

Schusterman-Benson Library

presents

Spooky Stories •2024•



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FOREWORD

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

Parents' Note: These stories have been written by students ranging in age from 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.162.

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



Some stories have been formatted for adaptation in this anthology.

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

Ages 8-11

The following stories contain scenes of abduction, blood, death, demons, gore, murder, and violence.

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THE TALE OF RAVEN STUMP

Reese James, 11

Once, in a small village known as Lantern Hill, a boy walked through the forest. He wrapped his cloak around himself as a cold autumn breeze blew through the trees. In the distance, coyotes howled. The boy looked around him, his eyes darting back and forth.

Soon he reached the brook which separated him from the rest of the town. He hurried across the small bridge and dashed up the cobblestone street to his house.

"Where have you been, Peter?" asked his mother when he came into the sitting room.

"I was paying a visit to grandfather, but when I was coming home through the forest, I thought I heard something. Uncle James said he saw a wolf once. Are there wolves in the forest?"

His mother smiled and ruffled his hair, but did not respond.



That night, while Peter lay in bed, he heard howling. Suddenly a scream pierced the air. Peter bolted upright. He was about to get out of bed, but he was so tired and exhausted from the scare earlier that day that he fell asleep before he could move any more.

The next day Peter awoke with no memory of the last night's events. He hurried downstairs and ate a delicious breakfast of pancakes and bacon before hurrying outside to get his chores done for the day. Red, orange, and yellow leaves were scattered across the ground in every direction.

Peter set to work raking them up. Before long he had a pile big enough to jump in, which would be fun for the little children of the village. After he was done with his chores for the day, he hurried off to join the other children in their games. As he walked down the road, he heard a sound as if someone, or rather *something*, was following him.

Peter turned around quickly. "Who's there?" he said.

Suddenly he heard puffing as if someone was breathing hard behind him. Trying hard not to scream, he spun to the other side, ready to run. To his relief, it was a black dog, panting.

"Oh, it's just you, Garm. You gave me a scare. Where's Anne?"

Anne owned most of the animals on Lantern Hill. She had a black cat, several dogs (including Garm), and a pet rabbit she had found caught in a hunter's trap.

Garm led the way, and soon they reached the village square where all the children had lined up for hopscotch. Anne and two other boys were standing to the side, probably bored of chalk games.

Peter yelled, "Anne! Carl! Charlie! Come play soccer!"

"Okay, Peter!" said Charlie, running over. Anne joined them and Carl ran back to his house for the ball.

A few minutes went by and Carl had not come back. What was taking him so long? Suddenly Peter heard a shout from Carl's house. They ran over to see what was the matter.

Carl came running down the path that ran through his garden. "What happened?" asked Peter.

"Nothing!" he said nervously. "Why do you ask?"

"We thought we heard a scream coming from your house."

"Really?" asked Carl. "I didn't hear anything."

On the back of Carl's hand, Peter saw a strange black mark of a bird with outstretched wings, but he could see that Carl was decidedly edgy, so he chose to drop the subject.

They began playing soccer, for though Carl had been delayed, he had not forgotten the ball. Within minutes Anne had scored two goals and was beating Peter and Carl two-to-zero. She passed it to Charlie, who kicked it straight into the forest.

Peter yelled, "I'll get it," before running in after it.

He mainly stuck to the trail that had been carved by his grandfather through the wood, but soon he had to walk through bushes and thorns.

Through the foliage he caught a glimpse of the ball, but it seemed to be farther than he had anticipated. He gritted his teeth as a thorn stuck into his leg. Ducking under an overhanging branch, he stepped into the clearing.

He gaped at all the bushes and trees which stood about. He could have sworn the ball lay in the next clearing. And yet, the ball was nowhere to be seen, and trees were everywhere to be seen. Turning around he saw, not twenty yards away, the same clearing which he had thought was just in front of him. Puzzled, he pressed forward through the underbrush.

When he reached the clearing (this time making *sure* he had reached it), he saw a young boy about his age playing with the ball. He was wearing a black cloak with a stiff collar and a beautiful golden watch that had a picture of a large bird with outstretched wings on it. The boy had brown eyes, black hair, and a rather pale complexion which brought him out against the colorful background of fallen leaves.

He was leaning against a stump, which for the first time Peter saw was not ordinary in the least, but had an engraving on it of a bird—a raven most likely, almost exactly like the one on the watch.

"Hello," said the boy. "Is this your ball?" He held it up questioningly.

"Yes," said Peter hesitantly. He had never seen this boy before. "My name's Peter. What's your name?"

"Samuel Raven," answered the stranger.

Soon Peter yelled, "Come over here, guys!" and Charlie, Carl, and Anne came running. In a minute they had all met Samuel Raven, and Anne was impatient to get back to the game. "Samuel can play too, if he wants," she said.

But the boy insisted that they stay in the clearing. They sat down and began to talk. Samuel told them about himself. He said he lived in a nearby village called Coraxville, though Peter had never heard of such a town. He said he had been exploring the woods behind his house and got lost, ending up in the clearing.

Overhead, owls hooted. A sharp gust of wind blew leaves across the forest floor, rustling like the sound of a hundred tiny creatures scurrying through the underbrush. Peter was getting a little nervous. He realized that they must have been in the clearing longer than it felt, for the sun was already setting, and it had only been the morning when the ball had rolled into the forest.

"We should probably get going back to our houses...it's getting late," said Anne.

"Wait," said Samuel, extending his hand. "Take this."

It was the golden watch, hanging on a chain which shone radiantly in the light of the setting sun.

Peter took it tentatively into his hand. "Why, exactly? We just met you."

Samuel smiled slyly, then shrugged. "I guess I'm feeling generous today," he smirked.

The sun sank below the horizon and Peter stood up, ready to leave. Then, remembering that his mom had taught him to always thank people who gave him things, he turned, but Samuel was already gone.

On the way homeward Peter consulted his friends about the departure of Samuel. None of them had seen him leave. Sticks and leaves crackled under the children's feet as they hastened forward to Lantern Hill.

* * * **

In the morning Peter awoke, eager for the start of a new day, and ready to examine the watch that had been given to him at Raven Stump, as the kids now called the clearing in which they had met Samuel Raven.

He turned to his night stand where he had set the watch the evening before. He blinked. It was not there. Instead, a silver necklace dangled from his lampstand.

He swung his feet out of bed and hastily ran outside. The morning chill sent a shiver down his spine, but he ignored it and sprinted down the street to Carl's house, where he stopped and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He knocked again, this time louder. The door swung open and Carl's mother filled the entrance. She looked worried.

"Hello, Peter," she said in a nervous tone. "Have you seen Carl?" Peter looked up with a worried expression. "No. Is he missing?" Carl's mother looked surprised. "You mean you didn't know?" she asked. "He went to play soccer with you, Anne, and Charlie and he never came back."

* * * **

Peter ran frantically through the forest, searching for Carl. "Carl! Where are you? You can come out now!" He ducked under a branch and kept running, plowing straight into Anne.

"Have you found him yet?" asked Anne, dusting herself off.

"No," said Peter anxiously. He turned around, his eyes narrowing. "But I think I know where he is, Raven Stump."

"But why would he stay there all night, Peter? It's the middle of fall!"

Peter was wondering this too, but he also wondered about the watch. Who had taken it? And did that have anything to do with Carl missing?

He was just going where he remembered Raven Stump to be, when all of a sudden something black and dirty burst out of the trees. Anne screamed and ran towards home, and Peter was about to do the same when a voice called, "Wait, guys!"

It was Carl, and mud covered him from head to foot.

"What were you doing?!" screamed Anne, when she realized it was Carl. "You were gone all night!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, cocking his head. "I was only gone for five minutes."

"Carl, seriously, this isn't a joke. You had your mom worried sick, not to mention the rest of us."

Carl moved his head back and forth from one to another of them. His questioning glance told Peter that he really believed he had only been gone a short amount of time.

"It doesn't matter," said Peter. "You probably fell asleep and thought it was a short nap, when really you slept all night. Come on, we should probably bring you home to your mother."

"And a bath," muttered Anne, eyeing the dirt coating that had been awarded Carl for his night in the damp, dark, forest hotel.

Reaching the field, they hollered to Carl's mother that Carl had been found. She came running and, disregarding the gunk that pooled in myriads from the body of Carl,

she hugged him tightly enough to smother him.

Suddenly, Peter saw something gold glitter in a treetop near Carl's house. He rushed over, and, climbing the tree, he found the watch dangling from a branch. Carved into the bark next to it were the words *Samuel Raven*. Peter slowly removed the golden timepiece from the tree limb and slipped it into his pocket. Immediately the tree branch below him gave way and he fell feet first into a thorn bush. Crying out in pain, he rolled out of the hedge as Anne and Carl came running. Close behind were Carl's mother and Garm, who whined mournfully when he saw Peter's predicament.

* * * **

When Peter had been properly bandaged and had taken a bath, for though he was not in the same case as Carl, he certainly needed some scrubbing, he retired to his room where he set the watch under his pillow. He had no idea how it had gotten out of the house in the first place, and what Samuel's name was doing on the tree next to where it had been hung.

Laying his head down on his pillow, he heard a soft creaking from the direction of the stairs. He heard it ascend the stairs one step at a time, before pausing and descending again. The creaking stopped at his door.

Peter held his breath as the door knob turned. But the door did not open. Slowly, the footsteps retreated down the hall and suddenly the door slammed. Peter broke into a cold sweat. Surely all of his family was in bed by now. No one should be out at this time of night.

For hours he tossed and turned, trying to get to sleep. He turned over and looked at the watch. It was one o'clock in the morning. Giving up on trying to sleep he got out of bed and went to his window. Drawing back the curtains he looked out at the night sky. The harvest moon was full and bright, seeming larger, somehow, than usual.

Underneath the scarlet moon, a shadow crossed the lawn. A chill crawled down his spine when he saw the shadow walk up the path to his house. The moonlight shone gold off of the watch, and the engraving of the raven seemed to look on hungrily at everything around it. *I need to get rid of that thing*, thought Peter desperately. His dad usually locked the door, but somehow he doubted it would help this time. Grabbing the watch, he ran into his mother and father's room before hurling it out the window. He watched as the shadow bent to pick it up, and then hissed in the direction of the house. Then, pocketing the watch, it vanished into the night. And somehow, Peter knew that the shadow was none other than Samuel Raven.

* * * **

In the morning, he slept soundly till midday—his parents, recognizing supreme tiredness, did not wake him up till noon. When they did, however, they were in the middle of an argument. Peter would have thought nothing of it (it was about history for Peter, the most boring thing in the world) but his father had said something that caught his attention.

"Well, they killed the Raven children, didn't they?" he said.

"What are you talking about?" asked Peter.

"Well, your mother and I are talking about the Coraxville Massacre in 1799. Several kids—John, Cole, Fanny, and Samuel Raven, if I remember right—were killed by a bunch of thieves from our town, Lantern Hill, who were trying to escape from the sheriff, but the government classified it as a massacre. That was a hundred years ago. But there are rumors of the emblem of the House of Raven. Stories were told, when I was a boy, of a child found dead, with a golden raven watch on his lifeless corpse."

The End.

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8

THE BOYS OF THE FOREST

Henry Alderson, 11

"Rest camping trip ever!" John says. Jackson and Blake, his best friends, quickly agree.

"Even though we didn't catch our own dinner," laughs Jackson. The boys look at the fishing poles lined up on the log and the scattered hot dog bun and wiener packages near the fire. This was the first camp-out; the boys were all alone. Their parents had finally agreed since they were now thirteen years old. They were all just *barely* thirteen, as Jackson had just celebrated his birthday. The trio had spent the day hiking, fishing, and unfortunately roasting hot dogs, since the fishing had not gone as planned. After stuffing themselves on hot dogs, the boys now lay around the fire telling ghost stories.

Jackson yawned, "I'm tired, let's get some sleep."

John made sure the fire was ready for the night, and they scuffled, as boys do, as they climbed into the tent.

The boys were crawling into the tent when Blake says, "I have to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back, guys."

John and Jackson settle into their sleeping bags and discuss their plans for the next day. Soon, they hear a noise outside. It sounded like someone or something scratching on the top of their tent. John and Jackson look at each other and mouth, *"Blake."* They hear the sound again and Jackson whispers to John, "Let's sneak out and catch him."

John gives a thumbs up, and they head for the opening. "You can't scare us, Blake!" they yell, as they jump from the tent. The sight they see is not what they were expecting.

Hanging above the tent, they see a body and begin screaming, "Oh no! It's Blake! Oh no, oh no, oh no!"

The boys cling to one another in tears. John bravely takes another look at the body. "Wait," he says, "that's not Blake. It's a dummy wearing his clothes!"

Jackson turns and studies the dummy. "I bet he's hiding somewhere watching us oh, he thinks he's so funny!" says Jackson. "Probably, but he must be cold hiding without his clothes. Let's find him!" replies John.

Jackson and John run through the woods yelling, "Blake, come out! We know it was you!"

After many minutes of searching, the boys start to get worried.

"You don't think he got lost, do you?" Jackson asks John. Then, they hear a crunch and look down. John had stepped on a pair of glasses. His skin starts to goosebump and sweat pops out on his forehead.

"These are Blake's," Jackson says, as he's shaking with fear, "Something bad has happened. He can't see without these."

A voice whispers from the darkness, "Who's next?" followed by an evil laugh.

"Run!" yells John. As the boys run, the tree branches sting them and leave drops of blood on their faces and arms; although they hardly notice, as they are consumed by fear. The laugh echoes behind them, and they hear someone or something crashing through the trees following them.

"Ouch!" cries John, as he trips over a rock and falls face first onto the ground.

"Get up!" says Jackson.

"I can't. I think I broke my ankle," replied John.

Jackson reaches out to help pull his friend to his feet. "John, you have to get up. Something is chasing us!"

John begins to cry again and rubs his ankle. "What do you think happened to Blake?"

Jackson takes a deep breath and answers, "I don't know."

John takes a long swallow, "Do you think we'll see him ever again?"

Jackson slowly shakes his head, "No, no, I don't. Now, you have to get up." Jackson reaches for his friend again when he realizes he's now staring into the red demon eyes of a man—an animal—or a man dressed as an animal?

"Who's next," whispers the creature.

"Run! Jackson, run!" yells John, sobbing uncontrollably. Jackson, not sure what to do, reaches for his friend, but the creature quickly jerks John away and pulls him, kicking and screaming, into the darkness.

Jackson runs deeper into the forest, stumbling over limbs and rocks. His thoughts

are whirling around in his mind: 'What was that? Should I have stayed with John? What happened to Blake? Where do I go?'

Frantically, Jackson searches for a place to hide. Up ahead he sees a thicket of bushes. He dives in, ignoring the branches tearing at his clothes, and his heart feels like it's about to jump out of his chest.

'There's no way I'm going to make it. I wish I could say a few good-byes,' Jackson thinks. Tears spill down his cheeks as he thinks of his family, and he clutches his favorite ball cap in his hands. "Dad, I'm really going to miss hanging out with you, and Mom, I'm going to miss your hugs. You gave the best hugs."

Taking deep breaths, he tries to slowly calm down and make a plan. Soon, he hears a twig snap behind him. Jackson gasps and holds his breath. He feels the hair stand up on the back of his neck. Sweat pops out all over his body.

A voice says, "You're next. It's time to join your friends." Sharp claws dig into Jackson's legs as he gets pulled from underneath the bushes.

"Stop! Stop! Please stop!" yells Jackson to his predator. The creature laughs, and Jackson's short life flashes in front of his eyes—and then...darkness.

* * * **

People searched for the boys for many months but only found their campsite, Blake's clothes, John's shoe, and Jackson's hat. Searchers reported they felt as if they were being watched, and could often hear a whisper in the distance.

No one has ever dared visit this forest after dark, since the boys went missing.

THE END.

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THE LEGEND OF KRAMPUS

Konstantin Brandes, 8

t was a dark and stormy night: December 5th. The house was completely quiet except for sounds coming from the kitchen and living room. The sound coming from the living room was a boy and his dad. The noise from the kitchen was his mom making dinner for the boy, the dad, and herself.

The boy had not been very good this year but they were still letting him watch TV. Sometimes he would steal the town baker's flour; sometimes he would tell the baker that his bread and sweets were gross while sneaking extras into his bag. When he was feeling especially rotten he would switch the baker's sugar with salt. He just liked torturing bakers—that was his specialty.

At the end of the dinner of spaghetti and meatballs, the boy was sent to his room. Earlier that day he had run into a fancy restaurant and had switched all the salt shakers with sugar. When it was time for bed, his dad came into his room to tell him to be careful with his choices. If he didn't stop acting up, there would be a terrifying creature that came in the middle of the night to collect the kids who were bad.

The boy began to fall asleep, but then he heard a crunching sound outside his bedroom window.

[crunch] [crunch]

[crunch]

"Dad?" the boy said. But there was no answer because the dad had left. The boy only became more scared when he heard a

[knock]

[knock]

[knock]

The boy knew it couldn't be his mom or his friends, as his mom was asleep and his friends were not allowed to go out after dark. The next thing he knew, he heard the

front door open and he then heard a

[clack]

[click]

[clack]

[click]

The front door had been left open. He hopped out of his bed and looked out the window, but all he saw were hoofprints in the snow. He tried to turn on his bedside lamp, but it wouldn't work because there was a power outage. Then his mom came in with a candle. She asked him if he was okay. He asked his mom to turn around so she could see what was behind her.

Behind his mom stood a dark and hooded creature with hooves for feet and horns on its head. The creature had a horrifying smile. His mom tried to push the horned creature aside so she could go save her son, but the creature threw her onto the bed. Then the creature began to tie up the mom.

Behind the creature were two hooded children with no eyes.

Actually, their eyes were black—black like the distant void of space.

The boy decided to run. He struggled to get out of the room, but the two black-eyed children grabbed him before he could get out the door. The black-eyed children were bigger than the boy and they pushed him all the way back to the horned creature.

The horned creature began to tie him up. It told him, "You might want to be better next year."

It was then that the boy realized exactly who this was. It was the creature that the dad had warned him about.

The boy yelled, "Dad!!" The dad rushed in as fast as he could and saw the horned creature and the two hooded children. When he saw the hooded children he knew he had to get a weapon, so he ran down to the basement and got a sledgehammer.

He came out of the basement and he rushed up to the bedroom to go save his son. He hit the two black-eyed children with the sledgehammer and then ran up to the hooded creature and hit him with the sledgehammer in the middle of the back.

When the creature was hit in the middle of the back, he was just about finished tying up the boy to carry him back to his home. The hit from the sledgehammer did not stop the creature; it only made him angrier. The dad untied the mom and then they ran; the boy followed and he punched the black-eyed kids beside him—right after his dad hit the two black-eyed kids with the sledgehammer. They ran through the hallway to the front door and got out of the house.

After getting out of the house, the dad said to his family, "We've got to go somewhere else." So they ran to the grandmother's house.

They got to her house and slammed the door behind them. Then they heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Expecting to see the grandmother, they were surprised when they saw the horned creature instead. They discovered the grandmother had been tied up. Then they heard

[knock]

[knock]

[knock]

on the door. The son saw the black-eyed children in the frame of the doorway. The dad and the mom tried to battle the horned creature, but they were pushed aside by the horned creature—who went straight for the boy. The horned creature said, "I don't give second chances very often, but I just ate in the last village," as he patted his full belly. "Do you promise that you will be good next year?"

"Yes," the boy answered immediately.

"And if you're not, then I'll make sure to stop here first," he snarled, showing the boy his sharp fangs and creepy grin.

* * * **

The next day...

The boy told all of his friends in school why they had definitely better be good. The other kids laughed, because they were pretty sure he was joking. The next day, a different kid at school came running in and said that he had seen a very creepy guy.

Then the boy said, "Maybe you should believe me."

The End

THE LITTLE BLACK CAT Savannah Mathes, 9

O nce upon a time, there was an old haunted house that sat at the end of a stone path. It was surrounded by a wood fence, and it had pumpkins growing from vines on the ground. There were two big trees in the front yard full of spiders crawling around the branches. Giant spiders were spinning webs in the big, black trees. Outside the house, crows were flying around in the whooshing air and leaves were crinkling on the ground.

There was one little black cat chasing birds up the trees. He pushed open the front door of the haunted house and quietly stepped inside. The little black cat saw the shadow of a jack-o-lantern! He turned and saw a glowing pumpkin face. He ran away super fast and ran into an enormous skeleton. He could hear the bones rattling as it crashed to the ground. He turned down a hallway that had candles glowing bright on the walls. He could hear witches laughing outside the haunted house. He saw a wooden door that was glowing like a bright campfire underneath. The doorknob turned and the door opened. A group of bats came flying out of the door! He ran up the crooked stairs and the bats chased him. He could feel their wings flapping into his whole body and hear their squeaking noise. Suddenly out flies a witch! She grabbed the little black cat and flew out the window on her broom. They flew over a big graveyard and past a pumpkin patch.

The witch started to fly over the trees in the haunted forest. The trees were black and the forest was full of fog swirling on the ground. The full moon was making the forest glow bright blue. She landed her broom in the middle of the forest where two other witches were making a potion under the full moon. The witch put the little black cat in a brown, old sack on the ground to keep him from running away. The cat could see through a tiny little hole in the old sack. He could see the three witches making a potion over a big, bright fire. They threw berries, dragon claws, spider silk and snake skin into the purple potion. One of the witches had a little black cup full of glow-inthe-dark venom from a scorpion. When she poured it into the potion, there were big bubbles coming up and the color changed to lime green. The little black cat heard one of the witches say it was ready for the finishing touch. All they needed now was one whisker from a black cat. The witches opened the bag and grabbed the cat. Before they could clutch the black cat's whisker, suddenly a gray wolf came jumping out from the big trees! The wolf grabbed the black cat by his neck and ran to safety in a dark cave. The witches could not finish their evil potion without the black cat's whisker.

The little black cat was so thankful and asked the little gray wolf to become friends. The little gray wolf said yes, so they walked back through the haunted forest to go to the pumpkin patch. They walked through the vines to find the most perfect, biggest pumpkins in the patch. They took their pumpkins back to the haunted house and started to carve jack-o-lanterns. When they were done, they put candles inside the pumpkins and put them in the front yard of the haunted house. The two new friends sat next to their jack-o-lanterns and looked up at the twinkling stars and the bright full moon and saw the three witches' angry faces as they flew away.

