outside on the porch.”

“How morbid!” Elizabeth exclaimed, chills running down her back. “Where did they come from?”

“Don’t know,” he said, stabbing his pot pie with his fork.

Elizabeth drank more of her wine, the syrupy texture thick in her throat as she swallowed. She didn’t like the wine; it was too sweet, too artificial. But it made Martin happy, the gifts he brought her. Yesterday was a loaf of fresh bakery bread. The day before, a juicy red apple. He was always bringing her little treats like that.

She finished her dinner and collected the dishes. As she was walking to the kitchen, she felt dizzy. More of the same. This has been happening for the past week, this feeling. She called to her husband, telling him it was happening again.

“Lie down, Eliza. I don’t want you getting sick,” Martin tells her, and she groggily trudges through the house, up the stairs, and into their bedroom. Elizabeth lay down just in time, for darkness had washed over her as soon as she lowered herself onto the bed. Until midnight, her mind would be asleep. But her body wasn’t. It was a weird feeling, she decided. She didn’t like it. She felt out of control like someone was reaching down and pulling her strings to make her do whatever they wanted. Eventually, however, the feeling wore off, just like every other time. Elizabeth felt a cold sweat throughout her body as she climbed out of bed and crawled down the stairs, not yet trusting her legs. She gets to the kitchen, eyes set on the refrigerator, when she hears a soft groan coming from the corner. She looks over and screams at a horrifying sight displayed before her. She saw her husband, sitting with a pained look in the corner, his arm limp beside him. He was covered in blood- so much blood- and upon further inspection, there was blood on her too. Her light blue day dress, her slick red hands, her crusty hair. An overwhelming sense of déjà vu washed over her as she relived her activities. *She* had done it. Elizabeth. She had cut off her husband’s arm. And as this revelation settled in, she realized it was all her. The rat. The cabinets. The squirrel. All of it. And now she was hurting the one person she loved most. Elizabeth’s bloody hands shook as she slowly reached out toward her husband.

“H-honey? A-are you alright?” Elizabeth’s eyes welled with tears and her heart rammed in her chest. Her breath caught in her throat and her head was beginning to ache.

“Eliza!” Martin’s eyes were wild and unsure. He looked at her with fear and agony. “Don’t come near me, Elizabeth!” he stumbled back, letting out a yell for the effort.

Elizabeth was taken aback. Martin had never talked to her like that. And he had

never, not once, called her Elizabeth. She took a step back. And another. Her eyes, however, stayed on her hands. Her blood-stained hands that appeared they'd never be clean again. As Elizabeth took another step back, she tripped over something. She looked down and realized it was the limb that had been severed. Elizabeth let out a scream and ran outside. The cold wind whipped her face as she gulped for air. The enchanting moonlight casts a cool glow over her face, illuminating the sight she has seen every day, but it is different. A frightening realization settled over her.

It was her.

And as long as she was alive, it would always be her.

Elizabeth calmed almost immediately and looked around at the trees. The grass. The sky. All the little things she now knew were so precious. Her small flower garden is in the corner of her lawn. The white picket fence surrounds her house. The neighbor's cat would always meow in the dead of night.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I love you," she whispered to the world.

Back inside the house, through the living room, down the hall, and into the kitchen, was Elizabeth's final resting spot. The cold tile was where she lay forever, eyes glazed over and knife in her stomach. The police were already on their way. Martin made sure of it. But first, there was something that had to be done.

He dragged himself across the kitchen and steadily pulled himself up to the highest cupboard. Sweat running down his back, he grabbed a small box. He didn't need to open it; he already knew what it was. The drugs were strong enough to make an elephant mistake himself for a mouse. He turned toward the sink and flushed the white power down the drain.

"There," Martin said with pride. "All gone."

Just then, he heard a loud bang at the door. Shouts on the other side verified that it was the police. Martin lowered himself back onto the ground in his corner and let the pain wash over his face. He let out a loud groan for effect. The police then broke the door down and rushed into the house. Martin saw the terror wash over their faces as they entered the room. Their eyes darted from the corpse to Martin. Martin let out another groan as the police slowly moved toward him.

"You're going to be okay," they say. "It's going to be alright." Dawn's light was slowly

creeping through the window. Martin could see early morning fog and a small mist stuck to the window. *She's gone*, he thought to himself. He could never pinpoint one thing he disliked about her; she was kind, beautiful, thoughtful, everything a good wife should be. He just had a feeling. A voice inside of him told him to drive her mad. And who was he to ignore that divine voice?

Later in the day, around 9 am, the paramedics informed him that his wife had been mad. That she had been mad for a long time. Martin showed a shocked look on his face, but behind his mask, he knew. He had gotten away with it.

HELLEBORE HOSPITAL

Olivia Pound, 14

Lily Buford, 15

The cold, harsh wind slammed against the passenger side of the car. The vehicle seemed to lean in the wind, only raising the tension that was becoming palpable within the car. Amaryllis slowly brought her hand to her forehead and laid it over the gash, cringing at the searing pain that followed. It was nearly ten o'clock when Amaryllis awoke from a terrible nightmare, jerking awake and causing the bedpost to slice right through the middle of her forehead. With the head injury, though, Amaryllis never did recall what was in that nightmare... what had awoken her with such terror?

"Almost there," her mother squeaked, hoping to remove some of the tension from the cramped vehicle. An antique sign reading "Hellebore H-s-ital" flickered at the hospital's entryway—a place people often mistook as abandoned. Built almost a hundred years ago in the rural countryside, the hospital's funding had been severely reduced in favor of new, lavish hospitals in the city. Though rundown over the harsh years, the hospital had a longstanding decent reputation. Though the machinery was out-of-date, the doctors were kind and highly educated. No one could ever figure out why such highly educated professionals worked at this—well, dump. Lately, however, strange reports had been coming in about the practices there, yet each of them was disregarded by law enforcement since there were no witnesses or other forms of substantial evidence.

The car pulled into a small parking lot whose lines had faded over time. Amaryllis' mother helped her from the small blue car, comforting her until they got inside.

Fumes from hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies engulfed them as they walked in. A shaky receptionist sat at the check-in desk, clutching her clipboard for dear life.

"N-n-name?" she stuttered, avoiding eye contact with Amaryllis' mom.

"Amaryllis," her mother said, pausing, "A-M-A-R-Y-L-L-I-S. Amaryllis Ray."

"Guardian name?"

"Caroline. Caroline Ray."

The receptionist wrote slowly as if every word had to be dragged out of her. "G-go to

the waiting room. Dr. Claremore will be w-with you shortly.”

The waiting room was cold and unwelcoming. It was dimly lit, which gave the room an eerie feel. The only seating consisted of torn blue chairs that looked like they would collapse under a small child’s weight. Amaryllis observed the creepy little things around her as they waited. She spotted spider webs, dust, and blood stains but guessed that the latter was to be expected in a hospital.

Sometime later, a tall doctor walked in. He wore dark blue scrubs and a tired, sorrowful look. A shining nameplate on his shirt read *Dr. Apollo Claremore*.

The doctor walked closer. “Amaryllis?” he asked, squinting at the girl, seemingly unbothered by the urgency of her head injury.

Amaryllis, filled with unease in the mysterious place, seemed to jump at the doctor’s deep, steady voice. “Yes, that’s me.” She hesitated. “I’m Amaryllis.”

“I’m Dr. Claremore. Unfortunately, we are very short-staffed at the moment so I couldn’t send one of our more friendly nurses to get you. Just- Nevermind. Follow me.” the doctor said.

Amaryllis was quite confused but followed the doctor’s instructions.