THE END

*

BECOMING A MONSTER Audrey Hurt, 11

Chris was in his room, thinking about what he should be for Halloween. It was only a week away! He thought and thought and thought. Then it came to him. He should be a werewolf! Classic. Totally scary. So, he went to a costume store.

When he got to the costume store, he found the perfect costume. The fur on it was really cool. It was gray at the base of the hairs and white at the tips. Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw a belt. He turned to look at it. The buckle had a picture of a snarling wolf on it. The leather that the belt was made out of looked interesting, not like cow leather.

He saw a man who worked at the store. "Hey, can you tell me about this belt?" Chris asked him.

The man turned to look at Chris and said, "Oh, that belt? That one's dangerous. Made from werewolf skin. It is said that if it is in the light of a full moon while somebody wears it, then that person will become a werewolf!" Then the man turned back to what he was doing.

Chris thought for a minute. "Probably some stupid myth," he said. Plus, this belt would go great with his costume! So he decided to buy it, along with the wolf costume.

A few days later, there was a night with a full moon. Chris thought, just for the fun of it, that he should sleep outside on his trampoline tonight while wearing his costume and belt.

That night, Chris put his costume and belt on and curled up on his trampoline. As he closed his eyes, he felt a tingling feeling. *Probably just the cool night air*, Chris thought.

In the morning, he opened his eyes and yawned. But instead of stretching like a normal person, he felt the need to do a downward dog pose. So he did. Then he felt an itch behind his ear. He scratched it like anyone would, with his foot. He looked at his arms and saw that they looked a bit hairier than normal. *Well, I am thirteen, so probably just becoming a man or something,* he thought.

Chris went inside for breakfast and had some eggs. When his mom gave him his

food, she stared at him like she could tell something was off. When he was done with breakfast, he went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and take a shower. When he looked in the mirror, he could see that his nose was a darker color. He had a little more hair everywhere, and it was a copper color. His eye color was changing from green to yellow, and...could he feel a small tail?

In the shower, he decided to try to shave all of the hair off. It worked. The hair was gone, for now. He decided to use his mom's makeup, just to cover up his purply-colored nose, and he found some green contact lenses. But...how would he hide the tail?! He decided to just stuff it in his pants and act normal.

Chris went to school and nobody seemed to notice that he was different. But when he got home and had dinner, he could tell that the hair was already grown back, but to the point where it mostly looked normal. Except that his hands had hair on them too. He went to his room and put on some wool gloves.

At the dinner table, his parents were looking at him with eyebrows raised. "My hands were cold," Chris lied.

"Okay..." his dad said suspiciously.

"Did you get a tattoo on your hand or something?" his mom asked.

"No, I swear my hands were just cold," Chris said.

His mom looked at him oddly and replied, "Okay ... "

"Can we please change the subject? Allison, how was school?" Chris asked.

"It was fine," His nine-year-old sister, Allison, said. Then she shoveled a spoonful of spaghetti into her mouth. For some reason, using a fork seemed wrong to Chris. But he knew that if he started gobbling it up like a dog, then his parents would figure out what was happening. So, he just used the fork.

That night, once he had changed into his pajamas, Chris looked at his pet gerbil, Theodor. Theodor looked pretty tasty. Chris knew he should go to bed, but he didn't want to go to sleep. He wanted to go outside and hunt. This was odd, because Chris was not usually the kind of person who liked to stay up late. But that night he went outside. He stayed out all night. Running around, hunting, and howling.

Once the sun started to rise, Chris decided to go inside and get to bed. He was glad that it was a Saturday, so his parents would let him sleep in. He walked in a few circles on his bed, then laid down and went to sleep. Later that morning, his mom woke him up. As soon as he finally lifted his head, his mom looked at him. Her eyes slowly got as wide as dinner plates. She screamed so loud that it hurt his ears and ran out of the doorway.

Chris didn't want to get up until the sun set and it was a little darker, but he was desperate to look in the mirror. He ran into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Chris saw a *wolf* in the mirror! It had reddish-brownish fur, yellow-orange eyes, and fangs sharp as knives. Just then, he realized that his clothes were ripped. He was a werewolf. He looked down at his belt. It was a brighter color than when he saw it at the Halloween store. Shinier.

He had to get that belt off of him. He pulled and tugged. That didn't work. He tried sawing through it with a knife. He tried to just pull it down his legs. Nothing worked. Would he be a werewolf...forever? He just shook his head and went back to bed.

When night fell, he opened his eyes and yawned. But then—suddenly, out of nowhere, he couldn't control himself anymore. Everything was a blur of red after that.

Then everything was black. He opened his eyes. He didn't know what had happened. He looked around and realized he was in a forest. He heard howls around him. Normally this would scare him, but now he wasn't scared at all. In fact, he howled back.

After that night, nobody ever saw Chris again, and it was said that every night with a full moon, there was a werewolf who came and lurked around the city. Sometimes, they would send out scientists during these nights to try and find the werewolf.

Countless people began going missing on the nights of full moons. Slowly, a gigantic pack of werewolves grew and now, on all full moon nights, they prowl the streets, looking for more victims to join their pack.

The End.

∗

BLOODY MIDNIGHTS

Braelynn Huerta, 10

Lie in a hollow ditch, covered in dirt and scratches; I hear the voice of my neardeceased sister whimpering my name. As I sit there, unable to do anything, I picture in my head all of my dead family members. I look up and a tiny drop of warm blood trickles down off of my forehead and silently drips onto my frozen, dirty hands. The clock strikes midnight...

* * * **

My sister, my dad, and I exhaustedly bound out of my dad's old truck. We are all drained from the insanely long drive from Venice, Italy to Bruchsal, Germany. It took us eleven hours to get here. But it was completely worth it to celebrate Halloween with my aunt and favorite grandpa.

I don't completely understand why, but as soon as I got out of the old truck, I felt a presence. I felt a cold breath go down my spine. It gave me an uneasy feeling. With every footstep, the leaves crunch under my timid feet, and the feeling gets more distressing.

As my family and I stroll into the house, that uneasy feeling disappears completely. I don't have to get a big glance, but as soon as I see my wonderful grandpa, I spring into his arms and we embrace in a fantastic hug! His sweet, warm body makes any anxiety slip away.

The house was a quaint cottage-like home with only one small window. On the outside, it is always shady and dark, but on the inside, oh, it was so welcoming and cozy. The cottage consisted of a little bedroom, a small living room, a fireplace, and a tiny kitchen. The home might be small, but it was decorated so nicely that it was dazzling from every corner of the house! After my aunt and grandpa welcomed us, the rest of the day was completely normal. I stayed inside all day and lay on the couch. Partly because I was tired, and partly because I was still a little scared to go back outside.

Every time I looked out of the small window beside me, it made me want to go into

the forest. The forest was physically calling my name, but it was not feasible at that time. So I went to sleep beside my silent sister on the ancient and dusty air mattress in the living room, dreaming about the enchanting woods.

I awoke around 5:00 a.m. to a strange sound in my ears. I didn't see anything, but I could hear the sound. The sound was the chime of a clock. It was unbearable and sharp, nonstop. The sound almost burst my small ear drums because of how insanely loud it was. I wanted it to stop, I *needed* it to stop!

I sat up in bed unable to do anything. Then, the sound stopped. The clock finally stopped! Or so I thought. I jumped out of bed, surveying the area for any clocks, but strangely the only clock I found was a microscopic alarm clock on the side table. It could not possibly make that great of a sound...right? I had no idea what to do, so I uneasily decided to go back to sleep.

* * * **

When I finally woke up later that morning, I knew it wasn't time to go into the woods yet. The voices inside my head were telling me I needed to go alone, and my dad would not have let me go by myself, so I would have to wait until everyone was asleep. As soon as I walked into the kitchen, I was greeted by my aunt. She had always seemed to keep to herself and never bothered to say anything. She was silent, but kind. She slid my breakfast onto the slick table of a reddish-brown color. The plate had an egg and a single piece of toast that filled me up just enough for the day, or at least until supper.

I stepped outside, breaking branch after branch under my feet. The wind was quietly blowing, and it left me with a nice breeze that reminded me of my mom. Oh, do I miss her! It was only the afternoon, but I was curious about what the woods would look like from this perspective. A stray dog wandered up to me, it looked like maybe a German Shepherd, with its brown and black markings and pointy ears, but it looked more like a mutt than a purebred.

Even though the dog was stray, it seemed to have a home in the past because of how laid back it was around me. It rolled playfully on the leaves, which were shades of red and orange. The dog pranced up to my legs and stared at me like it was expecting me to say something. I reached out my hand for the dog and it softly sniffed my hand and quickly scurried away. The dog was scared! I had done nothing, no sudden movements, no loud sounds, so, why?

My neck jerked up high to the sky and my eyesight went blurry as that same chiming of the clock started again, so incredibly loud! I wanted to scream, call for help or something, but, all I could do was sit there helplessly. When it finally ended, I once again looked around for a clock, trying to convince myself I wasn't going crazy...and there it was. Right behind the first row of big oak trees, there stood a grandfather clock!

I couldn't help myself. I sprinted as fast as I possibly could toward the woods. I was so curious that even a crow's high-pitched cawing couldn't distract me. I ran into the woods, almost proud that I wasn't out of my mind, as the crow's caws echoed through the forest. When I entered the forest that uneasy feeling from when I arrived returned, making me worry about what might be lurking in the dark forest, but I still went forth as I got closer to the clock.

I reached the alluring clock and came to a stopping point in my sprinting. I stood there in awe, admiring the object that had just scared me out of my wits. "Maybe it isn't so bad after all," I said under my breath. Oh, was I wrong—so wrong.

I ran my fingers across the beautifully carved clock, standing mightily in front of me. The *tick, tick, tick* of the clock was getting louder and more mesmerizing every second. The clock ticked one final time. I looked side to side, not knowing what to do next, wondering what could happen. I would be fine, right...?

I heard a voice behind me whispering while breathing on my neck, giving me goosebumps all over my body.

"I murdered your mother," it announced. I started to run into the woods, questioning my decisions, wondering why would I go out into the woods unsupervised. That's how everyone dies in horror movies!

What am I going to do? I might as well accept my fate and die alone, but that can't be the way I'm supposed to go. My foot gets stuck in a hole below me. My ankle twists almost completely, leaving a part of my bone sticking out. I fall and get scratches all over my body, but I can't stop running! I pick myself up and feel the unbearable pain in my ankle, like someone has brought a knife to it. That's when I stop. There's a big circle of five big oak trees surrounding me.

I land in a shallow ditch, the center writhing with maggots and other creatures I can not speak of. My head thrashes against the mulch as I scream in agony. I hear the whimpering of my beautiful sister and look up to see her near-deceased body impaled on a limb near the top of one of the big oak trees, now unable to speak. At the next tree, I see my precious aunt hanging mercilessly from the tree next to my sister's now-lifeless body. Then I see my chivalrous dad, and tears start to run down my shocked face. He is propped up against one of the trees and has a knife inserted in his left eye that causes blood, mixed with his tears, to stream down his face. I see my kind-hearted grandfather lying on the ground, calling out my name, but my body stays as still as a statue. I can't move. I can barely even speak! I look a tiny bit closer, trying to find out what happened to him when he shrieks, "It was a *DEMON*!"

That's when my gaze goes back to the tree in the center. A massive painting of my dear mother is hung from the tree, old and torn. The most interesting thing is that every tear on the painting had a torrent of crimson red blood, pouring out of it and pooling near my family's dead bodies. While the physical pain I was experiencing right at that second was horrible, nothing was worse than the emotional pain I had to endure.

The demon begins to mock my deceased sister, whimpering, almost exactly mimicking her tone of voice. I sit there silently, picturing all of my dead family members in my head, wondering why the demon would do such a thing to someone who had done absolutely nothing to it...*why?*

I look up and a tiny drop of warm blood lands on my forehead and trickles off onto my frozen, dirty hands. The clock ticks midnight. It suddenly begins to rain blood. I don't get a chance to do anything or say anything before I hear the horrid words:

"Bloody mornings. I watch you from your tiny old closet, while you awaken to get ready for the day.

"Bloody afternoons. I watch you, your dad, and your sister drive together from the big oak trees.

"Bloody nights. I watch you drift off to sleep from inside the burning fireplace.

"Bloody midnights. I watch you from behind your sister's dead, cold body as you helplessly witness every remaining member of your family die." The demon places his cold fingers around my neck and looks down at me. He smiles and chuckles ruthlessly, as he declares one last thing: "I killed that child and its parents. I killed your mother all those years ago. I've murdered every last family member of yours. Now...it's time for your demise."

I let out my last breath, as the demon sinks its jagged fingernails into my neck and I drift into my final slumber.

The End?

*

THE MYSTERY OF THE GHOST DOG

Maximus Prestridge, 10

Chapter One: Who Doesn't Love a Good Lick?

t was a spooky night: October 16th, and Donny Danny Drumfiddle was sleeping in bed, dreaming happy dreams and snoring contentedly. Suddenly, a sinister snuffling could be heard, and an eerie blue glowing figure could be seen outside the window. A ghostly figure shifted through the wall into Donny's warm, cozy room. It was, of all things, in the shape of a dog! A ghost dog!?

It crept up to Danny's bed and...LICKED HIM IN THE FACE!!! Then it went out the same way it came in; through the wall, as if there were a doggy door there.

Hours passed, and Donny slept on as if nothing had happened. But when he woke up the next morning, he found himself very slobbery and upset. He was not happy with the state of his face. It was all wet and his hair stuck out like a hedgehog throwing a tantrum.

It was time for breakfast and he, as always, stuffed as much food as he could in his mouth without choking while trying to talk with his mouth full. Pancakes were for breakfast, and when his mom handed him a hearty stack of warm pancakes covered with syrup, he ate everything in one gulp.

"Chww nnd swllow!" said dad who was doing the exact same thing.

"Hey Mom?" said Donny. "What do you think it was that made me so soggy?"

"It could be night sweats," Mom said with a shrug, then stuffed all her pancakes into her mouth. The Drumfiddle family always had a problem with stuffing their mouth with food and not savoring their meal. They try to tell each other to savor the food, but those wise words never stay in a Drumfiddle's mind for more than a couple of seconds.

Chapter Two: Dungeons and Drumfiddles

After breakfast, the Drumfiddle family got to work. If by work, you mean RPG. They played for hours every day. Right now, they were trying to find the lost plunger of the

sea to unclog the toilet of doom so that it would not flood the kingdom in water. They were fighting dragons made of delicious looking strawberry cake. Donny had just given one cake dragon the Darth Maul treatment.*

After the long gaming session, they took a nap. That nap, however, lasted until 9:30 PM, so when they awakened from their slumber they decided to stay up late. But something felt off. Their house, which was always warm and snuggly, was colder than usual. It sent a chill down Donny's spine. He felt as if someone was spying on them.

It felt paranormal and creepy. Someone was watching them; a very glowing someone. It was the ghost dog, watching them from through the shiny window. Then Donny Danny Drumfiddle spotted it.

"G-G-GHOST DOG!!!" he shouted. Mom and Dad rushed over, trying to see the ghost dog. They found it. But as soon as they spotted it, it ran to a spot outside where they could not see it.

"Let's call 911," said Mom, and they did, but the emergency people didn't believe them. They said, "Ghost dog? It must be your imagination."

The Drumfiddles looked online for a solution. "Bug spray? Tennis racket? Wooden steaks? No, that was for vampire dogs. None of these make sense," said Donny. "Wait, what about that one? Put bug spray on a tennis racket? No, that makes even less sense than the ones before. Wait a second, suck it up with a vacuum? That's the oldest trick in the book. I don't know how we missed that one."

Chapter Three: Catching the Ghost Dog

The Drumfiddle family pulled out their vacuum and went outside. They were all slightly scared, but very brave, so they went on into the backyard. Donny was very ready to get rid of the ghost dog because of how it had licked him in the face; he had figured out that it was the ghost dog who messed up his hair. They were in the middle of the yard, but they didn't see a thing—well, except for themselves. Then, the Drumfiddles spotted something, a see-through, glowing blue tail inside the house! They rushed back inside, vacuum at the ready. But they did not see anything, until they did!

^{*} Darth Maul was an evil alien whose legs were cut off in a battle.

It was the ghost dog, outside and panting, its drooly tongue hanging out of the side of its mouth. They rushed outside. The dog rushed inside. This went on several times and the Drumfiddles and the dog were all tired, and they all found themselves inside. Then, Dad got a second wind and sucked the ghost dog inside the vacuum with a *vooooosh* of its snout.

Chapter Four: A New Pet

The ghost dog made an incredibly cute puppy-eyes face inside the canister of the vacuum that *no one* could resist crying for. They let it out of the vacuum, and it gave Donny a friendly lick.

"Can we keep it?" asked Donny.

"Yes," said Mom and Dad, "But only if it is less naughty."

And so, they all watched a spooky ghost movie, and the ghost dog became their unusual pet.

THE END.

WOOF! WOOF!

INVISIBLE GIRL

Alleta Pinson, 11

leaf falls from the autumn trees; the wind blows. Such a calming day, wouldn't you agree? Just then, the relaxing atmosphere is interrupted as a young girl sprints past the fallen leaves, the dropped change, and the carelessly littered trash.

"Help!" she screams. Not too far behind her is a man who had tried to grab her and is still chasing her. A rock in the girl's path trips her, causing her to fall and injure her knee.

"Ow! Agh!" She groans in pain, glancing at the scene behind her just to see that the man has stopped. "Hmph, huh?" The girl mumbles, confused, yet grateful. An obnoxious honking causes her head to practically snap forward, the lights from the car illuminate her vision.

"I can't see, I can't—"

Before she can finish her sentence, she gets hit.

* * * **

"Gabi," her mother exclaims, "it's time for school!"

Gabi blinks a few times, sitting up disorientedly in her disorganized bed and looking around for any form of injury.

"Oh...right." She chuckles anxiously, yawning. Gabi grabs her phone and reluctantly gets out of bed and goes into the bathroom. She looks at her messy bed head in the mirror and a slight laugh emerges from her throat.

"As normal looking as ever," she jokes, but a part of her felt that she wasn't normal; she had heard the same phrase plenty of times, except the ones who had said it to her before had tones laced with condescension (but, according to them, playful teasing.) Not once did Gabi find their 'teasing' funny.

Gabi ignores the thoughts in her head and picks up her toothbrush, applying toothpaste before beginning to clean her teeth. "Left, right, left right," she murmurs, "Up—oh my God, is that BLOOD?!" She removes the brush from her mouth, observing it carefully. All of a sudden, Gabi gets a notification on her phone. But the only thing her eyes see is the time. "The bus is almost here!"

She panics, rushing out of the bathroom and into the living room. "Where's my backpack?"

...No reply.

"Mom?" Once again, silence. "Ay dios mío..." She sighs before searching her bedroom.

"Ah! here it is," Gabi says to herself after searching her bottom drawer. "Why would it be in there?" She lets out a laugh.

"Bye, mom!" Gabi calls, while walking out of her bedroom and exiting through the front doors. She begins humming a soft tune while she hastily walks to the bus stop, a song ringing in her mind with a melodic theme. The yellow school bus approaches the sidewalk and Gabi stands there patiently, waiting for it to stop and let her inside; however, it does stop but the doors don't open.

"Erm...?" she speaks up nervously. The doors don't open.

"Hello?" The doors still don't open; in fact, the bus begins to drive off.

"Hey! Hey wait!" Gabi starts to panic, her body filling with adrenaline. The first thing she thinks to do is run after the bus, but clearly that's not the best idea, in no hypothetical situation would it be a good idea to run after a vehicle.

"I'm right here!" she cries out, slowly falling behind. Thud. She hits the ground after a stone on the ground trips her, causing Gabi to scrape and bloody her knee.

"AAH," she shrieks, "Ow, ow, oww..." She moans, holding her knee in pain. "Did this already happen? Or am I having déjà v..."

Her mind suddenly flashes with the nightmare that she had earlier. "*Am I about to be kidnapped*?" Gabi shivers in fear, looking around to make sure there are no kidnappers. "Or is this some sort of weird dream within a dream?"

She sits there for a moment before coming to the conclusion that this is just an odd coincidence. Eventually, Gabi finds herself limping to school because she knows that if she told her mom what happened she would be called a *niña torpe* and would be sent back outside.

After a while, Gabi approaches her school, but she walks past her locker and heads

straight to the nurse. She clears her throat as she enters, not wanting to make a large entrance.

"Excuse me," she pauses, thinking of what to say, "I hurt my knee on the way to school..."

Nurse Tana looks up from her computer before staring right back at it, unphased. Gabi waits before speaking again.

"I—I hurt my knee..?" A moment of silence passes by and Gabi begins to get irritated. "I'm bleeding?!"

She gestures to her leg but Nurse Tana doesn't bat an eye, causing Gabi to get frustrated and let out a groan of annoyance. "Fine, I'll just do it myself!"

She reaches for one of the nurses' drawers and when she opens it, Nurse Tana lets out a shriek of surprise, instantly backing away from the desk. Gabi just rolls her eyes.

"You knew I was here. Don't act surprised!" She takes a Band-Aid before stomping out of the room angrily.

In the restroom, she washes her knee off with water and hand soap, but when someone else walks in, they're surprised to see the water running.

"Oh, hey Emily!" Gabi waves and smiles, however, Emily turns off the water.

"I'm...using that?" Gabi turns it back on and Emily's eyes widen.

"Why do you look so scared? It's just water!" Gabi chuckles light-heartedly, splashing some of the sink water on Emily, who... doesn't take the playful gesture so light-heartedly.

"Mrs. Winston!" Emily squeals while running out.

"What? Scaredy-cat!" Gabi mocks, obvious irritation now crossing her face. She continues wiping down her knee before putting the Band-Aid on it. "That's not doing much..." she thinks to herself.

The bell rings abruptly, causing Gabi to flinch (and whine). When everyone's seated in class, Gabi plays with her pencil, twirling it in her fingers.

"Mr. Harrisburg!" shouts one of her bullies.

"Oh great..." Gabi says, in a hushed tone.

"Yes, Carter?" the teacher asks.

"There's a floating pencil!" He points, most of the class already staring.

"Ha-ha, very funny." Gabi clenched her fist, by now she was convinced that the

school was playing a prank on her. Voices emerge from the class; students point and gasp.

"Settle down, everyone!" Mr. Harrisburg exclaims; even he was shocked. "Just what I needed, even my teacher is in on the prank." Gabi muses.

"I'm RIGHT HERE!" she yells. Everyone proceeds to talk excitedly.

"DON'T ANY OF YOU HAVE SOME SORT OF EMPATHY?!" Once again, no one stops for her ranting. "I'm being driven insane!" She gets out of her chair and marches out of the classroom, her pencil now dropped on the floor. Gabi sits on the floor of the hallway, patiently waiting for someone to come and get her, but no one does.

"Well, since I'm so 'INVISIBLE,' I doubt that anyone will care if I pull the fire alarm!" she wails, getting up and placing her hands on the fire alarm. Not a single person exits their classrooms to stop her.

"I really am invisible..." Gabi whimpers, leaning against the wall miserably and pulling her knees to her chest in defeat.

"No," a voice whispers coldly. Gabi's head jolts up and she looks around. "H- Huh?"

Her eyes land upon a floating figure beside her. "WHOA! A GHOST!" she exclaims, backing away.

"You're a ghost too..?" the ghost boy raises an eyebrow.

"I...I am? That's why everyone's been ignoring me?" Gabi asks, the boy nodding.

"Welcome to my world," he scoffs, "I'm Noah." He brings a hand out for her to shake.

"I-I'm Gabi." Gabi replies, shaking his hand.

"How did you die?" Noah asks.

Gabi's eyes widen. "I don't know...I just had this nightmare that I got hit by a car and ever since, everyone's been ignoring me," she explains, "or...everybody can't see me."

Noah nods. "I know how you died, my dad told me a fact about dreams like that a long time ago, when I was alive," he starts. Gabi looks at him curiously. He continues, "If you see yourself die in a dream, the shock of seeing yourself dead can kill you in your sleep."

Gabi gasps, "Is that true?!"

"Well...you just died for that exact reason, so I'd say that's enough proof." Noah chuckles.

"I guess I did, huh...my poor mother, she wouldn't ever want to find her *hija* dead!" Gabi cries out, suddenly burying her face in her hands and sobbing.

"Hey, hey! Don't cry, maybe I can show you all the fun things to do as a ghost?" Noah suggests nervously.

"Okay..." Gabi wipes her tears, her hand being taken in Noah's as he drags her out of the school.

"Come on, there's lots to do as a ghost!" Noah says enthusiastically.

"Really? You wouldn't really expect there's much stuff to do, being dead..." Gabi asks.

"Believe it or not, there's tons." Noah smirks before soaring off with Gabi.

"AAaH!!" she screams; she had never flown outside of an airplane before.

"Relax, you'll be fine. It's not like you can die a second time," Noah reassures her. "Ooh! Let's go mess with the town librarian, she was always a cranky old lady!" He snickers mischievously, dragging Gabi along as they both hover over the small town.

"Maybe being a ghost isn't as bad as I thought, I already made a friend who appreciates me more than most people at school..." Gabi ponders, staring at Noah. "Maybe this'll be fine." She starts smiling.

"Hey Gabi, look at this cool trick!" Noah tosses her up in the air, expecting her to fly.

"EEK!" she shrieks, falling back down instantly. "Oh no..."

Her next chapter in the afterlife will be perfecting her ghostly skills.

The end.

*

MAMA'S BOY

Penny White, 11

"Mama's boy." That's what the neighboring kids call him. But when your beloved single mother is a serial killer, what are you supposed to think? That's what Taiyo thought upon finding out what his mother did late at night. His mother was such a kind woman, how was it her? His mother had him at seventeen, and they've been struggling since he was practically a newborn. His father ran off after finding out she was pregnant. At fourteen, Taiyo made a vow never to end up like his father, and now at sixteen he's kept that promise, though he's never even dated someone before.

* * * **

"Taiyo? I'm going to work."

His mother's voice would never sound the same. What did she say to all her victims on the verge of death? He couldn't trust her anymore. He felt choked up, disgusted. His mother left the apartment they rented, and he bolted to the bathroom.

"Bleh..."

He slowly stood back up after puking and inhaled slowly. He washed his face and dried himself off. He walked back to his room carefully, feeling weak from throwing up. He grabbed his laptop and went onto his school app.

Taiyo was actually from Japan. Or, that's where his mother was from, at least. His father was Chinese, but he never knew his father; it didn't matter to him. His mother's family had moved to Boston. He'd been bullied harshly because of the living state he and his single mother were in. Once his mother found out, she fully withdrew him from public school; he'd been homeschooled since he was eleven. They used to live in Boston, actually. After his mother was offered the job at a tech company in New York City, they moved; they were suddenly almost a high-class family.

However, he was always ready for his life to flip around again.

He finished the work he was assigned by some AI teacher that decided that's what he needed to do, and signed off.

New York City, being full of mystery and crime, doesn't often have big serial killers.

Sure, there were one or two, but his mother? They called her the 'Unstoppable Force.' Even the FBI couldn't get ahold of her. They had their close moments, but she was never caught.

Her newest murder was one of the neighbor's kids next door. His name was Jake or something. Taiyo didn't know him that well. His mother acted concerned. She wasn't. It was a lie.

He couldn't rat her out, though...

...Could he?

* * * **

Look, Taiyo knew he would screw up eventually.

He accidently told his neighbor.

His heart was racing; he could practically feel it beating out of his chest. What could he do now?

He hesitantly opened the door to the apartment, ready to see his mother charging at him full force with a knife. But instead, he saw her sipping tea.

Maybe he's wrong. Maybe it isn't her. His mother is too clumsy. And much too kind. She could barely hurt a fly.

He just blamed his mother for something she didn't do.

That's not right.

But what could he do?

* * * **

He knew what he could do. He knew exactly what. But was he ruthless enough to? Doesn't matter. He needed to get it done one way or another.

He grabbed a trash bag, gloves, a mask and his heavy jacket. He quietly walked past his mother. Not like she would hear him anyway, she was watching her favorite sitcom. He left the apartment quietly, locking the door behind him.

The apartment complex was easy to navigate, probably because they were directions everywhere.

If Taiyo looked too suspicious, he'd surely get caught.

He couldn't risk it.

It was a one-time job.

Just to clear things up.

He slipped through, and found a window open. His neighbor's window. He slipped into it.

* * * **

He did it.

No one would know.

Cleaning up was a long process, but in the end it was worth it.

Was it?

Sure it was. His kind mother was too dear to lose.

He grabbed a piece of paper, the gloves still on his hands.

He began writing.

Dear Police,

I shall make myself known as Mama's Boy. Using my wrath to protect my mother from the harsh world, I shall not get caught. But if I am, do not blame her. It's my doing to end up as I am. Thank you.

—Mama's Boy

Leaving the note on the trash bag, he cleaned off his gloves and stepped out of the door.

You wouldn't tell on Taiyo...

Would you?

¥

CREATURE

Carter Cox, 11

have always hated grocery stores, and I swore I'd do my shopping digitally and everything would come to my house once I had kids, but now, I honestly wonder if I'll even live long enough for that.

It all started on a Sunday, when my jerk foster dad decided that I would go shopping with them. I had pleaded, but it was no use. Anything I didn't like, they made sure happened. I barely even had time to get my shoes on before they started yelling for me to get a move on. I jumped into the car (it was one of those big expensive flatbed trucks) and started the terrible ten-minute drive to the worst place in the world.

Once we got there, I hopped out and walked to the store with my terrible foster dad, Sam. He started yelling at me to walk faster.

"Come on, Alex!" I was only about a foot behind him.

"You're fourteen, you should be able to walk faster!"

I didn't respond; there really wasn't a point, anyway. He would probably just say something stupid.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom," I say, and sprint away.

I didn't really need to go to the bathroom—anything to get away from Sam. It was a very big bathroom, with unbelievably long walls. *I'll stay here for a while*, I thought. However, after a few minutes my plan was cut short when I heard a rattling in the wall and the lights went out for a few seconds.

I sprinted out of the bathroom as fast as I could and ran back to Sam, who acted like nothing happened while he examined a bag of pork rinds. Of course he was getting pork rinds; he knew I hated them.

He told me, "It's about time you came back," and I followed him through the store.

I examined the store while we were walking. It was huge, much like the bathroom, but way bigger and had things people would shop for. It was almost as if it never ended, with ugly gray-blue walls, and a ceiling with big windows and lights. There were storage rooms, too. They looked huge, although I couldn't see them very well.

"Alex, go get some relish while I look at the meat cooler, and don't take long," Sam

snarled. I walked over to the condiments and looked at the storage room. It was so big, and I could barely see it, so without thinking, I walked in.

As I entered, I looked around for any workers but saw none, so I walked deeper into the storage room. It was what I expected. It had lots of products and space, but there was a door at the back that looked off. I slowly advanced to it and jiggled the handle. Locked. That was too bad, I had really wanted to see it.

Just then I saw something shiny on top of a misplaced table to the right of me. I walked over and picked it up. It was a key, hopefully the one I needed. I walked back to the metal door, then pushed the key in the lock and twisted it. It made a creaking sound as I opened it and I walked in.

The room was small with multiple glass cages, and I walked down it looking at each one. One of them was an oversized snake with abnormally large fangs. I kept walking, as I watched the inhabitants. A huge, furry rabbit. Mutated domestic pets. This place was really creeping me out. I kept walking until the end, where there was a larger cage than the rest.

I looked inside, and all I saw was a dog. A sad, whimpering dog, with huge, depressed eyes. Looking at it, I could have died of sadness, it was terrible. I looked for a way to get it out and found a lever. It read, *DO NOT PULL, MANAGER ONLY*. I assumed that's what would release it, so I pulled as hard as I could.

A metal door started to slide open and the dog slowly made its way out. But instead of running off, like I expected it to, It started to make cracking noises as it blistered into a dark, fanged, angry, hay bale-sized beast with no fur and a skinny body on all fours.

As soon as I saw it I ran. I ran as fast as I could, out the metal door, past a worker who exclaimed, "Hey! You can't be he—" but was cut off by a scream and a slashing noise. I ran right out of the storage room, and past the relish that started this. I saw a man, but before I ran past him, I tripped and blacked out.

"It'll be fine...you'll be ok..." I could only make out a little of what the man was saying, and I passed out again.

* * * **

After a long time of being in and out of consciousness I woke up, and could tell that I

was up for good this time, so I looked around. There was the man I saw before I tripped, sitting near me. I saw that we were both under and on top of the metal shelves that held the store's products, and the boxes surrounded us like a makeshift fort. I looked out of a box window and saw that we were two stories up, and that the lights were off. I looked directly below and saw a body with a hole through the stomach, lying in a pool of blood. I felt sick, and realized it was Sam.

I almost threw up, but then I saw something in the corner of my eye. I looked over and I glimpsed the creature. I almost instantly pulled my head back into the base. Once back inside, I say, "So, how long have I been out?"

"Two days, do you feel ok?" he replies.

"I'm fine, who are you?"

"My name's Brad, I'm twenty-seven."

"I'm Alex, I'm fourteen, and I'm hungry and thirsty," I say back.

"Ok, I'll grab some of the food and water." Brad reaches into one of the big boxes and pulls out a bag of pork rinds and two water bottles.

"Where did you get the food?" I ask.

"I got the pork rinds from the cart that the man had down there, and the water was in one of these boxes."

I shiver from the thought that he got the pork rinds from Sam. *I guess Sam got me* to eat them even when he's dead, I think as I pop a handful of chips into my mouth.

* * * **

Brad and I have been here for two days, and I'm starting to think about how the pork rinds were the only food we had, and how hungry we were getting.

"I'm going to look for food before we're too weak."

"No! I'll go..."

"I'm smaller, and I can run faster," I tell him.

"Fine, we'll both go, then," he says.

So next thing you know, we're both outside the base, where the creature could be literally anywhere.

"Wait. We're idiots!" I exclaim. "We should be looking for the exits, not food!"

With that thought, I sprint down the aisle towards the exit. Once I get there, I see that there no longer are exits.

"Alex, you can't run off like that," Brad tells me as he sprints closer.

"Something's wrong."

"What?"

And then he sees it. Right where the exits used to be, they are cut off by a sticky, slimy substance.

"Maybe we can rip it off," he says as he grabs the stuff with his hand. As soon as he does it, he screams as the part of his hand that touched it disintegrates.

"BRAD! Are you ok?"

"Yeah," he says.

"What?"

"Yeah, my hand should be burning, but it isn't; I don't feel anything."

After lots of theorizing, we finally start moving again when we hear a blood-curdling screech. We grabbed some tuna and started our trek to the base.

I heard it before I saw it, something moving in the boxes beside us. I grabbed a pole from a nearby pile of rubble and held it like a spear, even though I'd never wielded a weapon before, let alone a spear, so who knew if I was holding it right.

"Who's there?" I say into the boxes.

"Mei," a small voice said.

"Ok, I know you're there, but what's your name?"

"I already told you, Mei. It's my name."

"Ok then, Mei, we'll be on our way now," I say.

"No! I want to go with you!"

Once she said that, she stepped out. She was only about five or six.

She walked with us toward the base, and then I suddenly stopped.

"Alex, what's wrong?" Brad asked.

"Shhh," I whispered.

Brad and Mei looked over and saw a huge, eyeless snake with an unnatural yellowred color.

"Don't run! It can't smell or see, but its hearing is fantastic," I said. "I saw its description while I was in the storage room."

We slowly crawled toward the base past the beast, which I remembered from my short visit to the lab, and once out of earshot we stood up.

"Did you hear that?" Mei asks.

I listen, and I hear the dog-creature screech in the distance. *Oh no*, I think. We just got away from the snake. I listen longer. There's a problem. The screeching isn't stopping, and it's getting closer and louder.

"Oh no," I say.

Just then, Creature rounds the corner.

We were running. All I remember is grabbing Mei and taking off. I don't remember anything else, but judging by the absence of Brad, I can take a guess. Somehow, I had made it back to the base with Mei, and that was truly a miracle, but Brad...he was a loss we will remember. He saved me twice, once by pulling me to the base after I tripped, and again when he put his hand in the disintegration slime. Brad was our savior.

* * * **

It had been a few months since Brad's death. I sneak out of the base once a week to gather food and water, and it's been awhile since I've seen Creature. I always feel like she's close, though. After our discovery of the disintegration slime, Creature had regurgitated it over the entire store. It was like her nest, and I'm pretty sure it's impossible for humans to break through, but Creature can walk all over it and destroy it.

We found two other kids, Will and Jasmine. I had just left the base with Jasmine, who helped me gather food while the others stayed up high and scavenged storage boxes. We started to walk into the food section, when Jasmine stops.

"Alex. Look at this," she says in shock. I walk over to her and freeze. There is a giant, dark hole in the tiled ground. She steps back and knocks over a pot, and I jump when it hits the ground. Then I hear a growling as Creature walks into the aisle.

"Run, Jasmine!" I yell.

She sprints away, and Creature traps me.

"Why? Why are you hunting us, Creature? I was the one who freed you!" I yell.

Creature doesn't even flinch. I take a step back, and fall. I fall into the hole, and

land in a fluffy thing that seems like a nest. I feel around and find an object. It was an oval shape, and I realized then, while Creature climbs into the hole, that this was an egg. Creature's egg. And then, as I am being eaten alive, the last thing I think is, *this story... doesn't have a happy ending*.

And reader, Alex could not have been more correct; in fact, this story does not have an ending at all.

*

Ages 12-14

The following stories contain scenes of abuse, alcohol use, cannibalism, death, gore, mental illness, murder, possession, suicide, torture, and violence.

2. 4

VISIONS

Kierian Trimm, 14

Fven if someone had paid me a thousand dollars, I would never do any of this. Sneaking into an abandoned mansion is one thing, but ghost-hunting is another. To be fair, how was I supposed to say *No*? All I was told was that Nathan Greene, the local lockpicker, Agatha Brown, my best friend, and Lonan Catawnee, the so-called 'spirit talker' were going to be there, and there was something in it for me. I was supposed to be at home, handing out king-sized candy bars and watching *Scream* with my boyfriend. I swore I wouldn't go any further than the living room.

But here I was, walking down the hall of a nearly 150-year-old house in the woods, holding a flickering candle that left melted wax on my hands. It was uncomfortably warm, like the kind of wax you'd put a strip of tape on before ripping it off your skin. Luckily, this type of candle wax was only strong enough to make a thin mold against my fingers. It was a mystery how the candle was even able to stand upright at all.

"Come on, Margaret, you're falling behind!" shouted a peppy, airy voice ahead of me. It was Agatha Brown, a tiny, bronze-skinned girl with a mess of wavy black hair tied back in two long red ribbons. She was my best friend who had a never-ending well of energy to keep her moving for at least an entire day. I don't know if I could ever top that. "We can't start without you here!"

"I'm coming!" I yelled back. My voice echoed down the long, carpeted hallway. A few of the portraits rattled in their copper cases.

"You've said that thirty times already." The melodic sound of Aggie's voice sailed down the hall as I heard her turn on her heel and run back to me. As she passed a stained window, her puffy, merengue-yellow dress shimmered in the silver light of the full moon. And for a second, I felt proud to have a friend so pretty.

"You're holding us up," Aggie whined, reaching out for my arm. Although she was pretty, she acted like she was five years old. Maybe it was because she was the youngest of five sisters and one brother.

"No, I'm not. You're walking too fast," I retorted. "I can't keep up."

The truth was, I could keep up, if I truly wanted to. But there was something about

the nearly choking, dust-filled air that was stopping me. Something about this house felt wrong, felt *evil*. It made every hair I had stand on end. But maybe that was a good thing. Maybe you were supposed to be scared. Ghost hunting was supposed to make you feel afraid.

"Come on." Aggie managed to snag my hand and gripped it tightly as she dragged me down the hall. The long, pale rug gave me no traction whatsoever, so I had no choice but to follow my best friend into the dark. Portraits watched us with cracked yellow eyes and bated breath they'd been holding for centuries. The walls seemed to stretch forever and cracked chandeliers threatened to fall on us both, crushing us instantly. My mind focused on this. The more I looked, the more I could feel my mind going hazy, the force of the glass hitting me, cutting and tearing through my skin like a thousand knives on paper, and the lightheaded feeling as blood seeped out of my body. There was nothing I could do to save myself. The only thing I could do was listen to the fading screams of Aggie and try to move my arm.

"Earth to Margaret?" a voice asked beside me. I snapped out of my trance. Nathan Greene in all his tall, lanky glory, stood over me. He was holding a fuzzy black object in his hands, along with the faint glow of a candlestick in the other. Smoke fizzled up from my hand, and I realized I had dropped my candle.

"This was a horrible idea," I heard Lonan say. He was huddled in a corner somewhere, out of my sight.

"I'm...here." I coughed out. Lonan jumped and something got knocked over. A shatter rang in the air.

"Your eyes went all the way into your skull," Nathan said before I even had a chance to ask. "And you were whispering '*No*' over and over." Nathan did his best impression of my terrified voice. It was pretty spot on, but it was several octaves lower than it should have been. "Then you fainted."

"Really?" I reached for a hand and took Aggie's outstretched one. She was paler than she had ever looked in her life, and I was starting to see hints of regret in her chestnutbrown eyes. But she swallowed her fear in mere seconds.

"We have to keep moving," she said confidently. "The EMF just went crazy. Lonan!" Lonan rose to attention, still shivering. He carried a long brown board with swooping black letters and numbers painted meticulously on little dips of wood. The board looked about ready to snap in two with how much he was shaking, but it was old anyway. If it didn't wither from termites, it would shrivel up with age.

"You go in first, spirit talker. You have the Ouija board." Nathan called.

"I wish I never agreed to this," Lonan mumbled. He put his palm against the door and his mahogany hand came away with several layers of dust. Then he tried the big brass handle. The door shuddered but didn't move. Without missing a beat, Nathan put the black box—a large, outdated camcorder, I now noticed—into his armpit and took a hairpin from his pocket. Within minutes, we were in.

The room was large and circular, and it could hold nearly three two-story buildings back to back. A long table cloaked in a moth-bitten tablecloth took up most of the space. Although everything was caked in a layer of dust, it did nothing to dim the rich carmine of the plush oakwood chairs. The ceiling itself almost outclassed the room. It was framed with quartz animals and painted over with beautiful ceramic people, all reaching out for one another. The windows from the side brought in the full, unfiltered light of the moon, making the silverware jump out from the table like ghosts. It shimmered brilliantly.

Without thinking, I reached out for a crystal candelabra at the end of the table. Then everything went blank.

I woke up with a start. The room was lit in a soft orange glow, making everything jump out at me vividly. As my head spun, I pulled myself up with the table and gasped. The candles in their silver, floral sconces flickered and sputtered like they'd never been extinguished. Everything was polished and bright. Nothing was broken. All around me, people who looked like they had stepped right out of a Victorian-era fashion magazine were a flash of colorful fabrics as they weaved and twisted in a kind of pirouette. I felt a poking sensation at my shoulder and I spun on my heel. Before I knew what was happening, I was immediately swept away by gloved hands. A woman in a long, flowy red dress spun me around and around in an elegant dance.

"Where am I?" I asked her. The woman just stared forward with a grin on her face as she twirled me counterclockwise, then she finally answered. "You know where you are. You're home, silly Alice."

"But my name isn't—" I tried to say, but she let go of my hands for them only to be immediately seized by a tall man. He seemed different, not as chipper as the woman was. There was something sinister about the way that he stared at me. Again, I asked the question, a bit more desperately. "Where am I?"

Instead of answering, the man whirled me around and I felt my back hit the table. I turned and the sight I saw would forever haunt me. Men, women, and children face down on their plates, and a bright scarlet plume spreading rapidly across the white tablecloth. I watched in horror as the skin on a woman's cheek started to sag until it completely fell off her face. The rest of the guests started to melt with her. The air, once thick with exotic perfumes from all corners of the world, was suddenly filled with the horrible smell of rotting pork and singed hair. Someone's hair had caught on fire. I felt sick to my stomach and I doubled over in pain. I don't know why, but I looked up.

A golden chandelier strained against the chain that bolted it to the ceiling, and then everything felt like slow motion.

I watched the wiry, crystalline death trap glide down from the ceiling, the crystal shimmering brightly in the glow of the burning candlelight.

No... I thought helplessly.

No...

* * * **

"MARGARET!" the sound of Nathan's voice woke me from my trance. Aggie had my hand in hers and seemed to be doing a prayer. I groaned, turned my head to the side, and spat out bile.