Dr. Claremore navigated the duo through a rundown hallway. Ceiling tiles were broken, lightbulbs shattered, glass on the browned floor, and not-so-small spiders crawled along the ceiling above their heads. He led them to an old hospital room that did not appear nearly clean enough to meet hospital health codes. Amaryllis was shown to a rickety bed, which she hesitated to get on. After lying down, the doctor examined the wound slicing across Amaryllis’ forehead.

He grabbed a few things from a cabinet and set them by the sink.

The doctor groaned, clearly displeased. “More stitches,” he said disgustedly, “Always stitches. Nothing exciting anymore.”

Abruptly, one of the hospital’s renowned neurosurgeons, Dr. Grey Damascus, walked in.

“A-pol-lo!” the man said in a quick singsong. Dr. Claremore flicked his eyes to Caroline, then Amaryllis, hoping to catch their reactions before turning his attention to the man.

“Stay here.” Dr. Claremore sputtered, “I’m gonna get some—uh...” he paused, looking urgently to the impatient man who then rolled his eyes and finished the doctor’s

sentence with, “Gloves.” Then, for a moment, an odd feeling passed between the two that gave Amaryllis chills.

She felt the doctor had urgent information he was trying to keep from her. Dr. Claremore, looking concerned, darted from the room, with Dr. Damascus following quickly behind.

Once they left, there was murmuring outside the room between the doctors. Most of the conversation was inaudible, but from what Amaryllis heard, it was about Dr. Damascus’ most recent surgery. Soon enough, the conversation left earshot, and she never heard the turnout.

* * * * *

“You could say that the surgery was... successful,” Dr. Damascus said to Dr. Claremore. “You can’t really think this is right, Grey. I mean—.” His sentence was quickly cut off as the surgeon shoved him into the wall.

“Do you really want to challenge me, Apollo?” he asked, pulling out a silver pocket knife and flipping it open. It had a clean and polished blade and a black handle. “For heaven’s sake, Apollo, I’ll do whatever I please.” He sighed, making eye contact with the fearful doctor. “*I’m* a neurosurgeon. *I* make the rules here. *I* get to say what is right and what isn’t, not you.” He pressed the tip of the blade into the soft spot on his neck. He pushed hard enough to nick him but caused no severe damage.

Dr. Claremore put his hands over Dr. Damascus’ and slowly lowered the knife. “I just—Grey. I know you. You would never do anything like what you’re planning.” He let go of the doctor’s hands before sighing. “At least the Grey I knew a week ago wouldn’t.”

The surgeon wiped the blade on his scrubs before closing it and dropping it back into his pocket. He sighed and began walking again, slowly enough for Dr. Claremore to catch up.

The slightly smaller doctor paced with him and listened as he said, “You know, I’m operating on a patient later this evening—Mercy, Alpenrose, Forscythe, and I. You should sit in.”

He grimly added, “Unless you’d rather miss the greatest craniectomy Hellebore’s ever seen?” The distressed doctor sighed and looked to the surgeon, who was

impatiently waiting for an answer. “Wouldn’t miss it. Not for anything,” Apollo said in a solemn voice.

“Then so be it. The procedure will begin at eight. You’d better not be late.”

* * * * *

Amaryllis and her mother sat in the unsettlingly quiet room, waiting for over an hour. There was no sign of Dr. Claremore or anyone for that matter. Amaryllis was becoming woozy but didn’t want to worry her mother, so she kept quiet.

Shortly after that, a petite female nurse trotted in. “Amaryllis?” The woman peeked into the room to see if she was there. Caroline looked up and nodded to her. She came further into the room and, at the sight of the open wound, still dripping blood, groaned, “Apollo! You stupid, good for nothing—” She cut herself off. “Sorry.” She paused. “He was supposed to give you stitches over an hour ago.” A sigh left her. “I’m Mercy.”

Caroline looked confused, “Mercy? I’m sorry. Did I hear you right?” Caroline asked.

The nurse, used to the usual reaction to her unique name, said, “Mhm! Mercy.” She thought again momentarily, “Did Apollo not tell you I’d check in?”

Caroline nodded a quick no, and Mercy continued. “Well then! I’m Nurse Mercy. I’m the head nurse here at Hellebore.” Mercy paused, looking around. “I see Apollo left all the things for the stitches out on the counter.”

While Mercy was stitching, she advised Amaryllis to stay the night for observation since her injury was to the head. “No signs of concussion but with the supplies we have here, you can never be too sure. Better safe than sorry in my opinion.”

After Mercy treated the gash, she left, allowing Caroline and Amaryllis to cast annoyed glances toward the door.

“This feels... uncoordinated,” Amaryllis began.

“I know, hun. Everyone here seems a bit—well, scrambled. We’ll leave here in the morning, after the storm. I don’t think we could go home in this weather.” Caroline sighed. She looked upset, then met Amaryllis’ deep brown gaze. “I’m sorry, Amaryllis.”

Down the hall, Drs. Damascus and Slaughter began the preparations for the

craniectomy.

“When do we leave, Grey?”

“We’ve been over this, Forscythe. Once we’re sure they’re all dead, we’ll leave and never be found,” the neurosurgeon said, looking down at his tray of sharp silver tools.

Dr. Alpenrose Vincent barged in, dragging Dr. Claremore, who was trying to pull away from her with both hands. She caught the two men off-guard, and they jumped in shock before relaxing.

Dr. Damascus, obviously pleased, shouted, “Alpenrose! Apollo! You’re right on time.” Dr. Vincent threw Dr. Claremore to the ground in front of her. He scrambled to his feet, dusting off his clothes, glaring at her while looking for a place to sit.

“Where’s Mercy?” Dr. Damascus asked Dr. Vincent, looking for a good explanation.

“Preparing the patient,” she replied, tossing her gaze to where Apollo was sitting. He had chosen a bench in the corner of the room and sat silently with his head lowered. Dr. Vincent lifted her arm and glanced at her watch. It read 7:57 pm. She gave a passing nod to Dr. Damascus, stood beside Dr. Slaughter at the operating table, and pulled her mask over her mouth and nose. The other doctors followed suit. Dr. Damascus waited at the door for Mercy, and she entered three minutes later, at precisely 8:00 pm.

* * * * *

Amaryllis woke up from another nightmare around 1:00 am with a sick feeling pulsing through her veins.

“Mom?” Nothing.

“Caroline?” Nobody.

“Mercy?” Blackness.

“Apollo?” Unbroken silence.

Amaryllis worriedly turned to the side of her bed and got up. The darkness of the hospital felt more abnormal than before, and Amaryllis could tell something was definitely wrong. The floorboards creaked under her weight as she entered the main hall. A thick, dark liquid soaked her shoes as she walked through it. Blood. She looked down the hall, dimly lit by a single flickering light.

A long, vast stretch of blood flowed from the operating room, completely undisturbed. Amaryllis moved toward the swinging doors and hesitantly pushed them open. Four bodies were scattered around the room.

“Mercy!” Amaryllis yelled once she noticed the corpse of the friendly nurse leaned up against the wall. A pocket knife was through her chest, and blood poured from the small yet deep wound. The blade was silver, sharp on both sides, and had a black steel handle.

She looked around the room. A woman’s body lay limply in front of her. A deep gash ripped through her chest, and she held her heart loosely in one hand. The name on the woman’s scrubs read Dr. Alpenrose Vincent.

Amaryllis looked up a bit; a man in a hospital gown had been thrown off the operating table. His cerebrum was visible through a clean square hole in his head. The hole was large, and the cut looked careful and, more frighteningly, intentional. Hot, red liquid was pouring from the wound.

“Dr. Claremore!” Amaryllis screamed, running as fast as her body would allow her toward the operating table in disbelief at the doctor who now lie still—the doctor who had been so very alive earlier that day.

His body lay there, his mouth stitched eerily shut and a gaping wound dripping blood down his side. He was quickly losing body heat along with blood. He was dead. Amaryllis shook his lifeless body, hoping he might wake up.

“No! Dr. Claremore!” she screamed. The doors behind her swung open, then shut. Amaryllis froze. She was no longer alone. She snapped her head to the side to see the neurosurgeon standing there. Her mind flooded with horror at the sight of the man wearing blood-soaked scrubs. She bolted into a standing position and slowly backed up until she hit the table. The man walked forward, cornering Amaryllis between himself and the operating table. She flung her head around, looking for something, anything she could possibly use to defend herself. She scrambled for the scalpel beside Dr. Claremore and whipped around to face the neurosurgeon.

He sighed and shook his head. “Oh, little girl. That was a stupid move.”

He mumbled something Amaryllis didn’t understand to himself, and a figure came up behind her, shoving a towel over the lower half of her face. Caught by surprise, Amaryllis didn’t have time to react and couldn’t break the unknown man’s strong hold

on her body. She lost her grip on the scalpel and felt her consciousness slipping away.



Amaryllis woke up on the table where Dr. Claremore had been in the operating room.

The bodies were gone, but the blood remained, leaving a crusted, rust-colored residue all over Amaryllis and her surroundings.

Though it was now dried, somehow, that disgusted Amaryllis further. Amaryllis needed to find her mom. She shot up to look for her mom but was pulled back against the table with force. She was restrained. Thick straps that looked new held her body to the table. She needed to think, but the sedative clouded her thoughts, and she was still in shock.

Come on, Amaryllis! she thought to herself. *Think! Focus! There has to be a way out... right?* She glanced around the dark room. The knife with the black handle—the one she recognized from it being stabbed into Mercy’s heart—was sitting open on the tray alongside a curved sewing needle and thin thread. Amaryllis froze when she heard the doors fling open and waited in dread to listen to them close.

Two tired, rough men stood side-by-side near the doors. They were both in scrubs and would have looked like trustworthy doctors if not in such an unprofessional place. But Amaryllis knew better than that, and she knew nobody would come to save her.

“Amaryllis, have you met Forscythe yet? Oh, that’s right. Forgive my rudeness. I’m sure you remember him,” Dr. Damascus smirked, looking calmly at the girl tied to the table.

She didn’t answer. She was fuming, not only at the doctor’s tone but at herself. She did know this man—but *from where?*

“She doesn’t talk much,” he informed Dr. Slaughter.

“Well then,” Forscythe replied. “Forscythe Slaughter,” he said, introducing himself to

Amaryllis. “Very nice to meet your acquaintance, young lady.”

He sighed when the girl gave him no response. “You ready, Grey?” The surgeon nodded his approval and stepped over to a counter where he and Dr. Slaughter washed

their hands and retrieved their gloves and masks. Amaryllis simply watched them get ready, knowing her screams would never be heard and that she would be shown no mercy.

Mercy, she thought, I will soon end up like Mercy.

Her death was slow. Painful. Agonizing. But somehow, Amaryllis wasn't scared. She knew what was coming. There was no stopping it. So Amaryllis just lay there, still, as they stitched her mouth shut and sliced her neck open dreadfully slowly. She had watched blood pour off of the table and spill across an already bloodstained part of the floor but was resigned to the thought of her death, just glad that her mother wasn't dead.

Amaryllis then began thrashing and breathing heavily through her nose. Where was her mother? Unfortunately, this only sped up her imminent death. She collapsed on the table, her eyes still wide with worry for her mother.

She lay on the bed now, her body cold and unmoving, while the hot crimson poured off the table. The men hadn't even bothered to shut her eyes. They had no pity and much less respect for the teen. When she died, she hadn't been screaming or crying. Instead, she lay still on the table, selflessly worried for her mother's safety.

* * * * *

"Don't worry, Amaryllis. We'll be out of here tomorrow. I promise." Caroline whispered into her peaceful daughter's ear before drifting off to sleep. She woke with a start, realizing she wasn't where she had fallen asleep but in a bed. In a room. All by herself.

The clock on the wall's hands read three, and in a panic, she shot up and managed to catch herself before falling over with a swift movement of her arms. Caroline looked around, her vision clouded and found herself calling for her daughter. The room began to spin, making the worried mother dizzy and causing her to fall back into the bed.

"Take it easy!" Dr. Damascus smirked as he led Dr. Slaughter into the room. His words were oddly soothing, and her breathing slowed. Even though Caroline knew something was deathly wrong, something about his voice was calming. Under Dr. Damascus' instruction, Dr. Slaughter grabbed a syringe and a bottle of sedative from

a counter that Caroline hadn't even noticed. He slowly filled the syringe, savoring every moment of Caroline's terror, and walked over to Dr. Damascus, who shoved her head sideways to face the wall. The syringe was put into the base of Caroline's neck, and all she could think about while he injected the drug was what had happened to her daughter.

* * * * *

Caroline awoke in the same dark room and noticed the two doctors sitting on old, creaky, rolling chairs near the bed. She looked up at the newly shattered clock. The bed creaked beneath her movement.

Dr. Damascus spun around. "Well, good morning, Sunshine!" he said, mocking the woman. Then, he turned his attention to the other doctor and, curiously asked, "How much of that did you give her to keep her out for that long?"

"Enough," Dr. Slaughter said, snatching the bottle from the counter and passing it to the surgeon. The tall doctor set the container next to Caroline.

"Ketamine." He pondered for a moment. "Not that you would've guessed." The doctor gave her an insensitive grin and was about to make another smart remark before Caroline cut him off.

"What time is it?" She asked, lifting her gaze to the broken clock.

The surgeon seemed confused. "That's what you're worried about?" A long sigh left the man, and he answered reluctantly, "It's almost 1 pm. You were under for about ten hours."

Caroline's face went white with shock, and she stared at the clock in horror. She turned when she heard the wheels of Dr. Slaughter's chair as he again reached for the syringe.

"Wait, Forscythe," Dr. Damascus said, holding up the palm of his hand while leaving his gaze fixed on Caroline. The two men froze as a shrill scream sounded down the hallway. "Go!" he yelled at Forscythe. Dr. Damascus stayed with Caroline while the other surgeon rushed into the hall.

Caroline looked at the remaining doctor and noticed a long scar on his neck she hadn't seen before. He sighed deeply, immediately knowing what she had just noticed. "It's the scar, isn't it?"

Caroline nodded as her curiosity and hope to distract the doctor took over. “How did you get it?” she asked, forgetting to worry about her daughter for a moment.

“False accusation of murder—a woman—and a faulty executionist. And *coincidentally*, the judge sure looked a lot like you,” he said venomously. He rolled his eyes at Caroline’s confused reaction. “Rope burn. You do remember me, don’t you?”

Realization hit Caroline like a bullet. Everything seemed to make sense now. He was out for revenge—revenge against her for his criminal sentencing just under a decade prior. Now would be his time to strike. The cases, the lack of witnesses, and now here she was. At his mercy, which she knew from the case presented to her years ago, was nonexistent.



AM I ALONE?

Emily Allen, 15

The dead leaves crinkled under my feet as the cold autumn air nipped at my cheeks. The bare trees creaked and swayed from the gentle wind that brushed against the tree's bole. Everyone knew not to enter Mansree Hollow, but you ignore silly rumors when you're a researcher like me.