Aggie shuddered, letting go of my hand. "It happened again."

"Aggie. Aggs, I saw something. In this room," I gasped, looking up at her wide brown eyes. "This room."

"What did you see?" Aggie asked in a whisper. Everyone had gone silent, crouched around me so they could hear what I had to say.

"I was d-dan-dancing with a girl and sh-she told me I was home. S-she made me dance with a man, and then he pushed me against the table and I saw it. I saw ddeath," I managed to stutter out. My eyes wandered to the tablecloth. I could see little scarlet plumes on every seating place, and I kept my gaze from ever touching the ground. "Help me up," I said shakily. I grabbed Lonan's sweaty hand.

"You were unresponsive for nearly a minute," he said quickly as he pulled me up.

"It was horrifying," Nathan added.

"What did the spirits say?" I asked, switching the subject. I didn't want to think about it anymore.

"I asked if the spirits had anything to tell us. The only thing they said was 'eyes that see will stay within the McCaddor mansion.'"

"What? What does that even mean?"

Lonan shrugged. "They didn't say anything else."

A sudden buzz from Aggie's pocket drew our attention away. She pulled out the EMF reader.

"Lonan. Grab that Ouija board. We need to head deeper."

A bit reluctant, Lonan grabbed the board from its place on the table and started to follow Aggie. Nathan lingered with me. It was like he was afraid to take his eyes off of me, afraid that I'd suddenly drop to the ground and die right then and there. I couldn't blame him. I was afraid too.

We walked down a dark, twisting hallway. Here, our candles were the only light. Every window was barricaded shut. Rusted candle holders jutted out from every wall, and the deeper we went, the more faded and aged everything seemed to look. Thankfully, it had no chandeliers. It was far too tiny.

We came to a sudden stop, forcing me to hit Lonan's back. I backed up quickly.

"There's a secret passageway somewhere here..." Aggie's voice sounded far-off as I slowly turned my attention to the wall.

A dusty mirror hung by a silver thread, its surface clear. I took a moment to examine myself and paused. I didn't have those eyes. Or those ears. Or that hair. My hair was a bright blonde. *Her* hair was wild and fire-red. The girl in front of me is not me at *all*. I blinked, and then the room was cast in soft orange light again. This time, though, I suddenly felt unmistakable terror. My heart pounded beneath my ribs as I sprinted to a loose panel in the wall and pushed it in. The wall made a clicking noise and started to open. I cast a glance behind me. I could hear the far-away noise of a motherly hum and the soft clink of metal scraping the ground.

She's coming for me.

I leaped into the passageway and flew up the spiraling stairs. The only light I dared to use was the one from the open passageway. The clinking was getting louder, the hum crescendoing, footsteps heavily hitting the ground below me—but I was already in my room, safe and sound. I jumped into my closet and quietly closed the door. The humming abruptly stopped. Then I heard the heavy, unnaturally quick tap of footsteps gliding up the stairs. The sound stopped at my door. Ever so slowly, it swung open with a soft creak. Before I was able to see what I was even running from, I felt myself being shaken awake.

I opened my eyes wide and looked into the terrified green eyes of Nathan yet again. "What did you see this time, Margaret?" he asked quietly. I didn't answer. Instead, I surveyed the hall. A once tidy hallway was now ransacked, the mirror shattered, and a closet with its doors thrown wide open. Old papers scattered the ground and two magenta pillows that had come from absolutely nowhere looked like they had exploded, leaving dust and feathers everywhere.

"What happened here?"

"Aggie went crazy trying to look for the secret door," Nathan snorted.

Agatha huffed, folding her arms. She held a sharp glass shard in her hand. "What else was I supposed to do? The EMF was going berserk. And I read the map Lonan's grandma *lent* us." By lent, she meant stole. "It says the bedroom of Eliza McCaddor was here somewhere."

"I mean, he isn't wrong though. You were downright *ruthless...*" Lonan's voice started to drone on and on, out of my mind.

My eyes searched the wall. The panel I pressed in the memory stuck out like a sore thumb to me now. I slowly got up on my own, moved past Aggie, and pressed the panel in. A loud clicking noise filled the room as the wall to my right slowly opened up to reveal a staircase, just like in my vision.

My three friends' jaws dropped as I silently started the ascent to the bedroom. The climb was even more grueling than it felt in the vision, each step feeling like a weight was tied to my feet. The stone stairs, as strong as it seemed, shivered now and then as if to say, 'be careful. I could fall at any time.' That or a chandelier? I'd pick the chandelier. At least I wouldn't be falling four stories down into the darkness, where

who knows what lives.

The sounds of our shoes quietly hitting the stone steps were the only thing to break the silence besides the creaking of the McCaddors' manor shifting on its foundation. It took everything in me not to jump whenever it did.

Where the stairs ended, an oval hole was cut into the wall. Flowery brass designs framed the opening, and there was no door. As I moved closer, I noticed that despite the absence of a door, it still had hinges. I climbed into the room and felt a chill go up my spine, settling within my bones. The room was large and circular, with washed-out pink walls and a white trim against the ceiling. A bashed-in toy box pushed up against one wall, and dolls strewn about the room. Dresser drawers sat untouched, nearly ten layers of dust clouding the surface. The canopy bed faced the door, where a small, lifeless lump of fluffy pink pillows curled into the covers. On the floor, ten candles sat in a circle. Even if I tried, I couldn't walk past the edge of this circle.

"Margaret," Aggie breathed. "How did you-"

"Because I was her. I could see through Eliza's eyes," I said, my voice barely higher than a whisper.

Agatha Brown's face was suddenly bright and cheery. "Oh, I knew it was you. I knew it."

"What...?" I whispered breathlessly.

"Eliza McCaddor died when she envisioned her family's death on the night of her sixteenth birthday. She claimed to have seen it over and over for weeks until she was found dead in 1891 with an ax through her chest," she whispered. "She had visions, just like you. And people like you are hard to find. Eliza wants you to stay, see things her way—forever."

I could feel something suddenly tugging and pulling at my legs, and a cold and empty feeling started to settle into my body, followed by a searing pain. I tried to scream, but nothing came out.

"Oh, Margaret. I hoped you were her eyes. You would have never agreed to it even if it were me," Agatha said sweetly.

I looked down. I was floating nearly three feet off the ground. Nathan stepped back, a nub of charcoal nestled in his hands. Underneath me was a glowing, spiraling pentagram. "She said we could have anything in the world. Magic. Wealth. Power. Think of the possibilities. But for Eliza to fulfill that promise, we needed you," Lonan said guiltily. He looked down, trying in vain to avoid my gaze.

"What did I do to deserve this?" I cried out. I tried to grab or reach for something anything—but I always stopped just short. Nathan reached out a hand, but Agatha grabbed it and yanked it back. I let out one final scream before it all went blank.

I was in the room again. Illuminated by the light of ten blazing candles, I slowly walked to the bed and overturned the sheet. My lifeless body was tucked in a peaceful sleep, a ghostly pale, slender hand pressing a rose over my chest. My blonde hair fanned out around my head like a golden halo.

But there was something wrong.

The skin on my face had rotted so far I could see my jawbone held together by black sinews of flesh. My body was full of chandelier shards, and with each puncture, fresh blood seeped into the pink bed. A rather large hatchet was lodged into my chest and a steady stream of blood dripped down its bit. Then I knew, right then and there, that I was trapped.

Trapped forever in a house of nightmares, forced to relive the last night of the girl who trapped me here.

∗

DENDROPHOBIA

Selah Harris, 12

arkness. That's all he could see...all he could think about...he could almost taste it as he struggled. The fear in his chest was about to burst, but he was paralyzed with shock. The voice still sung. The sweet sound it made shook him to the core. His mind wanted to be relaxed and calm. His whole body wanted to let the voice guide him. In the darkness he could see the thing, calling him, tempting him to come closer. But in the back of his mind he remembered the first time it called to him, the first time the voice said his name...

* * * **

"Mom, why?" Anthem asked as she handed him his suitcase.

"I already told you," Mandy said. "We're going to a meeting tonight."

"Mom, PLEASE let me come with you!" Lee, his little brother, whined.

"You know the answer to that, honey. No-you'd only be bored out of your mind."

Anthem tried to stuff his tablet into his backpack before she could see, but he didn't do it fast enough. She took it out and held it midair.

"Honey, I told you, Edith doesn't like devices."

"Uhhhh... yeah. Cause she thinks we're still in the time-period she grew up in...you know, five hundred years ago." Anthem laughed at his own joke.

Mandy just looked at him, clearly annoyed.

When she got her job as a lawyer, she had told her family she would be working more than her last job. But she never said anything about having *meetings* all the time. Every time she went to a meeting with their stepdad, who worked with her, the kids would have to stay with "Auntie Edith." The truth was, Edith wasn't even family. She was a friend of their step-grandma (another old and annoying lady).

Along with a little brother, Anthem also had an older sister, Fio. She had moved out right after their mom remarried. Fio was still really close with their biological father.

Anthem's younger brother never liked going to Edith's house. Every time they had

to go, he would make up stories to try to get Mandy to let them stay with their sister Fio instead.

Last time had been his greatest story yet. They kept getting better every time.

"Lee, are you packed?" His mom asked as she looked in the bedroom mirror and tried to pull her hair into a bun. Some stubborn strands refused to stay tucked in, and her dark brown hair framed her face. "Honey, we need to go!"

"Almost!" he yelled from the bathroom.

"Ugh! Lee! Don't take forever! I need my toothbrush!" Anthem heard Lee giggle from the other side of the door.

"No promises!" Lee laughed.

"Ugh!" Anthem banged his head against the bathroom door.

By the time Lee got out of the bathroom, the car was already loaded. Their stepdad, with his jet-black hair in a low ponytail, sat in the front seat. Anthem came out to the car just in time to see Lee about to pull out their stepdad's ponytail. Anthem gave him a stern look and shook his head. It took about thirty minutes to get to Edith's house. The old lady was sitting on her porch waiting for them when they arrived.

"Oh, Mandy!" Edith came and wrapped her in a hug. It almost made Anthem happy he got his cheek pinched instead.

"I'm so glad you guys came!" Edith said.

Anthem tried really hard to smile as they went in the door, but the big rush of granny perfume made him want to rip his nose off.

They went into the kitchen to find a big jar of cookies. Lee rushed toward them and began stuffing his face.

"Oh my, you're getting tall!" Edith said as she sat down with a grunt. "How old are you boys now?"

"Fourteen." Anthem ran his fingers through his blonde hair and stood up straight. His bangs partially hid his green eyes.

"And how about you, young man?" Her eyes went to Lee.

"He's nine," their mother said when Lee didn't answer. "We have to go, or we'll be late for our meeting. Thanks again!" Mandy said as she hugged Lee. Unlike Anthem, Lee got his dark brown hair from his mom. His signature big blue eyes and mischievous smirk practically shouted mayhem. "Bye, Mom..." Lee sounded stressed. "Please don't go! It's scary here and it smells weird."

Mandy put a finger on his lips, then put her hand on his cheek. "Love you, honey."

"See ya, Mom." Anthem thought he was too old for hugs, but Mandy kissed his cheek, then went out the door.

As soon as she left, everything felt weird. Anthem looked at the clock—4:36. It was too early to go to bed. When Edith gave them permission to go outside, Lee ran like his life depended on it.

"Anthem, can you sleep in my room?"

"Why? Are you scared of the dark?" Anthem teased.

Lee glared at his brother. "No, I'm scared of the shadows."

Anthem scoffed. "Your stupid stories don't work on me."

"Anthem, I'm telling the truth! I saw them last time."

Anthem rolled his eyes and ran ahead.

"Please, Anthem, sleep in my room for the first night, and then you can do whatever you want."

Anthem just muttered something about stupid and immature nine-year-olds.

"So, is that a yes?" Lee carried on.

"Fine..." Anthem gave in.

Lee had started listing reasons why Anthem should listen to him when Anthem shushed him. Lee kept talking.

"Shh!" Anthem hissed.

This time Lee listened. That's when they both heard what sounded like a woman singing.

"Do you hear that?" Anthem whispered.

Lee stopped walking, and they heard it again.

"Come on!" Lee said as he ran toward the sound.

"Wait up!" Anthem called after him.

Lee kept running and soon disappeared behind the trees. Anthem ran faster to catch up with him.

When he finally did, he found Lee on his knees, leaning over the edge of a lake.

"I didn't know Auntie Edith had a lake on her property," Lee said, looking at his

reflection.

"I didn't either." Something tugged at the back of Anthem's mind. Something didn't feel right. They had already spent a long time looking for the perfect rock, as Lee would say, for his collection.

"Let's go back," he said, checking his watch. It was 7:45. "Come on, let's go..."

"I don't want to go back," Lee said, touching the water.

"Stop...come on, I'm leaving." Anthem couldn't help but notice that the branches on the trees looked like fingers. The bark on some of the trees looked like faces. A bitter feeling tugged on his heart. *The trees looked evil...*

Lee stared at his reflection. He saw a shadow moving across the surface of the water, like that of a child. As his eyes followed, it moved to the ground and then merged with a tree's shadow. But when he looked closer, it didn't look like the shadow of a tree at all. It looked like the shadow of a young girl with pigtails. She waved at him as if motioning him to follow. Lee blinked, trying to process what he was seeing. He noticed the other trees' shadows also looked like people. There was one of a man with a cowboy hat. And one of a young boy with a ball under his arm. He heard laughter come and go with the wind.

Anthem saw Lee, lost in thought, and nudged his shoulder.

"Fine...let's go," Lee said, picking up some mud, still trying to make sense of what he saw. He tried to throw the mud at Anthem but missed and hit a tree.

Anthem turned around to see that the mud had hit the weirdest tree of all. Its black bark looked like snakeskin. The tree appeared old and ancient, its branches reaching up into the sky as if trying to grab the warmth from the air. For a second, it sounded like the wind said his name.

That's when Lee realized *that* tree didn't have a shadow at all.

"Come on..." Anthem called, running back the way they came, with Lee following. When they got back to the house, Edith was making supper. As they came in the door, a burst of what smelled like garlic bread filled their noses. Dinner went by fast for Anthem. All he could think about was the trees at the lake.

"Edith, why didn't you tell us about the lake?"

Edith turned to them, all the color drained from her face, and looked them in the eyes. "Don't ever go back there again!" She said.

"Why?" Anthem asked before he could think.

"My father always told me never to go there, and all who went there would be cursed!"

Anthem shivered, and Lee dropped his fork.

"You're just lying. What's the real reason you don't want us going there?" Lee asked, scooting his chair back.

Edith banged her hands on the table and stared at him. "The tree took everything from me...everything. It took her...my sweet Vera Joy."

"Who's Vera?" Lee asked.

"She was my twin sister. She disappeared at the age of seven, but no one believed me when I told them what happened. After all, I stood there watching...as..." Edith's voice cracked like she was fighting tears. "Everyone thought she drowned in the lake, but they never found the body. And I know the truth...all trees are evil."

Something thumped against the window, and when they looked, all they saw was the branch of a tree.

"Go to bed," Edith said, looking at the window with horror in her eyes.

"I think she's a witch," Lee said once they were in his room.

"No, she's not, she just has dendrophobia, with a little bit of crazy mixed in. Maybe losing her twin affected her mentally."

"What on earth does 'dendrophobia' mean?!"

"It means 'fear of trees.'"

"That's a thing? Do you think it's an old lady thing?"

Anthem rolled his eyes and smacked his head on his pillow. "I don't think the trees are cursed, but I want you to stay away from the trees...Do you hear me?"

"Fine...but why?"

"Just go to sleep!" Anthem said, turning the lights off.

"Ugh!"

Anthem could hear Lee muttering about annoying brothers the way he did. It made him smile. But the smile faded when he remembered the wind saying his name. He listened for a second. As if he would hear it again if he tried to listen. But he could only hear the breathing of Lee, who was now asleep. Slowly, he closed his own eyes...

* * * **

"Lee...Lee..."

Lee awoke to find it was still dark outside. His throat felt as dry as a desert. He walked into the kitchen to see the tree branch outside the window...gone. He rushed over to the window to look, but all he saw was a bush covered in the light of the moon. He quickly went back to the room to find his brother still sleeping, but when he got in bed, something didn't feel right.

Every sound was as loud as a tornado and echoed off the walls. Every movement from the tree outside made his heart race. He could hear it beating so loudly he was afraid it would wake up his brother. The shadows in the room appeared to be moving by themselves. For a second he thought he saw the girl with pigtails dancing with the shadows across his walls. Was there a chill in the room? The darkness came closer every time he opened his eyes. Sleep was trying to stay away.

That's when he heard it...the sweet, sweet sound. At first, he thought his mind was playing tricks on him. The song seemed to come from everywhere at once. Suddenly the room got a lot darker and he started to hear different voices...saying his name:

"Lee...Lee...."

Then the song would call to him. Begging him to come. Tempting him to listen. And that's what he found himself doing. Following the call.

It sounded like a woman singing a lullaby. But it also sounded like a song of sorrow and loss. Deeper the song went and as he heard it, it shook him to the core, leaving him paralyzed with fear. But he found himself barefoot and walking in the forest. Letting the voice guide him. He could faintly hear the thunder, and he barely felt the rain sprinkling on him. Some of the trees he passed seemed to be singing too, for when he passed them, their part of the song passed too. He almost couldn't think. It was like he was still dreaming, and this dream was *magical*.

"Lee...Lee...Lee...my dear..." the voice whispered.

He kept following until he was at the lake. In the back of his mind, he could hear

Edith warning him, telling him to stay away.

He could also hear his brother saying, "I don't believe the trees are cursed, but I don't want you going back there...do you hear me?"

But the other voice only grew stronger. Calling him, telling him he was close.

Then he saw the tree and knew the voice was coming from it. Something told him to run away...but no matter how hard he tried to get away, his body wouldn't listen. The last thing he heard was his brother telling him to stay away. The last thing he felt was the branches of the tree covering him, squeezing him and pulling him into its trunk.

"Anthem!" was the last thing he cried out.

ALTER EGO

Yeriel Ko, 13

The townspeople all gathered around the little blue house that an old lady and her grandchildren lived in. A confused and anxious air hung upon the muted whispers passed through the crowd.

It was already Christmas, but Lisa's face was iron-hot as the result of a swarm of complicated emotions in a brief moment. Was it anger? Grief? Fear? Her imaginative young mind could not grasp a hold on a single feeling, but she knew she was afraid to enter the cozy blue house.

Yes, it was Lisa's own house, where she had grown up and was raised all her life by her grandmother, together with her cherished little brother, Bucky. But the sight of the eerie grin at midnight that was not his—and then the grotesque, mutilated body she found the following morning—it was just mind-blowing.

The hum of the whispering throng and confused police gradually faded away as Lisa closed her eyes to reality and pictured the cozy little house of the night before.

* * * **

In her mind, she smiled as she envisioned little Bucky dozing off on her lap and her grandmother telling them stories while rocking slowly on the cushioned armchair. Lisa found herself wrapped in a dozen layers of the softest blankets, warming her feet at just the right distance from the crackling fireplace. A music box tinkled 'Silent Night' sweetly. Her eyes felt heavy as the coziness finally pushed her worries away gently, and her grip on her beloved little brother relaxed.

Then suddenly a sharp cry roused her, and Grandmother was no longer there. Her grandmother—or at least, a creature who looked like her grandmother—gently smiled, mouth parting until it no longer seemed normal. Her eyes rolled back until only the whites showed, but still she was grinning. Somewhere in the back of Lisa's mind, she remembered seeing the same smile in real life the night before...

Everything turned dark in Lisa's mind. Then suddenly she was there again, but

now in the cozy bedroom she and Bucky shared. The music box tinkled softly from somewhere, yet the coziness alarmed her strangely.

Her brother lay next to her, bundled up in woolen sweaters. His hazel curls and rosy cheeks could be seen in the warm light that streaked in through a crack in the door. For a while she uneasily but lovingly watched him sleep. A creak in the door sent a chill down her spine as she looked around. A shadowy figure, just like Bucky but *not* Bucky, crept in silently. Its eyes were alarmingly dull and empty, and everything else was dark. Its smile was just like the other grandmother's—the grin that stretched too wide for comfort. Its dull eyes drilled into Lisa's spinning mind, and it was just like in real life the night before: as if in a trance, she was knocked out into a short, uneasy sleep that barely seemed to last a second in her vision, only interrupted by a single shriek that pierced the night.

The night faded away quickly when a sliver of the sun surfaced above the horizon in her mind. She saw little Bucky sleeping soundly, yet something seemed to be wrong with him. The red blankets, sweaters, and even the floor was damp with something (she did not want to believe that it was blood) and Bucky's face seemed pale and lifeless. Just like in real life.

* * * **

In terror, Lisa tried to stop her imagination from revealing the truth: something she already knew but would not admit. But she could not snap back into reality.

* * * **

The room was no longer cozy. Yes, somewhere the Christmas lights were blurred against the snowy landscape outside the windows, and the fireplace crackled in the distance. Bucky was still sound asleep, but there was no sign of breath on his blank, placid face.

Lisa was comforted, yet terror reigned over her senses as she sat up. Her instincts warned her not to uncover the blankets, for she would reveal the deformed, grotesque lump that had once been her beloved little brother. She could not fully recreate the surge of fear that had overwhelmed her heart that Christmas morning, as she sat next to Bucky for goodness knows how long.

* * * **

The people around the little blue house seemed more worried, yet a wonderfully comforting but uneasy feeling seemed to daze everyone, as if in a trance. Lisa slowly but steadily wove through the hypnotized crowd. The drowsiness did not affect her and her alone.

The house was still cozy. Fireplace, music box, Christmas lights—all of them were intact. The armchair was still rocking, yet her grandmother did not occupy it. Instead, tattered fabric stained with red was scattered across the chair. She gritted her teeth and moved into the bedroom, which was still snug. The police were chatting like everything was normal, but on the bed was little Bucky. Or at least, the remains of Bucky.

Suddenly Lisa remembered the *other* Bucky with the wide grin and dull eyes. She vaguely recollected how it had inched closer to Bucky without taking its eyes off Lisa.

A surge of bile rushed up into her throat as she gasped for air, bending down. The floor was covered in blood, and so were her hands and knees. She took a couple of deep breaths, trying to shut out the world, but it was all in vain.

Lisa forced her eyes open and stumbled up. There was a soft click in the old bedpost, and time slowed down for the police and townspeople, but not for Lisa.