I started a documentary a few weeks ago, it's called "*Are We Alone?*" My friends and I made it for our filmmaking class. It's about some unexplainable "events" that happened in Mansree Hollow. But my friends refused to film here, so I came, alone. I'm the only brave one. Or maybe I'm the only dumb one...

I stopped in the middle of a clearing and looked at the gloomy sky. *It's going to be a cold night*, I thought, *I hope I'm not out here when the sun goes down*. I lifted my camera and started recording. After a few minutes of nothing, I stopped recording. I replayed the video on the small screen. It looked normal until I saw it, a black form. But when I rewound it, it was as clear as the tree it was sitting in.

I froze and dropped my camera, hitting the leaves with a *crunch*, "What the..." I exclaimed. I recorded a creature looking right at the camera. It had a big, unnatural smile that dripped black goo. It was perched in a tree like some deformed owl. Its lanky legs were unnaturally bent in a crouch. Its arms were between its legs, holding the branch. It had no eyes, just a mouth.

I looked up from the video, but there was nothing in the tree. After I hyped myself up, I walked to where it was last seen, clutching my camera. I looked up at the branch. Nothing. Then I heard it, *drip, drip, drip*....the black goo from the monster's mouth formed a pool on the ground. I heard movement behind me. I whipped around. It was right in front of me.

I turned and sprinted. My legs pumped fast in the leaves. I heard the monster following, grinding its teeth together. I ducked under a branch, not seeing the stick jutting into my path. It ripped my pants, leaving a deep wound in its wake. I screamed in pain and fell to the ground. My pants were red and sticky as the sharp pain seered through my leg. The monster caught me quickly and pinned me to the forest floor.

“Help!” I shrieked to no one, writhing, trying to buck the monster off.

It didn’t even react, it just leaned in close and opened its wide mouth. Its jaw unhinged, the dark ooze threatened to cover my face. My hands scratched on the ground beside me, searching for a weapon. I found a stick, grabbed it tightly then jabbed it as hard as I could into the monster’s gaping mouth. The creature fell backward and gurgled in pain. The noise rattled my eardrums. With the creature off of me, I scrambled to my feet and continued to run. The gash in my leg seared through my body, slowing me down. Miraculously, I saw a cabin and shoved my way inside.

I pushed an armchair in front of the cabin door. I tried to still my shaking body, being quiet to listen for the monster. The only thing I could hear was my pounding heart and my breathing coming in short gasps. After my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I looked around the cabin. It looked like it could’ve been a hunter’s cabin. A deer was mounted up on the wall above the fireplace. It was clear no one had been here for years. There was a thick layer of dust on everything. *Where did the owners go? Did the creature kill them? Did they get lonely and move?*

I saw a door at the end of the cabin. I limped over and opened it. A rush of cold, musty air filled my senses. There was an ominous staircase that led down to a pool of darkness. I looked around for a light source to navigate the unknown area. I found an old candle that was half melted and smelled like mothballs. I grabbed a match with my shaky hand and pulled it from my pack. I struck it, then gently lifted the small flickering flame to the candle wick.

Suddenly, a soft, warm glow surrounded me and chased back the black shadows. I cautiously padded down the steps and descended into the darkness before me. It’s all for the documentary, right?

My eyes landed on a stone wall at the bottom of the stairs. I squinted my eyes and could barely make out scrawled writing. *“My dear boy James, I’m sorry, so sorry. Why did you touch it? I warned you, and now you’re changed. Me, Evelyn, and your mother are leaving, we can’t watch your slow death. To whoever reads this, if we don’t make it out, it dies by fire.”*

I let out a sharp gasp into the still basement. *Fire; that’s the key. It dies by fire!* With all my strength, I forced myself to climb back up the rickety stairs. I felt it waiting for me, smelling my oozing leg, dripping its black slimy smile, wanting to taste me.

I gripped the candle tighter, looking for anything flammable. My eyes drifted to a rusty gas can. *Please, please, have gas in it!* I silently prayed. I reached the can and shook its contents. The sweet sound of liquid sloshed inside the aged container.

Suddenly, I heard a thud against the barricaded cabin door. I dropped the candle, its small flame sputtered, then died, leaving me in cold darkness. A splintering thud came again, louder, with more force than before. I saw through the new cracks of what used to be the cabin door. A smile that was blacker than any dungeon or basement; James' smile.

In my last bit of strength, I scrambled on the floor, ignoring the dots that swirled across my vision. My hand brushed the floor, and I found the candle. A hypnotic thudding filled the cabin, matching the sound of my beating heart. I grabbed a broken match from my pack, struck it against the rough floor, and ignited the candle. Splinters flew around me, like fireflies in a field of new spring grass. James was in the cabin, smiling his black, gooey smile.

In one smooth sweep, I dropped to the floor and kicked the gas can, spilling its liquid. I felt the dripping sludge on my arm before I saw my new nightmare towering over me. The black ooze burned my skin like a thousand suns. I dropped the candle, igniting the gas.

I woke up on the cold basement floor. I smelled campfire and ancient rot above me. Through the charred floor, I saw it, the monster, a lost son named James, dead above me. It still had a smile, but no longer oozing.

I lifted myself and winced from the pain in my leg. But a new pain broke through and snapped me from my feeling of victory. I looked at my arm in the dancing light from the fire crackling above me. A black ooze had settled on my arm. The cryptic message rang in my head, *Why did you touch it? ...now you're changed....* My eyes closed as I felt my new, black smile drip down my face.

THE CREATION

Hayden Armstrong, 15

Some believe Frankenstein to be the monster. The creature stitched together with thread, only alive because of electrostatic discharges. Some believe they know the truth. That Frankenstein was the scientist who played with the very idea of life and death like a new child does a gifted toy. Carelessly, and without a thought of what future consequences may occur.

Frankenstein was the monster. He was a cruel and unforgiving force. He was a monster who lacked humanity and craved power. Frankenstein was a man without a heart, a creature without a soul. He toyed with the villagers of his town. Taking their very lives into his monstrous hands and throwing them up and down as if they were nothing but a toy.

Up

Down

Up

Down

The thunder outside shakes the entirety of the room, from the cup on the counter behind to the table in front of me. It is the perfect weather for this ceremonious event.

White flashes of lightning burst just outside the balcony of this tower, illuminating the room I've occupied. The light washes over the operating table I have dragged up the spiral staircase just behind me. The light also illuminates the deep crimson lake drizzling down the table, making its way from the body sized puddle it originated from.

As I stand in awe of the horrific scene before me the door to the balcony flies inwards, allowing the invisible force that is wind to invade the circular room. Although an irritating presence, I make no move to shut the opened doors. I have far bigger things to focus my mind on. Things that have to do with the detached limbs, resting on the rectangular steel bed in the middle of my tower.

The limbs are pale, however they still resemble the pinkish color they originally were. The color they were when the heart the limbs belonged to was still beating, when the brain they used to take commands from was still alive. Now, here on this cold grey

table they lie. Waiting, yearning to be a part of something bigger once more.

I turn around from my place in front of the operating table to the cabinets above my counter to my left. I walk over to my counter and pull out a drawer, my hand gripping the heart shaped drawer pull. From inside of the drawer I pull out a physician's bag, equipped with all one may need when faced with something as great as this. Taking the brown leather bag, I turn back towards my masterpiece, or rather my work of progress.

Settling into the stool at the front of the operating table, I stare into my art work. The skin pulled tightly over the bones, the sunken eyes, and the crystal white bones that poke out from each body part.

To some, what I do next may be unholy, the devil's work. However, I consider it science. I see myself not as a devil's puppet, but rather a Van Gough to my own starry night. A Mozart to my own tune. A Gustave Eiffel to my own Eiffel tower. Those who may oppose to my art must never have felt the urge that artists get. The feeling that you must create, no matter the opinion of the people. Nor the danger it may put you in, physically or mentally.

Taking a breath of excitement and horror, I begin to unravel the cloth containing my tools. Each limb, eat part of my canvas not attached, to the whole must be sewn together. Despite my excitement, I remain professional. I am calm and my hands are sturdy as I pinch the skin of the neck with my forceps and carefully push my curved needle into the tissue with my needle driver. I use a horizontal suture, making sure my stitches are perfectly spaced. The dozens of horizontal lines of the upper and lower neck fit together in perfect unity.

My work does not end there, with the winds still howling about my tower, and the lighting ever-so-often illuminating my workspace, I diligently continue my work. I stitch the limbs together using the same amount of care for every one. From the upper and lower thigh to the pinky to the hand, each limb is sutured with the same amount of care and perfection.

It took hours of careful stitching, but it is finally done. The limbs that previously fell to no use, torn from their resting body, now reside back together. It's beautiful. It's art.

I cart it over to my bay window, lightning growing even more restless, however I will not be using it for my creature. Insead, before I step outside to the vastness that is the

night, I cart the canvas to another steel operating table. On it is a pig, sedated but still breathing. In it the first stroke to my canvas. The beating heart.

I prep the pig and gather all the tools I may need, my canvas beside me, cutting into it blood gushes out. I suck up the blood and continue on.

Cutting

Carving

Splicing

Continuing until I have it, the beating heart, extracted from the poor animal. My bloodied hands carry it to my artwork and gently place it into its chest cavity. Careful and with precision, like the Lord when carefully carving into Adam and extracting his rib. I place it in and quickly attach the nerves of the brain stem placed in the corpse moments before my first suture. I push the pig away from me, it is no use now that I have obtained its organ, and reach for my defibrillator. I have minutes to restart this heart and therefore the brain.

As shocks leave my canvas convulsing, my thoughts trail back to my claim.

Frankenstein was the monster. He was the monster who played with life and death, terrorizing his town. He was the monster who on a dark stormy night did the unthinkable.

The monster had created a man.

Frankenstien had gathered limbs for his own canvas. He had sutured him with simple interrupted sutures, and shocked him to life with lightning. He made his creature, his son, knowing the kind of monster he could be. He was the monster. The monster was Frankenstien.

A gasp of breath breaks my train of thought. Dropping the paddles of the defibrillator I too gasp. I gasp in awe and shock. In terror and amazement. My masterpiece sits up and turns to face me. It stares at me, and I at it.

I stand there staring at my masterpiece and it stares at its artist. It's Frankentien.

"Welcome back home, beloved."

DON'T LET THE DUST SETTLE

Dawson Reed, 15

Hudson walks up the long narrow road to the abandoned mansion on the hill. The crunch of fallen leaves after each step and the cold breeze filled him with dread as he tracked on. He shouldn't have made that stupid bet. Of course, his biology teacher could recite the alphabet backward. Hudson had to go to the top of the third floor and leave a candy bar at the top step because he lost the bet.

The town rumors say that a family once lived here, but they disappeared. Some say it was a ghost; others a beast. Hudson doesn't know what to believe. He thinks about leaving and turning back. He could live with the consequences of being called a chicken. But he still walks up the hill and approaches the door.

The mansion was three stories tall with high worn-out wooden beams. It was probably once a beautiful house, but now the paint has peeled and the wood beneath has cracked. As he looks at the house, he sees a movement from a window on the second floor. Maybe he was just seeing things. But he wasn't so sure as he climbed the front steps. The steps creaked as he rose and approached a window.

He looked inside, but all he saw was a dark, lonely room with an old rocking chair and what looked like hand-knitted quilts. Hudson takes a deep breath and pulls out his flashlight. He clicks it on and puts his hand on the door. He hesitates, then pushes open the door with a loud, chilling, and eerie creak. He steps foot into the house and closes the door with a thud.

Immediately, his flashlight goes out. He says a few words that his mother would not be proud of and presses the flashlight button. He sighs and puts it away. He was on his own now, with no light to guide him. He sees a door to his left and opens it up. He walks into the same room he saw through the window. It smelled dusty and stale as if there hadn't been a living thing in there for years. Or so he thought.

As Hudson turned around, he heard a little scurrying and froze. He can't hear anything over his heartbeat in his ears. He's paralyzed. After he regains his bearings, he slowly turns around and gasps as a little kitten comes into view. This cat was little. The runt of the litter, by the looks of it. It was black with white paws, but its paws were

dirty with dirt. In the back of Hudson's mind, one side of him says, "This cat could have diseases and spread those to me." But the animal lover in him is saying, "OH MY GOSH." He proceeds towards the kitten slowly. The cat sniffs his hand and lets Hudson pat him. He slowly picks him up and pulls him to his chest. "Alright Kitty," Hudson says, "you're my new companion as we navigate this place."

Hudson stands and walks out the door with the kitten in his hands. He shuts the door behind him and ventures off. Hudson turns left and takes a few cautious steps toward the main foyer. He walks into a large room with supporting beams and an empty fireplace. There is a big rug on the floor that might've once been pretty, but now the thick layer of dust obscures any designs that are a part of it. Suddenly, Hudson hears a loud crash, as if someone, or something, had thrown it on the ground. The sound came from the left, so Hudson turned to the right, hoping he could find some stairs to the top level.

After a few more gory rooms with dead rats and mysterious stains that were probably blood, Hudson found the stairs. They were big, cascading steps that wound up in a circular motion. Hudson quickly climbed but was careful not to be too loud. He still thought that he and the kitten weren't alone in this place. As Hudson was nearing the second level, he heard a creak, like the sound of a door being opened. He froze, and not a second later, he heard a door slam. Hudson quickly gathered his bearings and ran. He ran to the nearest room to him and barricaded the door with his body.

He stood there with his back to the door, listening for any more noises. He then heard a tiny squeal. He looks down and realizes he's squishing the kitten from fear. He quickly loosens up and sets it down so it can breathe. He stands up and takes in his surroundings. He walked into a little girl's bedroom. There was a large bed in the center of the room with lacy curtains surrounding it, and a large bookcase filled with dolls. These dolls were handmade and intricate, but now they had spider webs covering them and layers of dust. He quickly turned away because he had an unsettling feeling about them. He looked up and there was a large circular chandelier. It had tiny jewels all around the circumference. The chandelier rested on a hook that hung from the ceiling.

He took a step forward and tripped on something. He looked back and saw a long jump rope. He kicked it to the side of the room so he wouldn't make that mistake again. He needed to focus. He needed to get to the top of the stairs leave the candy up there

and get out of this scary place. He looked around for the kitten but couldn't see him. He then heard a little meow and turned his head and his eyes rested on the kitten in front of a door. Hudson quickly goes and picks up the cat, then opens the door.

Inside is a tall, dark, and steep staircase leading to the third level. Hudson takes a deep breath, then heads up the stairs. With the adrenaline pumping through him, he barely felt the time pass before he reached the top step. He pulled the candy bar out of his back pocket and placed it on the top step.

He glanced up and what he saw terrified him. He saw this huge shadow of what looked like a monster. It was making a bloodcurdling screech. He was petrified, and couldn't even scream until the kitten bit him and he immediately turned around and ran down the stairs. He almost tripped over himself, but he remained steady and quickly got to the second floor. He promptly shut the door behind him and barricaded his body against the door. He saw a chair next to him and he grabbed it and put it under the doorknob.