A girl crawled out from under the bed quietly. She was another Lisa, yet with dull eyes and a grotesquely wide smile. The figure said nothing but continued to stand up and stare at Lisa. The terrified girl backed into the corner and tried to hide among the police officers, but they were as hard as diamonds. No superhuman strength could move anything frozen in time.

The creature inched closer to Lisa, its grin becoming wider with every step. For the first time, it spoke, or at least silently embedded a message into Lisa's mind: *Join Bucky and Grandmother up there.* And she knew that her alter ego was coming for her, as the other Bucky came for the real one.

* * * **

The following day there was a joint funeral for two unfortunate children and a grandmother, who were found in their little blue house, shredded into pieces.

MY LIGHTHOUSE OF DOOM

Owen Lush, 14

arkness has descended into the deepest crevices of my soul. All my senses are on high alert, except my vision. I have been existing in near-complete darkness for the last fifteen days, if I've been able to track time correctly, but it feels as if months if not years—have passed since I saw my brother last. I hear the scurrying of rats on the floor, the trickling of water, and the moans and screams of the captives swallowed within. All I taste is the distinct metallic taste of blood that remains ever present in my mouth and is mixed once a day with a piece of stale bread that has no flavor at all. I smell a noxious fume that permeates these underground chambers. It's my fellow captives' waste, and my own. My eyes strain against the wicked gloom to make out the occasional form of a hooded figure that stands between us and freedom. Whenever I see one of these figures, I implore them for mercy, but my pleas are ignored.

In just fifteen days, I'm a shadow of my former self. I have been dehumanized. I am beaten and defeated. Hope of escape has long been suppressed by the hooded figures that confine and torture us. While I am covered in cuts, bruises, and burns, torture also comes in the form of listening to others being tortured. My cell floor is intentionally kept damp and unsanitary to ensure the itching and pain of trench foot will set in before the first day has lapsed. My feet ache in agony as I slowly watch my flesh rot. I will surely lose multiple toes if I get out of this alive. I have tried my best to keep the fire of hope burning by imagining a future with my little brother, but the final ember is fading, and despair is washing over me. The black, cold, darkness envelops me like a tsunami crashing onto a shore.

The shackles that confine me to the sharp stone wall bite my wrists; they are deeply cut, I see my bone, and my flesh is torn like paper. I have been stripped of my clothes, leaving me vulnerable and exposed. My ribs sharply protrude as if I have no skin. My hair is matted with blood. I look more like a demon than a human. The only way I endure this is knowing that my brother is safe.

I am weak and tired. My body needs more and more rest to keep me alive. Though I know I will need my energy because the pattern of torture includes my cell tonight. I allow myself to rest and with a quick flutter of my eyelids one hell goes silent, but I wake to another.

I jolt awake to the realization I am home, in my own bed, back on my family's farm, but I hear the unmistakable, though muffled, scream of my nine-year-old brother, Freddie. Freddie—with gentle baby blue eyes, blonde curly hair, and still-puffy baby cheeks—was born with monoplegia in his left leg. We are close and spent our childhood sharing laughs and adventures on our thousand-acre farm. Even though I'm older, he's always trying to help me, even when I don't need it. He is always there for me, and I love him with all my heart.

I lay frozen, trying to convince myself I didn't actually hear anything. Just as I start to shut my eyes again, I hear another scream. I jump out of bed, burst out the door, and trample down the stairs. I find my mother gazing out an open window, her tears shimmering in the moonlight. Her long white nightgown and her hair flowing in the evening breeze make her look like a spirit.

She turns around and smiles at me. "Stop being so loud," she says in a sweet tone as she tries to fake a smile. "I just had a nightmare. That is it, now go back to bed, darling."

"Well, I thought—" I started.

"Go back to bed, you need your rest."

Comforted, I walk back up the stairs and let out a loud, tired yawn. I lay down in my bed and pull up my covers over my cold body. I hear a clicking sound and then a light flashes through my window. I start to breathe heavily, my mother lied to me. Something is definitely happening and it's happening right now.

I run to my door and twist the handle, but it does not open. I pull harder, but my door is locked. I sprint to my window and look out as a big burly man throws a gunny sack into a horse-drawn carriage. I quietly open the shutter and climb onto the roof and jump to a big strong limb of an old oak tree that stands strong at the front of our house. My hands begin to slide on the branch, which is wet and slick from last night's rain. I am strong and well-built from hours of working on my father's farm, so I am able to pull myself up on the branch. With careful and well-placed steps, I am able to shimmy to the trunk.

I grab a small limb to pull myself closer into the earshot of the malicious persons, but in the middle of the motion, the branch breaks with a thunderous crack that shatters the still night. The bigger of the two men grabs a lantern and swings it around as he searches the tree. I am holding my breath now and sweating profusely even though it is a chilly November night.

The man circles the tree, and the light is about to dance across my face when the other man says in a stern but anxious voice, "Stop wasting time. A raccoon lives in that tree and it breaks branches all the time."

"Fine," says the burly man in a gruff voice as he turns and walks away from the tree.

A wave of trepidation flows over and through me as I realize the anxious voice was that of my father. I strain to listen more closely to figure out why my normally solemn father is fidgeting nervously with the coins in his pocket.

"Now, where is my money?" asks my father.

"In the bag. Five hundred dollars' worth of gold and silver coins."

I gasp—that amount of money is worth five years of work. I begin to run to our stables. No one is going to save my nine-year-old brother unless I do. The sound of my bare feet crushing the dry leaves that litter the ground echoes loudly in the still of the night. Detection is worth the risk.

"What was that?" asks the burly man as he ascends the carriage.

"Just the wind," says my father in a harsh tone.

"I shall be off."

"Okay, but never return."

"I am not afraid of you," he says with a nefarious chuckle, "But you should be of me."

Clip, clop, clip clop. '*No, no, no,*' I shout at myself internally as I hear the horsedrawn carriage pull away. The evil man has my brother, and he is leaving. I am running as hard as I can, but I still have to cross one more pasture before I reach our stable. The weight of the transaction I have just witnessed hits me and I find a new gear. I run harder and faster. My lungs burn and I gasp for oxygen. My feet are cut and bleeding from all the twigs, thorns, and stones my bare feet crossed to reach the stable, but I feel nothing. My head rings and my heart pounds with betrayal and anger. Just as I think my muscles and lungs might fail me, I see Blueberry, my beautiful and muscular black stallion, dark forehead emblazoned with a star and white stockings on each of his legs.

I look into his bold, brown eyes and tell him in a frightened but firm tone: "They are taking Freddie, and we need to save him. Run like the wind."

His eyes shine back with determination, and I know he somewhat understands. I hop on his back and in a matter of seconds we are at a full gallop. His long mane brushes and tickles my face; against my will, I let out a small giggle. We reach a forest, and I am forced to make Blueberry slow to a canter. Through the meandering trees, I can see the abhorrent carriage bobbing along and I immediately feel sick. Blueberry and I slow to a crawl and follow the carriage from a distance for a while until I see my chance to lower myself onto the back of the carriage from a low limb. I pull on the reins and jump off before Blueberry comes to a halt.

"Thank you, Blueberry. I need you to stay here." And with that, I begin to run again. I quietly and quickly climb the tree and at the precise moment drop onto the back of the carriage—which was luckily covered in hay to muffle my landing—but Freddie felt it through the reverberations in the wagon.

"Who's there?" he whispers.

"It's me, William," I whisper back.

"Dad told me I was no good to him on the farm and costing him too much money."

"It's okay, Freddie. I'm here. Try to stay calm, I'm going to get you out of here."

"Thank you," he says in a meek and melancholy tone. I need a plan, but there's no time for that. If I make too much noise, we are going to get caught. I am terrified, but then I look at the gunny sack next to me and know I have to be strong for my brother.

I grab the top of the gunny sack and cut it open. My gaze falls upon his woebegone and pale face. His face is wet with tears and his knuckles are white like the snow. I grab Freddie under his arms and pull him up out of his prison. I give him a big hug and whisper in his ear, "You are safe. I love you."

We decide to try and jump off the back of the wagon at the same time and roll once we hit the ground, but the ground is hard and dry and we hit the ground with a loud thud. As we are trying to get up, we hear a cold and hate-filled voice yell, "Stop!" We freeze in our tracks.

I'm so sorry, Freddie. I hate myself for not being able to save him. I will never forgive myself.

"I...I will s...stay for my bro...brother," I suddenly blurt.

"It makes no difference to me," he says as he starts to reach for me. I pull away long enough to pick up a stick that Freddie can use as a cane. I hand it to him and give Freddie a final, fleeting hug.

"Use this to help you get to the forest. Blueberry is waiting for you. Never forget how much I love you."

The burly man ties my hands behind my back with a coarse rope.

"I am scared!" shouts Freddie.

"It will be—"

A heavy object collides with the back of my head, and I begin to feel dizzy. I close my eyes and begin to lose consciousness, but then I remember Freddie is there. I open my eyes, and I feel a searing pain. I look out and see Freddie hobbling away with tears in his eyes. Then the sensation stops, and the world goes black.

* * * **

I open my heavy eyes and begin to stretch but stop as agonizing pain riddles my nervous system. That dream—no, it is not a dream, it is a memory from fifteen days ago, though it feels like it's been years. It is the reason I am here and a prisoner in this horrible place.

I sit in constant torment. No one is going to come save me. My head hurts and my throat feels rough as my eyes fill with tears. I am alone and afraid in this hellish place. I can deal with the physical pain, but to think—my own parents would trade my brother for money. They have become strangers overnight. I let out a loud sob that is swallowed by the shadows and that will never be remembered or comforted. My anger is suddenly calmed by the thought of my brother safe and happy, somewhere far away from here. A glimmer of joy fills me, but it is only a small sparkle on a large and dark ocean.

Tap, tap, tap comes the rapping of one of the hooded figure's boots and the jingling of the keys hanging from his waist. I flinch just hearing him, and goosebumps run up

my arms. I look up, and out of the gloom appears the hooded man. I loathe these people and this place. The man grabs my arm and hoists me up and uses one of his many keys to unchain my arms and feet. He holds my arms so tightly that I feel the blood flow beginning to slow. I'm ordered to exit my cell.

My whole body feels frail and each step is hard and painful. Large flaming torches flicker and line the dreary passageways of the crypt that lead to countless other cells filled with countless other captives. The darkness seems to swallow up the light, adding to my feeling of despair.

I haven't gotten to set foot out of my dismal cell for fifteen days. I have no idea where we are going, but just being allowed to step out of the prison cell is as if a huge burden has been lifted, and I let out an audible sigh of relief. I walk past other holding cells, some empty and some containing prisoners just like me. I look into a cell on my left and see an elderly man who looks like he was just put in his cell only a couple of days ago.

"Free me, I am old and can't survive here. This is a mistake," he pleads in a voice that is so frail and scared it makes me want to do anything for him, but the guard squeezes me harder and cruelly chuckles. Then a couple cells down to my right, I see a middle-aged woman who is bleeding and crying. She smells like a thousand-year-old corpse infested with maggots. She is so thin, I can see her muscles and bones through her nearly-transparent skin.

I let out a gut-wrenching shriek as I peer into the next chamber. It is a young, sleeping boy whose left leg is twisted and unusually thin. Suddenly, the young boy wakes with a jolt and my gaze meets his eyes, which are a beautiful light blue.

"No. It can't be," I gasp as the big man continues to drag me. "Freddie!"

"William?" I hear his familiar but panicked voice call out.

I pull away from the burly man with all my might. *Pop.* I scream as I feel my thigh muscle tear. As I fall to my knees, I reach for the waistband of the hooded figure and intentionally let out an agonizing howl to mask any sound made by the keys. Filled with fear and hope, I hold my breath to see if my stealth maneuver had been detected.

The man pulls me up, but my injured leg won't hold my weight. The man keeps on walking as if he hasn't noticed my injury or that anything is missing.

Over my shoulder, I shout to my brother, "It will be okay. I love you," and I toss the

keys into his cell.

"WWIILLLLIIAAMM!" Freddie shrieks.

I can't stand on my feet, and I cry out in pain, "Slow down! Stop! Please, stop." The evil man just keeps walking, dragging my body in his wake. I scream in pain as my bony shins scrape against the floor. I look back again and I see a serpentine trail of blood streaming from my shins, and beyond that, my brother peering out between the bars of his cell.

Time seems to stop, and the catacombs seem to be endless. The guard drags me to a huge set of metal doors. He opens them, and the room is flooded with blinding light. Unphased, the man keeps walking, dragging me farther from the lighthouse that is my brother, from the distant shore that is my home—my life with my brother.

As I blink trying to adjust to the light, I look out into the colossal, sphere-shaped room. The ceiling is so high it must be the apogee of the catacomb. The air is stuffy, and I can smell blood in the air. The room is moist and damp, creating an almosttropical feeling. The walls are black, and the ceiling and floor are red. The room is filled with countless black-robed people. The man drags me to the middle of the room, where a large altar-like black rectangle waits. It is two feet high, three feet wide, and nine feet long.

We reach the middle of the room in a flash. In a matter of seconds, the man has me on the altar and straps a thick leather band around my torso, and two more hooded figures grab my legs and chain me in. I pull and wiggle but can't move as my feet are chained so tight and my arms are pinned to my side.

Out of the crowd, a woman in a red robe emerges and removes her hood. She has sharp facial features, heavy makeup, and is bald. She has bright red lips and black smoky eyes with red pupils. Her bald head is covered in what looks like a sticky red goop. She reaches down and grabs a live snake out of a cask. She has bold veins and long nails that are about five inches long and filed to a point. In one simple motion, she eats it.

I begin to feel sick and gag. I am scared out of my mind about what this lady will do to me. She begins to spit and then black slime cascades from her mouth, spilling all over me. She smiles a wicked smile that makes my intestines curl. In unison, all of the robed figures begin to chant in a strange, foreign language. Then I look around at my surroundings, and I see they are riddled with piles of bones. I realize this catacomb will be my sepulcher. Tears begin to flood from my eyes.

Suddenly, I begin to understand the chanting: "For the Scythe, The Reaper, The Bringer of Death. May this body be cursed for all eternity."

With that, the evil lady plunges her long, sharp nails into my flesh.

I gasp, looking for air as it begins to feel harder to breathe. I realize my lung is punctured. I look down at the wound and see how small it is. I should not die from this. I smile, realizing that I might live. I look at the evil lady's face and then gasp for air. Shock and horror dawn on me. I am not suffocating, I am drowning. When she punctured my lung, she also severed my artery. Blood is flowing into my lungs.

I am going to die, and nothing can save me at this point. I close my eyes and think of Freddie, and I realize I will never know if he had reached Blueberry. Did he make it home only to be betrayed by my parents a second time? Did the burly man double back after knocking me unconscious? Has my brother been just down the corridor from me the entire time of my—of our—imprisonment? I will never know. Will the keys be enough to help him escape this nightmare? Given his condition, it seems unlikely.

I open my eyes and look around. I will be forgotten. My life was for nothing; I accomplished nothing; I will die nothing. My existence does not matter to anyone but a nine-year-old who will likely have the same fate as me. I feel my lungs filling with my very life source. The thing that keeps me alive will be the thing that kills me. I gasp and feel no new air come in. I have only a couple of seconds. I gulp like a fish out of water and then I began to feel dizzy. My restless, angry ocean is suddenly calmed by a single ray of light—a scintilla of hope that Freddie will live.

I know I am almost dead as I lapse in and out of consciousness. The lights flicker, and then the world goes black.

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WHEN MOM IS SAD

Ashley Esparza, 14

ONKKK!! That was the sound that kept ringing in Helen's ears. Her mind clouded with the memories: her younger child, Ruby, playing on the road, a semi-truck heading straight on, only for her to suddenly get pushed off by her older sister Liliana, Helen's pride and joy.

Being a single mother was no easy task, having started because of Helen being a foolish teen, having fallen in love with an even more foolish guy. Even if it was all unplanned, Helen loved nothing else more than her daughter—Liliana, that was. Her Lily was always there for her; they were all they ever knew, not that they wanted to know more. If someone were to ask any nearby neighbor who they wanted their child to be like, it'd be Liliana: a sweet, charming thirteen-year-old girl, a straight-A student, a hard worker, and most of all a loving daughter. Ruby, however, was different...not in the sense that she was a bad kid. No, never Ruby. She simply wasn't Liliana. Never was and never would be, in her mother's eyes at least. Both kids were products of the same errors, yet only one was seen as such.

That's why Helen was here now, on her thin, creaky mattress, coping, grieving the loss of her child, rotting away, physically and mentally. All savings and spirits had been drained after Liliana's sudden passing. Helen's eyes were glossy and barely opened as her youngest—no, her now *only* child—came into the room.

"I'm off to school now, Momma..." said Ruby meekly, the pitiful eight-year-old looking at her mother with a hint of fear in her eyes. Ruby's quiet farewell was greeted with a quiet groan, almost as if even opening her mouth to speak caused Helen pain. Ruby's hair was slightly matted and her clothes dirty, showing the neglect she had endured ever since her mother had given up on life.

The door groaned loudly as it opened, and the small child slipped out onto the front porch, getting ready to return to the usual routine before the accident. Helen simply stayed there, almost as if she had been the one that died; her lips chapped and skin pale, results of the great amount of neglect she had put her body through in the last months. The side effects of the accident showed not only on Helen, though; the house was now unkempt, no longer in the usual pristine condition Helen and Liliana kept it in.

The small amount of food the fridge contained was slowly depleting due to Ruby, who seemed to be the only person who survived the day of the accident. A foul stench now surrounded the inside of the home, fruit flies and their maggots scattered on any bits of remaining food. If Helen were still herself, she'd be thankful the light and water hadn't cut off yet; it had been a bit since Helen had gone to work, the autopay function being the one thing that kept the bills paid.

The neighbors had come by a few times to give their condolences or complain about the foul smell that had reached their homes. If anyone saw Helen, they'd say she wasn't alive—a corpse, a mere shadow of the woman she once was—yet she was happy, reliving every happy memory she had with her sweet Lily. This is how she coped, and she was okay with it.

Hours passed, seeming more like minutes to Helen's cloudy mind. She kept seeing her in her mind, her angel, her baby, Liliana. A loud voice_quickly interrupted these thoughts.

"Mom, I'm home!"

The voice sounded much like Liliana's. Helen didn't think it was possible, yet a glimmer of hope came through. She sat up as fast as her now-weakened body would let her, her arms nearly collapsing as her weight came crashing down onto them. However, her hope shattered when Ruby came into the room, the spark of hope in her eyes now having shifted into a dull and bitter look.

Her body quickly slumped back down onto the stiff and mildew-covered mattress. Yet that idea didn't leave her mind, not for one second. Was it possible for that...*child*, to be like her Lily? Helen's mind was in turmoil.

That kid could never be like her Lily; her child was paler, with hair that resembled dark mahogany wood. This tanned, blond, pathetic thing that stood before Helen could never be Lily—well, for now at least.

Soon enough, that thought was all that consumed her mind, first a few times a week, then every day, and finally every waking hour. Maybe she couldn't get her Lily back, but she could certainly make something similar enough; plus, it's not like the other kid does anything...

That's when the beginning of the end started: Ruby, getting back from school, feeling already bad enough, her small round face scrunched up into a scowl. Having gotten reprimanded at school for her poor execution of a project, one of the many things Lily used to help her with.

The small child hopped onto the bed, sitting beside her mother as she often did nowadays to talk about her day, going with no sign of a response from her mother. Yet today was different, far more different.

"I miss Lily," sniffled Ruby, her eyes red from crying as she told her mother about today's events. That's when something snapped, something deep inside Helen *finally* snapped, yet a smile came over her face. A wide, unnerving smile.

"It's okay, dear, I miss her too. How about we go take a bath? Bet that'll calm you down," said Helen gently, gripping the child's arm as she dragged her to the bathroom. It was beyond filthy, with months of trash now accumulated by the trash can, soap suds having dried onto the while bath tiles—it was a repulsive sight, and the smell so pungent it'd cause any normal human to resist the urge to vomit.

The small child was confused, shocked even at her mother's sudden "recovery." She wanted to argue and question her, yet the wanted sense of normality overrode any other feelings that might've been in the back of her mind. That was her greatest mistake, and the last one she would ever make in her mother's eyes.

Minutes later a bloodcurdling scream could be heard escaping from the bathroom, the source being Ruby as she pushed her head out from underneath the water. It was promptly pushed back down by her mother, Helen. Little Ruby clawed at her surroundings, begging for anything she could use to sit up, or at least keep her head out of the water. Her tiny nails chipped off at the force of trying to embed into the grout between the tiles. The clear water turned a murky red, splashing wildly out of the bathtub as the struggle continued.

When the police finally barged into the home, having been called there by worried neighbors, they were met with a bone-chilling sight: Helen in the corner of the living room, Ruby's now-leveled body held limply in her arms, the fingertips on the body now brown and caked with dried-up blood, ice-cold skin dressed in her older sister's clothes, practically drowning in them as Helen ran a comb through the body's matted hair for probably the first time in months—now sharing the warmth Ruby so craved during her lifetime.

It was a draining battle, both physically and emotionally, for everyone involved. The officers tried to yank the child's freezing-cold body from Helen. Finally, she decided to end everything, reuniting with her two daughters...

UNTITLED

Alexie Stepp, 14

he day started off like every other day. Which was, frankly, quite good.

* * * **

Samuel Haysworth woke up to the sound of birds chirping, made coffee and then sat down at the table to read the paper while waiting for the rest of the house to wake. The date on the paper read *January 3rd*, *1992*. The man let out a hum; he and his wife's anniversary was coming up. When he stopped at the store today, he would grab a present.

Speaking of the devil, his lovely Molly walked into the living room, looking a bit bleary. Samuel smiled, passing her the cup of coffee he had made for her.

"Slept in long enough, have you?" the man chuckled, straightening out his paper. "I thought you'd never wake up."

"Oh, don't start with me, Sam." Molly rolled her eyes. She took the mug, sitting next to him. "Not my fault you're the early bird of the house."

Sam couldn't argue with that. He prepared a light breakfast before his daughter, Heather, and his son, Luke, woke. After sending them off on the bus he kissed his wife goodbye and left for work.

Work was as usual. Same random man screaming about coupons, same rather uninformed questions. But that was to be expected. Samuel had a rather pleasant day outside of that, and returned home with a chicken he had picked up for Molly to prepare.