He stepped back and listened. He heard some scuffling and growling but it quickly retreated, back to wherever it came from. Hudson took a breath and leaned against a wall. He put his hands on his face and took deep breaths until he stopped shaking. It took a few minutes, but Hudson's ragged breathing soon became smooth, slow breaths. It then dawned on Hudson that he could leave. He completed the dare.

He took a few steps toward the door when he tripped. He looked down and saw the jump rope again. Hudson stared at it for a second. An idea formed. An idea so bizarre it might work. He looked around the room and his eyes rested on both the lacy curtains and the hook from the chandelier. Without a moment's hesitation, he made his contraption. He hung the jump rope on the hook and tied a knot from the curtain to the jump rope. The plan was to lead the monster into the curtain and Hudson would pull up and catch the monster in the net. He didn't have a plan for what would happen next, but he would figure that out when he got there.

When he set the trap perfectly, Hudson removed the chair from the door and opened it. He quickly hid behind the bed and waited for the monster to come. He didn't have to wait for long. Almost immediately, Hudson heard some scuffling, and then he heard the monster come down the steps. He couldn't see the monster until it stepped out of the door. Hudson didn't hesitate. He quickly pulled up, and he heard a loud grunt

come from the monster. He tied the jump rope to the bed and approached the monster.

When he reached the net, what he saw inside startled him. What he saw inside was a cat. A black cat with white paws. Hudson looked down at the kitten that he left on the bed. The similarities between them could not have been a coincidence. He quickly realized what had made this cat so angry, and he let him out of the trap. Immediately, the cat ran towards the kitten and laid down beside her to make sure it was okay.

Once the cat saw her kitten was fine, she faced Hudson and hissed at him. Hudson backed away when the kitten stepped in front of its mom and looked at her. There was some kind of silent conversation going on between the two. After a minute, the cat nodded her head, and the kitten ran towards Hudson. She nuzzled his shoe and looked up at him. Hudson smiled and looked towards the cat, who was staring at him defiantly from the bed. "I'm sorry I stole your kitten," Hudson exclaimed. "I wasn't trying to harm her or take her away from you." The cat didn't show any sign that she heard or understood him, but she walked over to the door leading upstairs. He looked down at the kitten, who was still looking at him.

The kitten purred softly, then went to join its mother. With one last look at Hudson, they climbed the stairs. Hudson stood there for a minute, processing what he had just gone through. He then left. Left the house. Left the kitten. Left the dust.

HAPPENSTANCE.

Rowan Fagerberg, 16

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Each spheroid carefully trickled along the passage, meticulously formed to mold every drop into its intended formation. Each one was plenteous, gravity pulling it toward the swelling puddle of inky liquid below. It was a ceaseless loop, an arduous journey that would only end if he desired it to. But not now. It was far too riveting to look elsewhere, for the look of blood flowing at a low viscosity rate was far too captivating. Seeing it smoothly glide down the path made just for it, witnessing it softly gurgle and bubble everything once in a while was indescribably satisfying; heavenly.

The latest schlemiel had countless red blood cells, maybe even irregularly shaped ones. The substance this time was mucilaginous, thick, and syrupy. Valen enjoyed the sight of oozing blood more than he cared to admit.

This unique fascination manifested from a child-like curiosity the raven-haired man always had within him. The intriguing wonder of what assuredly happens inside of the human body. Cadavers were his favorite. Valen liked to think of himself as an explorer and a sponge. It's odd to put two such words together, but it worked. He studied the human body, learning new things each time. While doing so, he soaked up every bit of information like a sponge, his curiosity quenched for a mere moment before another burning question popped into his mind.

There was something oddly calming about the routine process of preparing the dead for their final resting place. It was all so... methodical. The embalming room was Valen's second home. It was where he would don a surgical scrub suit, surgical cap, a gown with full sleeve coverage, eye and face protection, shoe covers, and double surgical gloves. It's essential to limit the amount of exposure to chemicals, inhalation of pathogens, and airborne particles. A local exhaust system removes formaldehyde emissions before they near or affect Valen's breathing quality.

First, Valen would usually wash the body with a disinfectant solution, massage and bend limbs to relieve rigor mortis, and shave any necessary parts, including the face and hands, to present a more pleasant view of the individual. Then the facial features

are set, including plastic eye caps and glue if needed, wiring the jaw shut, and using cotton to fill out the mouth to achieve the desired expression. Artiel embalming follows, which involves creating a small incision to access the carotid artery and jugular vein to insert the arterial tubes, beginning the draining process. The embalming machine is connected to the arterial tube and adjusted to regulate the flow and pressure of the fluid as it enters the body.

Depending on the weight, condition of the body, diseases, etc, Valen chooses what embalming fluid to use.

Cavity embalming involves a trocar being inserted into the abdominal and thoracic cavities and removing gas and other fluid contents in the body. That's where most of the bacteria and other non-pleasant things like to fester.

Cosmetics follow after the body is sutured closed.

Valen's favorite part was the cosmetic process, dolling up his patients and making them seem sentient again. They're dressed in formal attire, makeup especially mixed for the skin of the fallen is applied, the hair is washed and styled, and jewelry is placed alongside any other items that may be buried with them.

And when the day is over and Valen is released back into society, out of the room for authorized personnel only, a suit usually adorns his body. He preferred dark grey ones with a muted color tie. His hair was ordinarily slicked back, the ends residing around the middle of his neck due to his lack of haircut.

It could be argued that Valen was a bit of a loner, preferring to visit the anatomy lab in his free time or sit down with a nice glass of whiskey and read a novel from his time by the fireplace. His humble abode was certainly nothing remarkable or noteworthy, just a reflection of his bleak and trite personality.

Drop. Drop. Drop.

The sky on this particular day was stormy, the wind ferociously howling and whistling through the crack of Valen's front door. No matter how many rags he used, it persevered. Though this issue was infuriatingly inconvenient, it wasn't very high on the mental list of priorities.

Valen's immediate concern was that he had misplaced his car keys. The man had continually detested modern technology. Perhaps he was just decrepit and stuck in his ways, but there wasn't much he could do to help his predicament other than analyze

the individuals of the much, much younger generation and try to acquire the needed knowledge to know what captivates and intrigues them.

Mortals are so temperamental. Why can't they gaze at situations with logical understanding? Why do they seem to be growing more into the role of an imbecile as the years go on?

Splish. Splash. Splish.

It'd be immoral to drink the remnants of life that permeated through the cavities of oneself. Valen found pleasure in indulging in more... lively cattle, literally and figuratively—not that he had time to reflect on that in the first place.

Valen inattentively watched dribblets of rain slide down the pane of glass he resided by. He recently and successfully embalmed another patient. It was time for lunch. People are generally put off by the odor and sights of the dead, their insides twisting in a dance that is sure to chase away every ounce of hunger. Not this man, for it stirred this incessant urge within him, even if the blood within them is stale and reeks of decomposition.

When it's all said and done, everything appears unchanged. Not a single memory from their point of view is altered. They don't question the gap, the lost time, or the ache they feel deep in their bones, but the memory their body holds within it is irreversible. The damage done to the epidermis and dermis, and the questions stemmed from it are rather troublesome. That's why he now went for the femoral artery.

Settling for less would always be hard, but not impossible. The local butcher shop would suffice for today. In theory, William was feeling sick and took off for lunch early.

Ripple. Ripple. Ripple.