Once the meal was prepared, they sat down and said grace. As Sam ended with the last 'Thank you Father,' his daughter began to happily talk about her day.

"We did an art project today!" Heather chomped the turkey from her fork. "We had to make bookmarks. I drew a rocket on mine."

"I drew a cat on mine." Luke added, sipping from his water glass. Heather was definitely the more energetic one, Sam couldn't help but think. The man listened to his children's stories, a fond expression on his face. Once dinner was over the family had a bit of free time, and then he tucked his children into bed.

"Have a good sleep, gremlin." Sam kissed his daughter's forehead, and the eightyear-old made a playful growling noise.

"And good night to you, bud." He did the same to his son, who curled up under his comforter immediately. Sam left the room, casting the two a fond look before flicking off the light.

He had a bit of alone time with Holly, then went to bed himself. He kissed his wife goodnight before rolling over, a content feeling running through him. The day had been nice.

* * * **

Samuel Haysworth woke up on the floor of his living room.

There was an aching in his temple, accompanied by bruised palms and red fingers. He sat up, blinking at the darkness. After adjusting to being awake, he naturally inferred that it must still be nighttime. But he could hear muffled birds chirping outside. How odd.

As he got used to his surroundings, it finally occurred to him—why was he on the ground of his living room? He distinctly remembered going to sleep in his own bed. He sat there, racking his brain for a logical explanation. Maybe he had gone downstairs to get a glass of water. Yes, that was surely it. And he had fallen—that explained the headache. This answer satisfied him, and he went to open the window for a bit of fresh air to clear his head.

Instead of cold glass, his fingers found rough wood. He blinked in confusion. Maybe he was touching a wall. But his house's walls didn't feel so unfinished, did they?

He retrieved a flashlight from the fireplace mantle and shined the bright light at where the window was supposed to be. He was met with rough wooden planks, firmly nailed across the window pane. Just a sliver of light shone through, revealing what seemed to be daylight outside.

Sam felt his anxiety rise. What, in god's name, was going on?

He made his way back upstairs, his heart rate rising with each step. It must be daytime, and maybe even morning—where was everyone?

He stumbled into the main hallway, breath hitching as he narrowly avoided stepping on a sharp sliver of glass. At further examination, he found a picture—one of his favorites, of a lovely landscape—had been smashed across the hallway table. What had happened? Oh god, what—did someone break in? He felt his breathing speed up as he ran down the hall, desperate to know his children were okay. He swung open their bedroom door, eyes widening at the sight of empty beds. He sprinted to he and Molly's room next—sometimes Luke slept with the two of them. Maybe—maybe Heather had just come with him? His brain was frantically attempting to rack up any sort of logical explanation. He practically ran into his bedroom door before managing to still his body enough to open it. His heart dropped into his stomach at the sight of the empty bed, then somehow it dropped even farther at the sight of blood spattered on the sheets, along with an abandoned glass shard. The picture of him and Molly that typically rested on her bedside table was resting on the floor, its frame shattered across the floor and table.

Sam barely held back a pained choking noise, every single horrible possibility flooding his mind.

Samuel froze at the sound of someone—*something*...moving. He composed himself enough to grab the baseball bat he kept in his closet and, with trembling fingers, opened the bedroom door. His breath hitched at the sight of something slithering just out of sight, apparently going down the stairs. Just the edge of it looked grotesque, misshapen and almost...blurry around the edges. It was horrendous, and Samuel felt a chill run down his spine at the sound of the creature's gurgling noises fading down the stairs.

Had that thing...done something to them?

It wasn't logical. It wasn't something Samuel could have imagined in the darkest parts of his dreams, but it was the only explanation. The only hope Sam had was that his poor children and wife were still alive.

Samuel made his way down the stairs, careful not to alert anything lurking in the shadows. He turned the corner of the hallway and barely stopped himself from letting out a gasp at the sight of the horrific creature digging through his cupboard. It wasn't very large, probably reaching his chest, and resembled a deformed, slimy looking animal. Three horrific, clawed paws greedily dug into Sam's pantry, shoving canned

food items into its gaping maw, lined with ugly crooked teeth. Sam barely hid himself once more as the gaze of the thing's bulging eyes found where he had been standing. Just as Sam was about to take a breath, he saw another creature step into the kitchen, much larger than the one eating from his pantry.

At about Sam's height, the creature's face was covered by long, raggedy hair. It had the limbs of a spider embedded into its human-like torso, one leg wearing his wife's favorite bracelet. It was a lovely bracelet, made of pretty white pearls that stood out against the grotesque black, rotting skin of the thing. He felt his rage spike, his hands gripping the bat so hard he thought he might snap it. His wife's bracelet shouldn't be anywhere NEAR that...*thing*. Was it mocking him? Mocking the people it had captured, or—or killed. Samuel attempted to clear his head. He couldn't think like that.

Sam soon realized that there were three creatures in total, two of them seeming younger than the spider-esque one. That sickened Samuel more. Either it was a mother and its children, or it was another way of mocking Sam.

The smallest one had an encounter with Sam while the man was trying to find the phone. Just as Sam found the cut phone lines, he saw the thing entering the room, where it froze. It had a horrific droopy face, eye sockets stretched down to its cheeks and mouth gummy and without teeth. Long, bony limbs dragged on the ground, flesh looking thin and disgusting.

Before Sam could think, he had bashed the thing's head with the bat. It wailed in agony, collapsing and clutching its grotesque face. Sam felt his blood boil, and he started slamming the bat into the creature's head.

When he finally took a breath and looked down, he held back a gag at the sight. Its skull was cracked open, blood and bits of skull distributed over its frail body. Its hand twitched, making Sam flinch, before it finally went still.

Samuel had made his first kill. Ever. He had never even seriously harmed a person. But...it wasn't a person, right? It was a monster. He wasn't a killer. The man clung to this idea, desperate to not view the blood on his hands as morally wrong.

He needed a drink.

* * * **

Sam spent the next hour hiding out in the house's basement, trying not to drink

himself out of his mind to stay alert. As he got up with a sigh, he noticed a flash of white and stumbled upon a few papers that he recognized from the astronaut stickers as pages from his daughter's diary, which she carried everywhere. It was falling apart and often dropped pages, but she refused to give it up. Sam chuckled softly at the thought, picking up the papers. His slight amusement faded at the slightly misspelled words.

1/5/92. Dear Dairy,

Today hasnt been fun. No one took me to school, and i was supposed to take a test! Wait, that might make the day beter. Anyway, its been kinda scary. Mom got me and Luke out of bed WAY too early, bleh. Now we hav to hide out down here with a bag of food. She won't even let me go get a book! Luke got scared and got out, we dunno where he is. And wheres dad? This whole day is weird.

Samuel took a moment to ponder the words. So, they hadn't been captured? Maybe they had went to hide out of fear. Didn't explain why Sam had been on the floor when he woke up though, or why Molly hadn't woken him up as well.

Those thoughts were drowned out by a familiar scream—the scream of his daughter. He *ran* upstairs, gripping his bat tightly, but found nothing but the disgusting body of the smallest creature. He stepped over it carefully, noticing the main bathroom's door cracked open.

Carefully, ever so carefully, he stepped inside.

His eyes widened at the sight of the creature in his bathtub, the second smallest one. Its three paws were gripping the edge of the tub, trembling slightly as its throat let out a scratchy, somewhat dog-like whine. Sam somehow felt a sliver of pity for the pathetic creature, before it looked up at him, locked eyes with his bloodied bat and lunged, snarling furiously.

The bat was knocked from Sam's hands, and he yelled in pain as he felt the teeth sinking into his shoulder, the creature locking its jaw around his skin. He barely managed to wrestle it off, feeling blood seeping into his shirt as his vision blurred. His hands found its throat, and he held on tightly as it snarled and gasped, clawing at his hands. The bathtub handle had turned in the commotion and the tub was about a fourth full. Samuel found himself dragging the thing to it before shoving its head under the water. He held on, ignoring the thrashing and desperate whines.

Then everything was still.

He slowly backed away, releasing the limp being's throat. His back hit the wall and he slid down it, barely managing to still his trembling legs.

"...deep breaths. One, two, three..."

Sam mumbled to himself. It was a tactic he used on his own kids when trying to get them to calm down.

"One, two, three... One, two, three..."

His heart rate gradually slowed, and he finally felt like he could breathe again. Now, he had wasted enough time. He managed to find spare bandages to use on his arm, and dragged the thing in the bathroom's body out to sit next to the smaller one's deformed figure.

Now what was he to do?

He couldn't bear to look at the corpses. So, he dragged them upstairs, to dump them in the attic. Samuel found the attic door open, the ladder open and waiting for use. He could hear the skittering of spider legs, the sound sending a chill down his spine.

It was time to end this.

He dumped the bodies next to the stairs, ignoring the stench of blood on his body as he climbed the staircase. He started to climb.

The attic lights were off. He groped around for a moment before finding the pull string and yanking it down. In front of him, groping around inside of a wooden chest, was the last one.

It was around Sam's size, with horrific spider-like limbs protruding from its torso and bulging end. Instead of legs and a rear, its body ended like a slug. The grimy black hair hanging from its scalp nearly reached the floor. It seemed to be looking for something. When it turned and saw Sam, it shrunk back. Then it stopped. Maybe out of the corner of one of its ugly eyes it saw the bodies at the bottom of the stairs, or maybe it smelled the blood on Sam, or maybe it just could sense something. But it snapped.

Letting out a horrific screech of pure rage, it charged Sam, clawing at his body and managing to pin the man underneath itself. The man tried to fight back, but one of the entity's claws found his damaged shoulder, making Sam gasp with pain. Blood seeped through the bandages. It gripped his head and started to bash it against the ground. Sam fluttered in and out of consciousness, gasping for air as it finally released him. The man staggered onto his knees, managing to swing a punch and hit the creature's face. Sam felt a crunch under his fingers and heard a wail of pain as it scuttled back, holding its face.

With what little sense he had left, he clawed his way to a corner of the attic, barely managing to hide. As he propped himself up against a wall and attempted to nurse his shoulder, something caught his eye.

An axe.

Usually it was kept in the shed, but he had been reorganizing earlier that month and it had ended up here. He did his best to keep quiet as his hands found the handle. As silently as possible, he crawled from his hiding spot, and saw the creature hunched over, sobbing into its hands. Sam didn't have pity left in him for these things. They were going to pay.

In a blind fit of rage, he swung the axe. The spider-like entity screamed in pain. It was too human-like for Sam's liking. He swung again. It still screamed. He swung again and again, until it was gasping for air, red staining the floorboards beneath it. Its eyes were visible through gaps in its matted hair, and Sam froze. Those were his wife's eyes. The beautiful hazel eyes that he still recalled looking into on their wedding day.

Sam felt himself let out an almost animalistic growl as he swung one last time. The thing's head rolled off onto the floor, and Sam could finally breathe again. But the screaming didn't stop. As he dropped the axe at his feet, his eyes once again noticed his wife's bracelet. It had snapped in the scuffle, and its pretty beads were scattered across the wood.

He focused on the beads for a moment before realizing something. The air seemed...clearer. He hadn't even realized his vision had been off. It was like when your ears pop without knowing they were clogged.

His foot nudged the pale, long leg of the decapitated woman behind him. He blinked at the feel of human skin, and turned.

The limp body of Molly Haysworth lay behind Samuel. Tears were glittering on her blank face and her neck had stopped bleeding. Sam stared down at the body, unable to breathe. Unable to think, unable to move. He managed to take a step forward, enough to look down the stairs. His eyes met the deformed, cracked skull of Luke and the pale, mangled body of Heather.

The screaming was still going. But it wasn't screaming, it was sirens. Sam heard his front door broken open from downstairs as the sound of police rushing into the house, yelling orders filled his ears. He picked back up the axe and sank back, next to the body of his beloved wife. With one last glance at her hazel eyes, he used the blade to slit his throat.



Birds were chirping outside. It was morning once again.

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THE DWELLERS Lillian Doty, 13

Some towns have fun traditions, like Thanksgiving parades; ours is a bit less fun... The night of October 28th, all the children are called in before sunset, all doors are locked, and the curtains are drawn. All children hide under their comforters praying they won't be chosen. Eventually they all fall asleep...then the black-cloaked men come. No one knows who will be chosen. There will be five children, usually sixteen to seventeen years old. We call them 'the sacrifice.'

* * * **

The man in the black cloak creeps up on the sleeping figure of Audrey Mabel. He has done this many times, but still can't get over the guilt. He is sending an innocent child to die with strangers, but despite the guilt he always takes them. This year it is fifteenyear-old Audrey Mabel. She looks so peaceful; she has no idea what she is going to wake up to. The man gives her a sleeping drug using a syringe, then he throws her over his shoulder. He places the letter they always leave for the parents, saying how grateful they are for her sacrifice, on her pillow. Then he steps out the floor to ceiling window he came through, taking Audrey with him.

* * * **

Why me? What did I do? Why did I get chosen? I'm stumbling through the forest trying to find the shelter described on the note left in my pocket. When my sleeping body was dumped on the forest floor, I was left in a gray sweatshirt and sweatpants with only a note describing where I have to go. It said that the shelter was around four miles from where I started. So all I have to do is be as quiet as possible so as to not draw the Beast to me. *Right?*

The Beast' is what the town calls the monster that has been living in the forest for decades. The same forest I am currently hiking in. *Why me? What did I do to deserve*

this?

After what I'm guessing was an hour and a half later, I catch a glimpse of a white wall. I speed up a bit, happy that I finally found the shelter, when I trip over a root and fall face-first on the ground. I groan and slowly push myself up, cursing my clumsiness. I push up to my knees and take a moment to brush the dirt off of my face. When I finally look back up at where the shelter should be, I see nothing but darkness. Did I just imagine it? I've heard of people hallucinating in the desert when they are thirsty. Did I hallucinate because I am so tired? I rub my eyes to see if that will change anything, but no, nothing. Wait, what is that?

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" A high-pitched scream pierces the air. It takes me a moment to figure out who it came from: me.

In front of me is a large creature with bright red eyes, and teeth and claws as long as my arm. And its body—well, imagine a bat that has been run over a hundred times then put back together with some organs poking out. Then imagine the bat is as big as the average one-story house.

I turn and run! The Beast growls, as if it is upset that its prey is putting up a fight. *This is it, I'm going to die!* I spot a large rock sticking out of the ground and I dash behind it. Not like it's going to do anything but it's worth a shot. I sit there panting, praying the Beast won't chase after me. I risk a look behind me and I don't see it. It must have seen one of the others. Right now I have a clear path from here to the shelter door and I don't know how long it will last. I take one more deep breath then I'm running again. I'm so close, just a few more steps.

I push the door open then slam it shut behind me. I lean against the door, trying to catch my breath. *Breathe in and out, in and out.* My heart is beating so fast it feels like it might fall out. *In and out, in and out.* Just as I start to get ahold of my breath and my heartbeat...*BANG BANG BANG BANG!*

"Let me in, someone please let me in!" someone yells from outside. I yank the door open. The guy spills through the door and I quickly slam the door shut again. I look down at the guy who is now sprawled on the floor.

"Hi," I say. He flashes a half-smile at me but I'm too freaked out to return it. I glance down the hall too and I see double doors at the end.

The guys get up from the floor and gesture to the doors. "Well, shall we?" I nod and

we start walking. We push the doors open and we are met with three other people. We are all wearing gray sweatshirts and sweatpants.

Before we can say anything, we hear two high pitched beeps then a cheerful man's voice over what I assume is an intercom. "Congratulations! You five have been chosen to be this year's sacrifice. First of all I would like to let you all know that you are here temporarily. When the sun sets you will be thrown right back out there, so don't get comfortable! Also, I would like to let you all know that your only purpose now is to be a sacrifice. So, I suggest that you forget all the people you loved. Remembering them just makes dying a gruesome death a little harder. Anyway, don't forget to leave the shelter when you hear three beeps. Adiós, amigos!" Two beeps and silence follow his announcement.

"No. No. No. I am not going to die. No. I refuse. I'm too young. They can not do this to us," the only other girl says.

The really buff guy next to her crosses his arms and rolls his eyes. "Will you just shut up? Complaining won't do anyone any good."

The girl turns and glares at him. "Well, if you want to die then go ahead, but I am not going to give the Beast a big warm hug while it bites my head off!"

I can tell that this will go on for a while so I tune them out. I take a look around the room. It's decorated...interestingly. It has white walls with phosphorescent lights, but it also has lamps and rugs scattered around the room. There is also a metal table surrounded with five metal chairs. It's like whoever decorated it was trying to make a surgical room cozy.

"Hey! Helloooo..." I startle out of my thought to find that everyone is staring at me. "Well, what do you think?" the redhead across from asks.

"Think about what?" I ask.

The guy I came in with chuckles a little. "Do you think we should fight or just accept our fate?"

I shrug. "Fight. I guess."

The buff guy crosses to the table and sits down. "Well, if we are going to fight we need a plan."

A while later we have formed a plan that, if nothing else, gives us hope. We also learned each other's names. The redhead is Brandon, the girl is Lucy, the buff dude is Fred, and the guy I walked in with is Lucas. Fred had the idea that we should take apart the chairs so we can use the legs as spears. I am skeptical that they will be sharp enough, but it's all we've got. For a while we went over the plan, but then we fell into silence. I'm guessing everyone is thinking about their life before this; at least, that's what I'm doing. In situations like these, you really realize how foolish you are. *I should have listened to my mother, I should have spent more time with my little sister. I should have never fought with my best friend over that stupid...I should have...I should have...I should have...I*

Beep beep! I'm pulled out of my thoughts by three high-pitched beeps. It's time.

I stand up from where I was sitting with my back to the wall. "Everybody ready?" Lucas smiles weakly, "I don't think anyone can ever be ready."

I shrug. "Fair enough."

We gather all our stuff, then we walk out. As soon as we close the door behind us, we hear it click shut.

"Well, good luck everyone," Lucy says right before we split up.

Our plan is simple. We all split up and whoever finds the Beast first signals us. We then try to surround it. While we are surrounding it we will try to confuse it by calling out to each other. Then once we have it surrounded, we will all charge at the same time, hitting its soft points. We hit it until it dies.

Hopefully.

I never actually thought I would be looking for a monster in a creepy forest. I do not recommend it.

* * * **

It's been about thirty minutes since we all split up and there have been no signs of the Beast. *What if it got to one of them before they could signal the rest of us? What if it is luring us into a trap?* I am about to drown myself in "what ifs" when I hear it. Two short whistles and one long one: the signal.

I start running in the direction I heard the signal come from. I think I am getting close when I hear an earth-shattering scream.

I speed up. I can tell that I am running off of pure adrenaline right now. My heart

is beating a mile a minute.

Please no one be dead. Please, please, please.

The trees start thinning out and I can tell that I am getting close to a clearing. *Please no one be dead.* I burst into a clearing, and then all of a sudden I feel pain. Pain. Pain. Pain. All I know is pain.

My chest is on fire. My limbs feel like they are going to fall off. I can not think, I can not see, I can not move. Everything is pain.

Then it is as if I am outside of my body; I still feel pain but I can see. I can see those that were not there before. Hundreds of spirits. *Where did they come from?*

Then I finally see Brandon. He is in the air with a dark thorn-covered vine piercing his chest. If that is not bad enough, his flesh seems to be melting into the vine. It is like his body is being vacuumed up layer by layer. I follow the vine with my eyes to find that it is protruding out of the Beast's body. It seems as though it is absorbing Brandon into itself. I watch in horror until all that is left of him is his skeleton. I watch as his bones fall to the ground, then I'm drawn back into my body.

Somehow the pain is worse. I can feel every particle of my flesh as it is torn away from my body. Pain. Pain. Pain. Even as my bones fall to the ground, I feel pain. Even as my bones are swallowed by the earth, I feel pain. As I watch Lucy, Fred, and Lucas get devoured by the Beast, I realize I will always feel pain.

I will always feel pain because that's what the Beast wants me to feel. Guilt, anger, and defeat, day after day. The Beast took my body and now it owns my soul. It owns all of us. Every single person who has ever been a sacrifice. I can see all of them now. We all feel the pain. Here we wait for the day that one brave soul comes and ends it all. Although, we all know that day will never come. We are the dwellers.

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THE AWAKENING Olivia Gulisao, 14

nielle was quietly keeping to herself in her tucked-away corner of the Barlowe Manor when she heard a crisp knock on the door to her bedroom and dove to her creaky closet, forgetting to lock the old door behind her.

There was only one person who could appear behind the large door that led to her tiny hovel of a bedroom; only one other sought shelter in the eerie Victorian manor. The combating voices that constantly roamed in her head were causing quite a cacophony as she heard her father's boots stride into the room, fear sparking across every nerve ending in her body.

'Ominous' was simply the kindest word to describe Mr. Barlowe, Anielle's father. Frankly, he was the purest essence of evil in Anielle's world. To many, the tight smile that so commonly pulled at his smooth, pink lips maintained a calming effect. To Anielle, it only meant he was hostile enough to drag her by the brown waves of her hair to the downstairs wine cellar to be ignored for hours, able only to escape into the darkest depths of her mind. It was there where she fantasized about the horrible treacheries that now commonly plagued her conscience.

After just a few moments the door to the closet creaked open, pulling her from her thoughts. Looking up at the tall man, her heart pounded quicker, goosebumps raising the hair off of her arms. Her father looked down at her meek figure with unquestionable disdain. His eyes were glassed over, but there was the slightest glint in his eyes that chilled her to the bone. She knew that look; it was the face of her nightmares. The horrifying man was about to do something grislier than his bleak personality. Worse even, he was drunk and most likely out of his morbid mind.

He jerked at her arms, causing her to stumble upward and into his arms. He wrapped his disgustingly dapper jacket around her roughly, as though he found her too nauseating to touch for more than a moment. He then dragged her down the stairs, taking care to make it as uncomfortable of a ride as possible. Her father took her into the living room, as usual, and dropped her on her back down to the carpet.

Mr. Barlowe pulled out his old rusty lighter, which was not a good sign. He was

definitely livid with someone, though it may not have ever been her doing. He pulled on the lever, lighting a blueish-yellow fire. He drew it close to her skin. This he was delicate with. He held the flickering flame close enough to her skin to hurt, but not enough to burn. Then all at once, he pressed it onto her skin, releasing mortified wails from her tiny little mouth. It seemed to be enough satisfaction for the moment, enough to allow him to lock the door behind him, surely heading to his weapons room.

After all, he'd done this many, many times, all of which resulting in varying degrees of pain. On some occasions, as Anielle recalled, he'd sliced knives down her arms and legs until she'd cried out in such agony her voice was raw. On others, it was pure, unadulterated drowning to the near brink of death. Her least favorite however, was poison; she loathed the way he left her there, thrashing around in a sight so pitiful to see. It might have even driven her mad...it most likely had.

Anielle huddled up in the corner of the room fiddling with her nimble fingers, a nervous habit of hers. She crouched behind the couch, manufacturing a plan that would make her father's blood boil. For once, she would overtake him; he hadn't checked her pockets on the way to the room. She had hidden a small knife on her belt. She hoped it would be enough to disarm him. If not, he'd probably kill her for her rebelliousness.

As she heard the rickety grandfather clock, *tip-tap*, she lost track of time. Mr. Barlowe could have returned in a minute, or maybe a day later. Timing really was irrelevant to him. Anielle wasn't quite sure when he would return this time. Regardless, she listened for the jangle of the doorknob as her signal to pounce. Finally, the lock turned.

She lunged, dilapidated knife in hand, as her hair whipped behind her. The look of shock on Mr. Barlowe's face encouraged Anielle to slice.

And slice she did.

He appeared as wild as a primal ape as muscles throughout his body spasmed and clenched on the carpeted floor in truly devilish ways as she whispered softly into his ear, "How desolate you seem now, Father. How come you don't enjoy the pain you've so commonly inflicted on me?"

She then pulled up her sleeves to reveal a myriad of scars that ran from her shoulders down to the tippy-tops of her fingertips, showing him just exactly what she had done a few minutes prior to him. It was positively revolting, his convulsing body lying there so helplessly; she relished in her carnage.

It was then, standing with a knife, drenched in the repulsively warm blood of her now very-dead father, when Anielle realized she must truly be mad. Her thoughts were racing inside her head.

It should have been cleaner, but she had lost herself as the adrenaline overtook her. She just couldn't help herself as she fell into a state of bliss as she slashed and slit in an exquisite manner. Regardless, she knew better than to make a mess; it only made scrubbing every crevice of the sitting room more arduous than necessary. However, it wasn't particularly disheartening, not after hearing such delicious, bloodcurdling screams that desperately released from her father's strangled throat. She felt so very content with enacting her slow, painful revenge. A slow smile had crept across her face as she heard the frantic pleas. Her surroundings faded away, almost as if it were a fragment of her imagination. For a moment, it was just the two of them floating in oblivion, obscured from reality. Her vision fogged up just as she realized this moment was merely fictional.

* * * **

Moments later, Anielle roused from her dream. Peeling her sweaty head from the cold stone floor of the wine cellar, she blinked the bleariness out of her eyes. Panic filled her skull to the brim; alarm bells rang off in the corners of her brain. *No. No! NO! It couldn't have been a dream, it couldn't have!* Her brain refused to believe that it wasn't real; her only hope was diminished because her own mind couldn't accept the mindnumbing truth that was dangerously close to driving her off the small precipice of sanity that remained intact after such a brutal upbringing. She groggily sat up, tears threatening to spill from her eyes. From the shadows, she saw something moving in such an unnerving way it turned her legs to lead. From those shadows emerged her father, face pale with an extremely victorious smile. She pushed herself backward as much as she could before he yanked her leg so hard, she felt something pop around her knee.

She yelped out in pain as he spoke in a ghastly tone, "My dearest Anielle, you must think me a fool...you dreadful girl. Do you know how frequently you sleep talk?" With that, her faced whitened so much she could nearly be mistaken for a ghostly spirit.

"That's correct, Anielle, you ought to be petrified. I could hear such excitement as you went on and on about my supposed 'murder.' But you see, Anielle, there are two kinds of people in this world. There are people with their wits so cleverly intact, like me, too intelligent to be so easily fooled. Then there are pathetic little children, like you, who tend to dig their own graves."

He spat in her faced before grabbing her chin and whispering with his foul breath, "And you will never be in category one."

It was as if he'd chopped out her vocal cords with the words he'd spoken. She was speechless. She couldn't utter a single clownish word.

She saw him.

Then she didn't.

Her father had turned off the lights, robbing her of vision. It wasn't long before she heard a sharp *zing*. He was sharpening a knife. Not long after, she felt the blade sink into her gut. Less than a second later, a larger knife impaled her thigh. He dragged a jagged blade down the side of her arm. She gasped for air, unable to receive anything other than a few short breaths. Subsequently, he stabbed knives of varying sizes throughout her limbs until blood had soaked and stained her clothes an entirely new color. *Red*.

Pain seized her body, making her vision splotchy. He made quick yet agonizing work of the small nine-year-old girl. As he continued to dismember her body in the early moments of the night, Anielle felt hazy. The scene playing out in front of her began fading until all she could do was lie there and weep silent tears, until the blood covering her hair and face and body had dried.

By the wee hours of the morning, Anielle was dead in the wine cellar of the Barlowe Manor, never having met anyone other than her father, a demon in his own making.

LOVE KNOWS NO BOUNDS

Aoping (Ami) Ren, 14

knew it was love at first sight when we first met.

I was driving one uneventful night when I saw you. Your eyes stared up at me pleadingly from the sewer drain, the cold wind battering your sullen cheeks. I had taken you into my arms and helped you into the back of my truck. There you stayed limp, possibly exhausted from spending a long night out. I wasn't going to leave a poor soul all alone out in this unforgiving weather, however.

I gazed up in the rearview mirror, murmuring, "How are you feeling?" but all you do is stare back at me fearfully. Guess I should've known that you weren't in the right state of mind after all you've been through. Your eyes fluttered, and soon your head was resting against the seat belt.

I glanced at you one more time before turning my eyes to the road. Whatever had happened to such a beautiful lady, I needed to make sure she was as far away from this road as possible.

* * * **

The garage door rumbled as I closed it behind my truck. Still holding you in my arms, I managed to use a shaky hand to unlock my door. "You're going to be alright..." I murmured. After setting you onto the couch, I leaned above you, checking your injuries. "Oh my! Why are you so beat up?"

Staring into your cloudy eyes, I could tell something was wrong. Touching your forehead gingerly, I leaned in for a moment. When your hair fell off your face, it revealed a hidden beauty. I let out a gasp. How someone could be so breathtaking was beyond me. Now, though, it was not the time. I had to focus.

Trying to seem reassuring, I attempted to unknot your unkempt hair. Your uncertain smile was all I could focus on. A pang of pity stung my chest. Who had thrown you away so carelessly, like a broken toy? My thoughts drifted as I propped you up carefully on the couch. You were stiff and couldn't do so much as to lift a limb. However, your eyes sparkled dimly in the light, filled with untold emotions.

"What are you thinking? Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you." I placed my hands on yours and suddenly noticed the huge bruise on your neck. Your head slowly tilts, and I gently grab your chin. "Don't be like that! I'll help you heal that bruise, and you'll feel way better after."

Your eyes sparkle brighter. I chuckle and helped you lay down again. Whoever would do such a thing to someone, who made my blood boil? I needed more answers. For now, though, I would focus on taking care of you. I watched you from the corner of my eye while getting bandages out of the bottom kitchen drawer. "Don't worry, I'll find out who did this to you."

* * * **

I was exhausted when I came back from work. My office job was mundane and boring, and all day I thought about the poor lady I left at my house. I should've never left you. Just as I was staring aimlessly at my computer, waiting for any customers to call, someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around to find my co-worker Jane.

"Hey, are you ok?"

I nod, flashing a quick smile and replying, "Yeah I am, just a bit tired today."

She nods back and reclines in her chair. "You just seem a bit distracted today, that's all."

I stayed quiet for a moment, debating whether to tell her or not. While we sat next to one another and sometimes helped each other, Jane and I weren't that close. Then again, she was the only one I could get in touch with right now on a weekday. I suck in a deep breath. "Yesterday, I found a woman by the road on the way home."

Jane raises her eyebrows but doesn't say anything.

"She was frozen stiff; I still can't get her to move." An awkward silence envelopes us for a bit.

Finally, Jane whispers in disbelief, "Where?"

I clench and let my fists rest on the edge of the table. "...Meadslade Road." Her face becomes unreadable for a moment before her jaw drops on the floor.

"That secluded place? Really? I thought no one would drive around that place, though I suppose that would be a good place to abandon someone." I shudder and say bleakly, "It's horrible, isn't it? I wish there was a way to help her loosen up, I wonder if she's doing alright back at my home."

Jane smiles, reaching over to rub my back. "It's fine, I'm sure she'll get better." She awkwardly pulls away before it gets too personal. Her voice goes soft for a moment, glancing at me but not really looking. "Mary, her name is Mary."

Now it's my turn to look astonished. "You know her name?"

Jane leans back, lacing her fingers together. "Yeah, just someone I used to know."

* * * **

Once I returned from work, I anxiously opened my door after closing the garage. Would you be alright after all these hours? I sighed in relief as you were still sitting on the couch, exactly where I left you this morning. "Are you alright? Can you move any better?"

No answer. I took off my shoes and walked over. You weren't staring at me anymore, instead looking at the window with a dazed expression. "I know it's hard for you, but I promise it'll get better eventually!"

I tried being cheerful, but you didn't seem to be in the mood for anything. While you were still ignoring me, I grabbed the bandages I left out from last night. You still needed your bandages replaced, whether you liked it or not. I gently sat beside you and tilted your head up. You were stubborn, however, and immediately turned your head down.

"Don't worry, this will be quick!" I held onto your chin again and unraveled the bandages I put on yesterday. The bruise had only gotten worse and was now blistered and purple like an old grape. As I gingerly touched it, a feeling of despair slowly squeezed my heart. "It's not getting better, how can this be?"

I quickly reapplied the bandages and patted your head. While I was pulling away, I noticed a strand of hair falling onto the floor. A huge lock of hair had fallen from the spot I touched you. Standing up in shock, I stared down and whispered, "Oh, Mary. What's happening to you?" I noticed your eyelids lowered at the mention of your name.

"That's your name, isn't it? Jane, my coworker, knows you." I bent down to clean up the spilled hair before continuing. "She might know more about what happened to you, I'll make sure to ask tomorrow." Your eyes don't spark this time. You looked less cheerful and your eyebags were deeper than before. I decided to give you some time and walked over to the window to draw the curtains. "It's time to go to sleep, Mary, good night."

I gave you a hug before laying you down on the couch.

* * * **

I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of knocking. At first, it was quiet and hesitant, but it grew louder. When I started to get up, the noise had escalated to a thunderous bang. I sprinted to the front door to put my bleary eye against the peephole. Blood coursed through my veins at heightened speed, and my ears rang from the sudden silence. No one was there. I stepped away and shook my head, debating whether I had become delirious, or a fool had really pounded on my door in the dead of night. My stomach twisted into knots as I noticed your head tilted to the window once again. I cautiously walked over to it and peered through the crack of the curtain. A pale face stared back at me, my reflection. The other shadowy figure I didn't recognize.

* * * **

I hadn't slept well. The five cups of coffee I had this morning were my only lifeline. Luckily, no one seemed to notice how worn out I was. I almost didn't notice the tap on my shoulder.

"You look like you didn't sleep well." I turned to find Jane smiling at me. Only the smile was humorless, seemingly glued flimsily onto her face.

"You don't look well either," I remarked.

She simply shrugged, changing the topic. "I've been busy. How's Mary?"

I turned to face her and cleared my throat. "Her bruise hasn't been improving, and she still can't move." I hesitated before saying, "Do you know any way I can help her?"

Jane twitches in her chair, a perplexed look replacing her uneasy smile. "I don't know...why would you do that?"

For a second, I was confused by her question. "What do you mean, of course I would

want to help! Her condition has only gotten worse!"

She rubs her face, shaking her head and muttering, "Never mind, forget that. I don't know any way to help."

I was still dumbfounded and studied her worriedly. "Are you okay? You don't seem well."

Jane's face pales and she shakes her head. She started to get up, but sat back down. "I'm not feeling well today, I have to go now."

She quickly made her way out of the office, probably going to the front to sign out.

* * * **

Ever since that day, Jane hasn't shown up to work.

Knowing that the only person I decided to share my secret to ghosted me, I decided not to seek any more help. It'll only draw unwanted attention.

While driving home on a windy evening, I pulled into my driveway and climbed out with the new library books I'd checked out. They were all about diseases, make-believe and real. I just needed a match to find a cure for you.

My hopes slightly dimmed when I entered to find you hunkered on the couch. Your hair had thinned to a light net around your scalp, and your eyes cast downwards toward the ground. You wouldn't even stare out the window anymore. Then again, I have had the blinds shut since the day the monster started appearing. I knew it was there. The shadow would come every night to the same window you sat next to.

"I've brought more books, maybe they have your sickness in them," I said as I sat next to you and stacked the books beside me. I swallowed as I stared at your bony hands. Whatever it was, it was eating you from the inside out.

"I'm sorry Mary, it must be horrible not being able to do anything."

You didn't look up at me, and I felt like it wasn't the right time to fix your hair. I slowly reached for the first book and flipped through the pages. None of the books I've looked through had any clues; nothing was working.

The hours ticked by and before I knew it the bright slits spilling from the blinds had turned orange. I turned to look at you again and carefully propped you up and opened up the blinds. My eyes adjusted to the sudden blast of light, but I could see a small figure dart away from the window. Blinking rapidly, I opened the window and shouted, "Who's there?" The swishing of tree leaves was the only one to call back.

I shuddered and closed the window. Whatever the thing was, it always arrived at this specific window. The one right next to Mary. I turned to stare at your sickly face, those eyes completely dark now.

"I'll bring you to my room tonight so that creature won't see you, alright?"

You don't look at me this time.

"Fine, you can stay here but I'll have to keep watch," I finally declared. Surely ghosts didn't exist, right? Even if they were, I knew I was going to protect you no matter what. I took your hands in mine and murmured, "Whatever happens, just know I'll be there with you."

* * * **

It all happened so quickly. The deafening eruption of crashes and lights. One moment I was dozing off on the couch beside you, and then a thunderous roar came from outside. I jolted awake to the sharp raps on my door; each thud sent shivers down my spine.

I brushed my hand against yours and noticed you weren't awake. That didn't matter, I had to protect you no matter what. I turned my back on the flashing lights blaring from the window and grabbed onto a baseball bat sitting beside me.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Boom! Bang!

* * * **

The two police officers inspected the man that was shot down.

"He'll bleed out soon," one of them observed.

"I'll make sure he doesn't bleed out," the second one offered. As the officer bent down to pick up the man, he gurgled out a curse.

"Monsters...you monsters."

The officer felt a twinge of guilt for firing so quickly, and carefully slung him over his shoulder. "Sorry buddy, you'll be alright." As he carefully applied pressure on the bullet wound, the other officer called out, "I'll investigate the house, hopefully, the woman's report wasn't a hoax."

The officer rushed to take off the man's shirt and press it down onto the gaping hole. "I'll stay here to make sure the suspect's safe, keep me updated."

The man's eyes started drifting backward and he murmured, "Don't hurt her."

Noticing this, the officer called for an ambulance as the man seemed to be succumbing to his injuries. The officer's radio crackled as his partner radioed him in a fuzzy voice. "Suspect's house is very cold, nothing abnormal other than that."

As soon as he said that, there was a long pause. "You've still got your radio on," the officer replied to him once he placed the man on the ground.

"No, that's not it." For a few moments, both of them go silent, each waiting for the other to reply. Finally, a shaky sigh could be heard from the other end.

"There's a dead body. I found a corpse in the living room."

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THE GRAY

Nathan Riffe, 13

Samuel Moore sat, shrouded by his canvas. His wet paintbrush outlined a golden spire. His painting had been in the works for months, and showed a symmetrical city with towers and winding bridges. *It's devoid of flaw*, Samuel thought. Paint dripped onto the same marble island his great-grandfather owned decades ago. *BEEEEEP*. The doorbell rung from the hall. Samuel flinched, sending a black line across his canvas.

He scowled to himself and looked at his wife, Charlotte. "Is one of the kids outside?" They had lived isolated for centuries in a wooded area, like their predecessors. No one had rung the doorbell before. Charlotte shrugged at him from across the island. *Knock*-*knock*. Something started to heavily rap against the front door. Samuel pushed his stool back, and made his way to the door. Pine trees devoured the landscape and any view of faraway neighbors. Samuel exhaled, turned, and pushed on the doorknob. The white door swung open to reveal five figures.

Samuel lurched backwards. All the figures were dressed head to toe in gray uniforms that concealed any face Samuel might've seen. Each individual carried a black cone about a yard in length and ending in a curling red ember under their arms.

Samuel noticed, with brown eyes wide open, that the frontmost figure was pointing the fingerless stump of an arm at him. Samuel slammed the door and flicked a golden dead-bolt in place. "Charlotte?" His wife had been standing in the hall with Mark and Joel. "Are you aware if we did anything to attract terrorists or agents of some sort?"

"No?" Charlotte replied. Mark began to cry. Samuel took a look over his shoulder before going back to the kitchen. Blood pounded throughout his ears. He'd gotten in enough trouble before to know this was excessive for any enforcement. A crashing slam derailed his rickety train of thought. The children screamed and climbed away from the back door, which now laid on the tile, blasted off its hinges. Through this opening four of the figures stepped through. Two grabbed hold of Charlotte and Mark with their twisted arms that seemed to bend at hundreds of points simultaneously. Samuel scooped Joel and sprinted through the dark parlor back to the front door. Samuel unbolted it to find the fifth figure, who brought their cone's end into Samuel's nose. Samuel stumbled back, his nose mixing blood into the tile grout. The gray figures pulled Joel from Samuel and dragged them both to the kitchen. Samuel's swollen eyelids were peeled back by palms so rough from the cloth covering them that he started to question if they were human.

In front of him his family stood, each member pinned back. Samuel's pried eyes followed the fifth figure as they leveled their cone to Mark's sobbing face. Samuel's eyes turned red, his voice petrified in terror as the figure pressed a button. Jets of red flame shot from the ember. Samuel couldn't see him, but Mark's sobs transitioned into wails. As the fire disappeared, the figure walked by Charlotte, leaving Mark's body on the floor with a blackened knob.

Charlotte screamed incoherently, unable to turn her head from Mark's corpse. The cone's ember glowed orange before covering the side of her head in an inferno. Samuel had never understood the comparison of melting skin and wax. In the moment where Charlotte's hair acted as a fuse, melting through her face's layers: white, pink, red, maroon; Samuel understood. He finally opened his mouth and screamed alongside Joel. To no avail, skin continued to pool into Charlotte's eyes. The cone switched off, and the figures abruptly faced Samuel and Joel before stabbing the two with green-colored syringes. Samuel's head was too numb to feel the tile, and his vision dimmed, but not before seeing his composition being bleached and grayed by the flames.

* * * **

Samuel's eyes opened, but his perspective stayed the same. His vision was cloudy, however there wasn't much detail anywhere around him. He lay in a small gray room. Luminescent lights buzzed above, and below there were twenty-five drains orientated in a grid on the floor. The room had no visible windows or exits. Samuel's room was not unique; in every direction, thousands of copied rooms were occupied. As Samuel's sense of reality rejoined, he feared his heart beat so rapidly he would pass out.

Beep. Samuel twisted his head and stood against a wall. He couldn't find any source of the sound. *Beep.* Two tubes suddenly emerged from opposing walls. Samuel watched them slowly rotate and extend, each one painted gray. A slow mechanical whirring sound taunted Samuel. *Beep.* Samuel's legs shook as the tubes stopped after each

extended a quarter of the way into the room. The everlasting silence broke beneath Samuel's breath. *Beep*. Deep inside the pipes, dozens of nozzles emitted a gray fountain of mist. The mist filled the room in seconds. Samuel sputtered as the gas slithered up his nostrils. It smelt like a burnt corpse. His muscles surged and twitched. His throat burned, but then stopped.

Beep. He blinked and watched the tubes retract inside the walls, now invisible. The lights seethed into Samuel's skin. He vaguely noticed he was no longer hungry. Samuel spotted a rectangular hole in the wall in front of him, open. He stumbled over to it. A lift was seamless against the room's floor. Samuel's eyes scanned the lift for any pipes or knobs. There was nothing; Samuel didn't even see a button panel like most elevators. Samuel inhaled some of the dry, stationary air and took a step halfway into the lift. He looked back at the empty gray room before fully stepping in.

Slam. In an instant Samuel was eclipsed in darkness, the wall slamming shut with enough force to decapitate someone. His arms kept himself from being shoved to his left as the lift jerked side to side. Outside, the lift plummeted diagonally past hundreds of rooms. Samuel's forearm slipped and he fell forward, right before the lift halted.

Samuel tumbled out of an opening onto hard concrete. He pressed himself to his feet. The lift had disappeared. For as far as Samuel could see, the building he had left stretched on. Hundreds of neat lines of citizens were staring straight ahead and walking. They all wore gray cloth like the figures did, but their heads and hands were exposed.

"What the hell?" Samuel spoke.

The citizens' expressions were cold and tranquil. Samuel's bones ached, as he realized he too was dressed in a suit of gray. Someone bumped into him from behind. Samuel twirled around, eyes bloodshot. A deadpan man repeatedly pushed into him, without acknowledging Samuel, as if they'd been chiseled into a pattern to ignore their surroundings. Samuel sidestepped the man and crouched beside the invisible path the citizens seemed to follow. The building was bereft of windows or any texture; it rested on an asphalt ground. Ahead of the citizens was a long structure that had a black funnel leading to another building, which was equally gray as the complex and had a barn-shaped roof. A metal chimney identified it as a factory. Samuel traced the smoke rising from it into the nonexistent sky. Samuel's brows jumped as he noted everything

he saw was encased by a steel dome; stadium lights dangled where the sky should've been.

Samuel's memories suddenly jarred to life: Mark lying on the floor. Charlotte melting down. Joel being dragged away. Samuel's tears were rejected by the hydrophobic suit.

"Hello."

A lifeless voice sounded behind him. Samuel jumped upwards and stared. The speaker had dozens of black hooks peeling back their lips like piercings, connected to tight ropes that extended into their mouth. Their head was completely bald: an android or a human, Samuel couldn't tell.

"Who're you?" questioned Samuel.