Cotton handkerchief in hand, Valen delicately dabbed away remnants of his meal from the corner of his wide lips. He casually folded it and slipped it back into the front pocket of his blazer when finished. It continued to rain faintly, a fine mist covering the area in a foggy haze. Shapes and colors became muddled with the lack of light from above. Some would see it as a sign of misfortune or sadness, but Valen saw it differently. He welcomed such weather and wished it upon the world, for it made him feel more at home and indistinct. He melded into the crowd of unsuspecting people because of it, something he could not do in the daytime.

The cold metal of the door handle met Valen's palm and fingers when a presence

behind him caused him to pause. The inky man turned his head to the right, barely over his shoulder. A glimpse of a soul flickered in the corner of his eye. The air turned still as Valen inhaled deeply. This thing posed no threat, but it was still mildly unsettling to have been trailed.

“I know.” A head peeked out from the alleyway Valen had just come from. This voice was light and feminine, barely a whisper. The smug tone lacing it ruined every potentially redeeming quality it had. A surge of displeasure ran through the man’s veins, spreading throughout his senses before it subsided just as quickly. Why would he waste his energy worrying about what this creature knew? There wouldn’t be a problem whatsoever.

When Valen opened the door, the voice was suddenly raucous, small footsteps hastily pounding toward him.

The noise was nauseatingly loud in his sensitive ears.

“Wait a second!” The steps paused as Valon whirled around to face what looked to be a teenager. He couldn’t quite control the look of distaste that marred his features for a moment. This... girl was about a head shorter than him with wild brown locks. Her eyes were a muted golden color, bright and full of curiosity. Her outfit consisted of a sweater and jeans, and a crossbody bag stretching across her torso; casual.

“Can I help you?” Valon was unsure how to respond or speak to such a young individual without seeming like a prude pensioner. Her head tilted, curls falling alongside it. Her eyes were wide as they practically stared into him.

“Mr. Wakefield? From Evergreen Rest Homes?”

“That’s correct.” Valen Flatly replied, not very impressed with how bold she was being. He would’ve at least appreciated a simple greeting, even if everything about her was impulsively disastrous from the looks of it.

“My name is Nelle Saccone. You were the one who organized my sister’s funeral. Her name was Estelle Saccone. Remember her?” Valon realized she was shaking when she dug into her bag and pulled a photo of her late sister. Of course, he remembered who her sister was—he’d been the one to embalm her. But he looked at the photo anyway, at the bright eyes that resembled Nelle’s. He didn’t remember the person in front of him, though. She hadn’t attended the funeral, that much was obvious. It raised quite a few questions.

“She was my twin,” Nelle went on. She *wasn’t* a teenager? “I wasn’t able to attend the funeral due to issues within the family, so I was hoping you could point me in the right direction?” The brunette’s tone grew hopeful, her eyes round as she looked up at Valen. He looked off to the side, his brow twitching slightly.

“Pleasant Ridge Cemetery on Valentine Road,” Valen spoke after he gave her a long look. His pale hands slid into his pockets, gripping at his keys. Nelle’s face lit up, her mouth moving to thank him. That wasn’t all she had to inquire.

Flowing. Spreading. Swelling.

It felt like some twisted obligation to personally guide Nelle to the one grave she sought out of thousands. Valen supposed it’d be cruel not to assist, especially considering his position within the home.

“Any reason as to why you decided to pay me a visit when you did?” Valen had inquired as they walked side by side to their final destination. Nelle shrugged her shoulders. The curls sprouting from her head bounced with every step. “I’ve tried to find you at the funeral home many times, but you were always out, so I guess I got a little impatient.” Nelle awkwardly chuckled. She was lying. It’d been two months since her sister’s funeral, and Valen was always available whether it be that he was physically there or one could call.

“I see,”

“I don’t have a great relationship with my family.” Nelle felt some type of obligation to defend herself if she was telling him that, not that Valen particularly cared anyway. But he nodded alone, a flat smile on his pink lips. He had a job to fulfill as a funeral director.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m glad that you’ve decided to come up here and visit. I know she must’ve been an important person in your life.” Valen uttered lines he’d spoken countless times before, his eyes sliding to her gold ones before roving the ground ahead. It wouldn’t be too long before they arrived at their destination.

The sounds of grass crunching underfoot, the breeze blowing through Nelle’s hair and rustling their clothes, the sharp calls of birds, it was all mildly unsettling in the presence of a stranger; awkward. Valen found himself wishing he’d notified her of some imaginary issue he needed to attend to, told her to come back some other time so he could properly digest his lunch and find solace in watching blood drip in his special

room.

Nelle kneeled in front of the grave when they finally arrived. Valen stood back a few feet and watched with narrowed eyes. Something about her wasn't right, but he couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. Nevertheless, she gently laid her fingertips on the grass sprouting from the dirt, her eyes closing. She grew motionless except for the fingers that slowly dug deeper and deeper into the soil. She looked content, as if she was urging the invisible spirits around her to feel her sister's presence below, to connect with it and properly grieve. Viscous liquid oozed from the ground underneath Nelle's digits, and Valen immediately discerned that something was amiss—that he'd overlooked something. The blood was slow moving, droplets rising around Nelle's figure, and the raven man took a step back, eyes taking in the wondrous sight.

"It's your favorite," Nelle whispered, inaudible if it weren't for Valen's keen sense of hearing. He swallowed, the droplets slowly migrating toward him, delicate in the way they moved; mesmerizing. Thunder deeply rumbling in the distance, like a tiger ready to pounce, unpredictable and hair-raising as ever. Who was this girl? *What* was she? Questions raced through the man's head as he reached a hand out, the blood resting on his fingertip once it had gently laid itself upon it. Nelle moved to stand, a puddle of blood in her hand as she turned to him, eyes rapturous as she gazed at him. Clouds covered the sun, her eyes seemingly glowing in the dull light. Her curls unraveled themselves, texture growing coarse as the strands tangled themselves together. Valen lowered his hand, the drop floating in the air where his finger was. Nelle wasn't here to play nice, he realized now. But it was already too late.

It was instantaneous, the bright light that burned Valen's retinas, the sound that burst his eardrums, the movement that made him feel like a snail in comparison—his quick reflexes were no match for the stringing blood that surrounded his limbs and curled around his arteries. He tried to run, but the ends dug into his skin, intertwining with his very being and restricting every movement in his body. He was suffocating and blind, unable to think or speak. This blood was not the kind Valen was enamored with and knew like the lines on his palms. It was the kind that sought revenge, to bring justice to the ones who had been oppressed.

"I know you did it, Valen." Nelle's voice had taken on a different tone, grave and unforgiving as Valen struggled to breathe, unable to wrap his mind around what was

happening to his body, who she was, why he couldn't see or breathe. The grass under his shoes fell away as he felt the droplets of blood sticking to his skin, the strings inside his body slithering into his arteries and restricting blood flow. His mind grew hazy, hoarse sounds escaping him as he suffocated.

"Is this what Estelle felt when you drained the life out of her? Sucked the blood from her body and rendered her into a corpse?" Nelle fulminated, her anger surrounding Valen in a cloud, crowding his senses with all of his wrongdoings. His blind eyes rapidly moved side to side, images of individuals he'd drained unwillingly flashing behind his apertures. His body was stiffening as the oxygen and blood stopped circulating. Nelle's voice rapidly faded as she yelled her grievances and screamed at him for his inexcusable crime.

"When I'm done with you, you'll never want to hurt another mortal again." Nelle's sharp words physically pierced him, the hardened strings of blood wrapping around his heart as he fell under, into something less than pleasant.

Valen's future while uncertain and utterly doomed, part of him could say he didn't mind. After all, four hundred years is a *long* time to inhabit such a world. The sweet release of death felt close and smelled saccharine.

THE CAROUSEL

Annabella Elliott, 17

Tonight was the night I had been waiting for: Halloween, and my costume this year was extra special since I'd chosen to dress up as the sugar plum fairy, and the ballerina tutu my mom had picked out was the best part. Halloween was my favorite holiday, but my parents' least favorite, due to the looming candy high that ensued after trick or treating.

My parents had been yelling at me a lot the past few days, and though I couldn't fully understand why, it might've been because of my birthday bossiness.

I'd recently been crowned ten years old, my birthday falling on the week before Halloween. It was during the party that my parents surprised me with tickets to the Halloween event at the local zoo, a wish that lit up my heart like the fireworks at Disney World! In previous years, they'd always said they were too tired to go and didn't want to deal with the kid chaos. As my parents scooted into the car, I performed my daily ritual of begging to sit in the front seat, while anticipating the rejection and a stern lecture on how dangerous it would be.

However, to my surprise, I was given the okay!

My Dad patted the passenger seat. "Come up, then."

I nodded excitedly, practically launching myself on to my mom before she could trade places with me. As I settled in, I attempted to press buttons that would definitely mess up the settings.

"Hands. Off," my dad warned sternly.

I complied; simply happy I was allowed to ride in the front seat.

The car rolled down the street, my eager grin powering the speed of the vehicle, familiar yet dark surroundings zipping by as I peered out the window.

It was then that I felt a violent shiver, goosebumps erupting across my skin.

Sensing the confused distress on my face, my mom rubbed the top of my head soothingly. "You alright, honey?"

"I'm okay," I lied, but thankfully the sensation soon dwindled, and the car continued to descend into the night.

Not long after, my dad pulled into the zoo parking lot. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I leaped out of the car and ran to my mom, pleading for her to hurry up.

Eventually, we made our way into the zoo, and I was on the verge of jumping out of my skin with excitement, bubbling cheer fizzing to the surface.

The night was a dream come true: zooming around in roller coasters, munching on clouds of cotton candy, greeting every cute animal. I was even allowed to enter the Haunted House, and it was refreshing to say I was no longer afraid of the ghouls trying to scare me. After all, I was now an adult!

I was fierce, unstoppable, charging through the zoo with my parents trailing behind me, barely able to keep up.

Just before the zoo was about to close, peering beyond a canopy of shadowy leaves, I spotted the distinguishable popping colors of twirling luminosity, vibrant and magical. They spun and spun, calling to me from the wispy waves of mist that flowed over the ground.

Eagerly, I grabbed my mom and dad's hands, begging to be taken to the swirl of rainbow hues.

The Carousel.

Like none I'd ever seen before: a rotating halo, glimmering a variation of airy tints onto my starry-eyed face, mystifying, hypnotizing . . .

My parents reluctantly agreed, following close to me as it was really dark now and there were no other guests in sight.

The smell of slushies, fun, and amusement drizzled over the ornate spectacle, gold encrusted into the poles, attached to make-believe creatures: unicorns, dragons, pegasi galore, schemes of pastel and patterns of swirls creating a whimsical presentation.

My parents saw the look of wonder I wore, and the carousel attendee was quick to swing open the gate temptingly, despite the late hour. A curly, frayed indigo skirt was at her waist, with white stockings like a princess, a pink striped blazer accompanied by silver rings. Her long, flowing black hair was tied into thick braids, pooling like ink down her body.

"Go ahead and go up," my mom urged, probably worrying about how the zoo was on the verge of closing.

I beamed and nodded, racing to the first fairy-winged alicorn I saw.

It was with the enchanting melody of a faulty speaker that the carousel began to twirl, my twinkling smile matching the gumdrop-resembling lamps at the center. I lost myself in the uncontained joy I was experiencing.

A minute later, the ride slowed to a creaky stop, and I swung my feet out of the cuffs, nearly falling as I struggled to slide off the tall, shiny animal.

Managing to find my footing, I bounded out of the golden swiveled gate, only to discover that my parents... were nowhere to be found.

And then, I saw them, walking in the opposite direction of my shouts. "Mom! Dad! Where are you going?"

They completely disregarded my yells, sauntering along as if they were in no hurry. A hand fell upon my shoulder like a deadweight, and I felt my body crackling with an all too familiar shiver.

I slowly turned to see the carousel caretaker, chapped white face paint accentuating her hollow, abandoned eyes.

I witnessed the makeup crumble off the woman's face, an anguished expression contorting her features.

The woman leaned forward, bending so that her lips touched my ear. In a broken whisper, she said, "*it's your turn.*"

I shuddered to the bone. "What?"

"*IT'S YOUR TURN!*" she cried in a raspy, petrified tone as she grabbed hold of my small frame and hurled me up over the gate to the carousel.

"Stop, you're scaring me!" I yelled, praying this was somehow merely a show, playing pretend, but I knew better. I wish I'd known better before.

No sooner had I been thrown to the ground than the carousel started to spin out of control, creating a blinding whirlpool of colors that didn't seem so cheery anymore.

I dug my nails into the chalky marble slabs, the pulsating array of tinges shining onto it, and I clung to a sunken-in crevice like my life depended on it.

Unable to hold on any longer, I was caught in the hurricane of the carousel, flying feetfirst into a horrific dimension. It was like a night sky but with no stars, no light, no hope.

* * * *

The girl I once was died that night, but something else took her place, lurching up from the depths of a screaming abyss, a tormented reflection of myself.

* * * *

Now, no longer reminiscing on that night twenty years ago, I watched from afar as a distracted little girl wandered to the brightest area with the darkest truth, gleaming eyes staring up at me.

“Mommy, Daddy, can I ride the carousel?”

No answer.

The child turned around, saying: “Mommy? Daddy?” in a far more frightened tone as they walked away from her without a word.

“Silly girl,” I cooed. “Don’t you know those aren’t your real parents? Your parents are *dead*.”

The girl faced me, a haunted gaze telling all but a fairytale.

“Come on,” I said, opening the gate, “*it’s your turn*.”

CONTENT WARNINGS

Stories are listed in order of appearance

* * * * *

8-11

Uninvited Guests • Max Earickson

Death by fire, reference to arson & murder

Don't Look Away • Scarlett Leutkemeyer

Body horror, parental death, suicide, depression, drowning/injury

Missing • Mia Potter

Car crash, reference to parental death, running away

Fever Dream • Cash Curry

Abduction/confinement, stabbing

The Death • Aadhya Duggirala

Death of family, injury, blood/gore, spiders

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12-14

Untitled • Savannah R. Walker

Murder of child & teen, body horror, gore, violence

Moonlight Menace • Austin Scharnell

Death of animals, implied death of child, guns, transformation

The Crow • Maryn Smith

Description of breaking bones

The Mask • Tori Thomason

Alcohol use (adult), spousal abuse, being drugged, violence/gore, implied suicide

Hellebore Hospital • Olivia Pound & Lily Buford

medical setting, murder, death, reference to being drugged

blood, stitching wounds, dead bodies, murder

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15-18

Am I Alone? • Emily Allen

Body horror, supernatural monster, transformation

A Monster of My Own • Hayden Armstrong

Dismemberment, descriptions of surgical procedure, killing of animal

Don't Let the Dust Settle • Dawson Reed

Mention of dead animals/blood

Happenstance. • Rowan Fagerberg

Details of embalming process, descriptions of blood, reference to alcohol use (adult)

The Carousel • Annabella Elliott

n/a