"I'm Corrector and I've noticed you're off the average schedule by ninety seconds. I'll direct you for the remainder of the day," it explained monotonously.

Samuel's breath heaved. "Where're we?"

"We're off the path." Clack. Snap. Corrector's jaws winded and released.

Samuel glanced behind himself momentarily. "Where do I go?"

Corrector's frail limbs carried themselves to the path of the citizens and walked. Samuel followed.

As Samuel neared the factory building he noticed it had windows that'd been painted over gray. No other citizens followed a corrector. Samuel passed a doorless archway into the factory where the line slowed. Samuel continued, but a firm grip on his wrist stopped him. Samuel looked up to a faceless gray figure, who pointed behind Samuel. Samuel slowly reached out to a wooden tool in the wall. With a firm pull Samuel now held a sledgehammer. The hammer's handle had been painted gray. *Clink*. Another handle fell into place for the citizen behind Samuel.

Samuel remained on his stroll behind Corrector into an enormous chamber. He immediately collapsed against another wall. A stench that put the mist from earlier to shame occupied the chamber. He blinked open his eyes, and watched the other citizens go to the sides of a winding conveyor belt. Strobing lights shattered Samuel's vision into frames. A burning sting pressed against Samuel's side. He ignored the cramp until he cried out. A figure had a cone against him.

"Go to the supplying," said Samuel's commander. Samuel could've been seeing double, but hundreds of figures seemed to line the chamber. He dragged himself to the conveyor. Corrector was now nowhere in sight. His neck hairs stood. None of the citizens made a noise, their sledgehammers hanging at their sides. *Beep*. On Samuel's right, shapes fell onto the conveyor out of a machine. As the conveyor quietly rotated, Samuel saw they were people. People lying and being deposited on the belt. Instantaneously, a piercing howl unionized with the beeping of machines. Around Samuel, the citizens released the most awful wail he could perceive: it was in between a scream and a shriek, all while staying single-noted. Samuel couldn't help but join in horror.

One by one, people rolled past Samuel. He put his hand out to one to feel its heart pounding. Some were fully grown and beheaded, some rotting; some were babies who still squirmed. *Bang. Clang.* Samuel's world shook as the citizens raised their sledgehammers and swung down onto the bodies. *Bang.* An infant's skull imploded around the hammer's head, bright red blood radiating in color against all the gray machinery. Too numb from terror to move himself, Samuel glanced at a faceless figure who watched him back. He gulped his saliva down and waited until a corpse passed his way. Samuel raised his hammer above a brown-haired boy who looked eleven or twelve. Samuel swung. *Beep.* The boy's limbs jerked and spasmed, his body unable to scream without its watermelon head.

"No," Samuel cried. The citizens further demolished the boy automatically. Samuel watched the boy reach the end of the conveyor where a great blazing engulfed all those unlucky enough to still be alive. *Beep*.

* * * **

Samuel stood for hours, counting the seconds in his head. At 37,000, a droning voice informed him: "The shift is over, Samuel. Return to your home."

Samuel turned and glared at Corrector. Their eyes looked dead. Samuel dropped his hammer on the ground like the other citizens who'd left.

After the march to the complex, Samuel questioned Corrector. He spied a figure watching them from afar. "Corrector, why're they destroying the bodies in there?"

Clack. Snap. "In order to be disposed of properly, the suppliers must be in small pieces to burn."

"Why, though? Why not just bury them, hell—some of them were alive." The figure was definitely facing them now.

"Once in the incinerator, the suppliers can happily supply their leftover nutrients to be condensed with sterilizers into mist," Corrector said. The gray figure glared at them beneath its uniform. *The mist smelled like burnt corpses*. Samuel stumbled.

"Why, though? On second thought, who's in charge of this? Who thought this was a good idea? Where are they?"

Corrector's dim, beady eyes glanced to the side for a moment, while their wheels and ropes squealed in protest.

"Oswald is our home's operator, and resides in the monolith." Corrector pointed at a thin, gray tower you'd have to look for to spot. Gray figures swarmed beneath, and out of it.

Grief overtook Samuel. "Corrector, do you know where someone named Joel is?"

"I can't provide that information, as all citizens are unmarked and unnamed." Corrector stared at Samuel.

Samuel careened into a metal lift. "Goodbye, then."

The lift shut, blocking off any lighting.

* * * **

Beep. Samuel's eyelids opened. He'd fallen atop the hard floor of drains. He was unable to tell if he was in the same room he originally awoke in. Beep. The tubes started to invade the room. Samuel wanted to hold his breath but he couldn't. The mist emerged out of the pipes and onto the floor, writhing towards Samuel. The soul of the boy he murdered crawled up his throat, burning his skin. His throat closed, Samuel's face flashed from red to blue to purple. It released him. Samuel gasped for breath. The mist had cured his thirst. He shouldn't have gone inside the lift that day, but he had.

Samuel marched among the citizens to the factory; even outside he noticed all the guards following him. Once past the arches, Samuel hesitated but nevertheless followed procedure, and took a sledgehammer. Once again, Corrector was nowhere to be seen in the factory. Perhaps Samuel was following 'the average schedule.' A few fluorescent lights were off today, blurring any difference between the citizens' faces.

Squish. Samuel looked beside himself. A woman clawed at a carcass, swirls of black and maroon twisting underneath her bloody fingernails as she chewed a heart. Droplets of blood raced down her repellent gray suit. *Munch*. Samuel froze as around him more citizens started to chow on the people, alive or dead. They treated it like a big sushi conveyor. Unable to fill their stomachs with anything but gas, they turned to the next option. *Beep*. A faceless figure noticed Samuel's preoccupation, came to Samuel and pressed their cone's ember against the nape of Samuel's neck.

"Swing," the dry voice ordered. Samuel didn't respond.

"Swing." Samuel felt the ember peel itself towards his spine, ready to evaporate him at any given chance. Samuel shuddered, and swung. *They aren't alive. They're already dead*, Samuel told himself. *Bang*. The adhesive on the belt released nothing once something touched it, except for the metal heads of the sledgehammers. *Bang*. Samuel missed again. The figure behind him felt nothing but the need to correct this. The ember burnt white. Samuel squealed and slammed the sledgehammer down once more, regretting it the moment he did. Plastic crunched instead of flesh squishing. Samuel lifted the hammer to see black bands and ropes snap into the air. Gears acted as waterwheels, spilling blood into the belt's cracks. Geysers of blood sprayed from Corrector's neck; only as Corrector headed towards the incinerator did Samuel think Corrector was human.

Samuel rotated to the figure who made him do this and swung his sledgehammer as hard as he could. The figure fell backwards; the blow had ripped through their uniform and uncovered their massacred face. The citizens continued to swing. Samuel punched a citizen who had also consumed a corpse. He didn't flinch or notice Samuel. Samuel punched again; the man continued to work before falling over with Samuel, as a green syringe pierced Samuel's back.

* * * **

Samuel awoke wearily. He was strapped to a gray chair by shining chains. The conveyor was to his right; still churning despite the fact no citizens filled the factory. It was deathly quiet without machines dropping bodies onto the conveyor belt. He straightened his head, and stopped. Two silhouettes stood feet away from Samuel.

Their gazes bore into him. Samuel exhaled. The silhouettes emerged; one was a figure, bearing a cone. Were they the one who killed Samuel's family, who stopped him, who stabbed him, or who forced him to murder Corrector? It didn't matter, Samuel realized. If they all insisted on being the same, then they were each responsible for the actions of all. However, Samuel couldn't currently justify anything. The chains pinned his shoulders and legs down.

The second figure took Samuel aback. They wore a full uniform up to their head like the first, but their suit was pure white, and they carried no cone. They stepped forward to Samuel.

"What are you?" mumbled Samuel.

A response as plain as any other figure emitted from under the white cloth. "I'm Oswald."

Samuel's eyes expanded.

"You're the 'operator' of this?" Samuel recalled Corrector's information. "You're in charge of this, and you probably made it too. Why?"

"Am I responsible for our perfect society? Yes." Oswald turned to the gray figure. "Rid us of him." The figure's cone's ember shifted from red to orange.

"Perfect? No place where people inhale the same people they slaughter can be perfect." The figure stopped their cone, and looked at Oswald.

Oswald turned back to Samuel. "Perfection is anything without flaw. Not whether someone likes it or not. This society functioned flawlessly before you showed up."

Samuel seethed. "You mean to tell me none of these citizens think this is wrong?" His hands picked behind the chair at a knot of chains.

"There's no wrong without right. These citizens have nothing to compare their identical lives to. Every moment for them is both the best and worst moment they ever had and will have. Or it was, until you punched one across the face," rebuked Oswald. "The only reason you see in color is because you've lived for years with variation. These citizens don't even see in black and white; they see in gray."

Samuel's eyes settled back into fear and flickered to the figure's ready cone. "Why did you take me then, if your society was unflawed?"

"I told our team that we couldn't transfer an unconditioned human into our society. You make a good point." "Do all these people agree with this then? What part of them enjoys this?" Samuel stalled, undoing a knot.

Oswald's voice muffled darkly beneath his uniform. "None of these citizens enjoy or agree with anything. Neither do they disagree. They're all virtually the same; we only need to manipulate one person in a way. An endless stream of them come from our cloning sector, which directly feeds the conveyor with mutations. We had to scrape together a mutation as soon as you came around, though. Named it 'Corrector,' we did."

"Is this society correct, though? Even if the citizens know no better, shouldn't they still get to experience variation?" shouted Samuel, covering the clink of chains against concrete.

Oswald shook his head. "As long as you and your memories plague us, our society will never become perfect. Well. You and one more person."

The conveyor stopped churning. Samuel glanced to the right, his heart stopped beating. Lying across the expansive slab was Joel.

"Joel?" Samuel sprung up and looked at Joel. Ash covered his face, but it was clear Joel was conscious from his brown eyes. The conveyor started again. Samuel jogged alongside Joel. The incinerator's light cast his hair orange. Samuel reached and grabbed Joel, but Joel's skin was merged with the tread's adhesive, and Samuel was dragged across the floor. Hot air shrouded Samuel.

"Father?" asked Joel. The furnace crawled across the conveyor towards them. Samuel pulled with all his strength on Joel's arm. The conveyor slowed, jamming against Samuel as he pushed against it, before Joel was ripped free.

Samuel looked down at Joel's arm. He screamed and grabbed the remainder of Joel as Joel began to enter the incinerator. His muffled wails echoed from within the incinerator as Samuel pulled his charred hands out. They were quieter than the citizens', but somehow, much worse.

He stumbled back to Oswald and grabbed a chain off the floor. The figure started their cone but Samuel slashed them aside, sending them bleeding on the ground.

"Our society was fine until you appeared, Samuel. You are the problem in perfection." Oswald spoke.

"Why'd you even bother having citizens work? Why not use more machines?" yelled

Samuel.

"I wouldn't want to bore them—that would just be cruel."

Samuel slashed Oswald in the head, scarring their uniform.

"They are machines, Samuel. However, I'm also a problem. I understand how things work; I'm flawed, and must give control to another machine. Goodbye, Samuel."

Samuel gaped as Oswald flung himself into the incinerator. Shaking, he looked away. Samuel passed through the factory's exit once more, and stared at the dome above, like a lid for a platter. This left his neck open for another needle.

* * * **

Samuel got up off the floor and waited patiently for the mist, before going to work. Samuel traveled across an expanse and into the factory. Samuel had come to like Oswald's society. *Bang*. After all, what's not to like when there are no problems?

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Ages 15-18

The following stories contain scenes of abuse, alcohol use, blood, cannibalism, death, mental illness, mature situations, murder, partying, self-harm, suicide, and violence.

IN THE GRAY Anne Paschal, 15

glance around the empty square. The gray streets stare up at me and the black sky stares down. I can hear the wind calling between the tight buildings. I close my eyes for a moment, the short blink of blackness the only respite from the scene before me.

Bodies litter the gray ground and float along the gray river, their gray skin beginning to blur with the landscape.

I walk up to one. A girl, older than me, dressed in rags. Her eyes are closed and I am thankful for that. There's blood near her mouth, tinting her lips in a way that looks lively, pretty even. I feel sick.

I walk on, contemplating my task. I knew what I had to do before I left my crammed home. I just thought it was possible to delay my acceptance a little longer. Food. I was sent out to find food. I knew it, my cousins knew it, and my mother knew it, that there is no food to be found. But it's so much easier to say that I'm going out for "food" rather than what we all know I'm going out for.

As perfect as the first girl would have been, her lips have led me to thinking of what she might have looked like when she was living. I know I can't play this game forever; I must eventually pick one, one that is to be treated as less human than all the others I'm surrounded by.

The next I see is an older man. His shirt has initials embroidered into it: *DP*. Hand done, lovingly done. A wife or a sister spent her time on it. A gift, possibly. No. He's too human.

The next is a boy, maybe twelve years old. He has a scar above his right eyebrow. Maybe he got it wrestling with his dog, maybe he was tossing a ball with his brother. I can't. I can still see the ghost of life in him.

I realize I'll never find one that I can see as worthy for the fate they will receive. So I pick one. The one directly to my left. A woman, middle-aged. She has on a pink dress, she's missing a bottom tooth. Her eyes are unfortunately open. They're brown. She's who I pick.

She's who I pick for dinner.

THE DOG

Emma Rayburn, 17

G od, I hate Halloween. The thought repeats in my mind, over and over, running a marathon that never seems to end. I can't even enjoy my walks this time of year, every house covered with jack-o-lanterns, giant fake spiders, animatronic zombies, and ghosts made from chicken wire. Name any Halloween decoration and I'm certain at least one house in this wretched neighborhood will have it.

Sure, the little kids having fun running around in costume are bearable, until they're on a sugar high, screaming "*I don't want to go to bed!*" so loudly it shoves through every wall in my home as if their cries were determined to get to *me*. And the teenagers? God. Whichever ones aren't at their unsupervised houses—throwing parties they know they shouldn't throw with drinks they know they shouldn't drink— are the ones that run around terrorizing everyone else. I can't even count on two hands anymore how many times my house has been vandalized by those *miserable little*—no no, I need to remember my New Year's resolution! *Be happier*...who really follows through on that crap, anyway?

I have countless cameras installed now, both inside and out. Whatever little *brats* decide to try and ruin my home this year will have not only a kindly worded letter sent to their parents but also a visit from the lovely officers of our town. Come to think of it, would the cops even show up? They don't like me very much this time of year, say I call too much for no reason. They *have 'more important things'* to deal with. Maybe I can move before my house is crowded by groups of sticky kids expecting handouts from me...four days is more than enough time, right? I would give anything to escape from this hell.

I'm lost in thoughts of a nice new home with no neighbors; maybe I'll live in the middle of nowhere, with trees shielding me from those insufferable decorations. The sound of leaves crunching beneath my feet act as the only soundtrack I need. I never liked listening to music on my walks, it felt too distracting. I could miss something, something important, maybe even something that could save my life. A car horn honking at me to get out of the way? A scream from the victim of some crazy axe

murderer? I shake my head with a sigh. *I've been watching far too many slasher films.* A quiet whimper catches my attention, dragging me out of my thoughts and stopping me in my tracks. I turn, and there, directly on the other side of the street from me, is a dog. A small black one, shivering next to a rain gutter.

What a pitiful little thing. I'm surprised nobody has seen him and taken him in yet, especially with how kind my neighbors pretend to be. I walk up to him cautiously and his ears perk up. Maybe someone left him here, maybe he wandered over from a neighboring apartment complex. He looks so sad, I wouldn't be too shocked if some teens had kicked him. I squat down to his level and stare into his eyes.

"Hey fella, you got a collar on?"

I reach out slowly to pat his head and my eyes trail along his body. "No, no collar..."

I hum a sigh of disappointment. I didn't expect him to have one on, but it would've made things a whole lot easier if he did. "No injuries either, at least none that I can see." I smile at him, and his ears fall back down. Strange.

"Maybe the shelter has space for you, can take care of you, send out people to ask if they're missing a dog..."

Who am I kidding? They'll kill this thing within a month if no one comes forward to claim him.

He looks at me, directly in the eyes, and it sends goosebumps across my skin. He looks sad, yes, but there's something else...I let out a long sigh, which soon turns into a frustrated groan as I drag my hands down my face.

"Okay, fine. I won't send you off to be killed, at least not yet. I don't have the capacity to take care of another living thing for long." I reach my hands under him and my sleeves scrape against the dirty road. *Great, ruining my shirt for some mutt.* He's a little heavier than I expected, but it's fine. I guess.

"I suppose I can survive for a few days." Unlike him if he's left out here.

I carry the thing in my arms, walking the last few hundred feet to my home as I talk to him as if he understood a single thing I said. Foolish, I know, but it can be nice to have someone—*something* to talk to. I set him down on my front porch as I dug into my pockets for my keys, and he started barking. I turn to see some teens walking by. *He doesn't seem to like them either...good dog.* I stare at them as they talk

to each other, stopping right in front of my mailbox.

Loitering.

I should call the cops on them.

"Uhm, ma'am? We don't think you should take that thing inside-"

I roll my eyes as the shorter of the two speaks, and the dog stops barking. Of course they don't think I should have a dog; a dog would alert me if there was someone outside. They wouldn't want that.

"Yeah—we saw that thing earlier and it seemed...off."

The tall one agrees and I watch her stare at the dog, a look of disgust spreading across her face. The dog whined and looked up at me. It was like he knew I would pity him.

My hand finds my keys in my pocket and I take them out. "Thank God I don't care what you think."

I turn back to my door and unlock it, pushing it open and reaching back down to scoop the dog up once more. I can hear the teens start talking to each other again before I close the door.

"They probably saw you earlier, huh? Left you all alone."

I look down at the creature in my arms, and he seems like he's...*smiling at me*? No no, that's not possible. It's probably just how his mouth sits...probably. I drop my keys down on the table next to my front door and kick off my shoes.

"Okay, let's see if I have anything you can eat." I mumble to him. Then, I turn right at the stairs and walk into the kitchen.

I look around for a moment for a place to set him down, my eyes settling on an old stack of newspapers thrown in a small pile on the floor between the edge of my countertop and a window.

"Alright, there you go..."

I set the dog down and turn toward my cupboards, walking over to search through them. I've never had a dog, so I don't have any dog food, but I'm sure I have *something* he can eat. After a few minutes of searching, I find a can of Spam[™]. Sure, why not. I grab it and sit it on the counter next to the knife block gifted to me by my brother for Christmas last year. Speaking of, I must remember I'm supposed to call him on Halloween. I walk over to another cupboard, open it, and grab a small bowl. Once I turn around, I see the dog eyeing... the knife block? No, must be the Spam[™]. He's just hungry.

I walk back to the counter, open the Spam[™] and prepare to drop it into the bowl, but I stop. With a sigh, I pull my phone out of my pocket. "Is Spam…safe…for dogs."

I mumble the question aloud as I type, then look over the results. "Okay...what I'm getting from this is that generally no...not on a regular basis at least..."

I look back at the dog. He hasn't moved from where I placed him.

"You'll be fine, I'll get food tomorrow."

I shake my head and put my phone down on the counter, grab the can of Spam[™], and hold it upside down over the bowl. It drops with a wet plop! and I recoil before setting the bowl down in front of the dog.

He doesn't even look at it. He's looking at me.

"Ah, water. Right..." I answer nobody and walk over to the cupboard of bowls again, grab one, and walk to the sink. Can water be *too* cold for dogs to drink? I turn on the tap and, just as I expected, it's freezing. I turn the knob towards 'hot' and wait. *I can feel its eyes on me...er...his eyes on me.* I shiver slightly before pushing the bowl under the water. It's warm enough now. I wait for the bowl to fill, my eyes focusing on the tan pieces of my hair that hang to rest over my forehead. I am drowning in thoughts of why the light reflects on hair this way and that, but am pulled out by water rushing against my hand. The bowl is overflowing. I push air through my nose. "Damn it."

I pour the extra out and use a paper towel to dry the outside of the bowl before walking back over to the dog and setting the water down next to the Spam[™]. He still hasn't eaten it. *Nothing to worry about, I'm sure he'll eat it eventually.* I stand staring down at the dog, he stares back.

Maybe he doesn't like eating in front of people? I back away, and away, and away. He still isn't eating. *Whatever*. If he gets hungry enough he'll eat. Speaking of eating, I have leftovers that need to be taken care of.

* * * **

I stand from the couch and stretch, grab the remote, and turn off the TV. When I lean

forward to look into the kitchen, the dog is staring at me through the two doorways. How did he know I'd look? And he has yet to eat. *What is wrong with this thing?* I shake off the uneasy feeling in my gut, it was probably those leftovers.

"I'm going to bed now—uh...dog." I cringe at my own words. He can't understand me, and even if he could, would that be offensive? Maybe I should give him a name no. No name. *A name will attach you.*

I walk through the doorway to the living room and to the stairs opposite the front door, turning my head to stare directly at the dog now sitting in the doorway to my kitchen.

"Okay...I'm going to bed now..." He has everything he needs, he'll be *fine*. "Goodnight."

I scurry up the stairs. I'm not looking back, I don't *want* to look back. Maybe those teens were right, he *is* a little off.

I'm woken by a *thump*. I sit straight up in my bed, it's probably those damn teens. I throw my blanket off and jump out of bed, quickly walking to my desk.

"Little brats. At least now I'll have the 'evidence' the cops claim they need to do anything..." I mutter to myself as I power on my computer. I wait for the screen to light up, and I hear a cracking. Eggs again, really? They couldn't even be creative with it. I shake my head and click the security system, immediately it opens to my front door camera. I quickly move my mouse to the arrow and click, changing to the camera angled at the entire front of my house. Nothing.

What..? Did they get into my backyard? I click again, switching to the camera on the back porch. Nothing. My stomach rolls in on itself. *Did somebody break in?* The thought drips sweat down the back of my neck.

I click again, switching to my living room camera. Nothing. The hallway camera. Nothing. The kitchen camera. Noth—wait. The dog. Is he…choking? I worry for him, watching his body move like a cat preparing to cough up a hairball. *What if he found something I left on the floor? What if he's allergic to what I gave him? What if he ate the Spam*[™] *and it*—My heart drops to the pits of my stomach as I stare at my screen in horror, every muscle in my body clenching as I watch this dog—this *thing* regurgitate its bones onto my floor, the cracking noises replay and echo in my head. It wasn't eggs smashing against my house, it was *that*. It was the thing's *bones*.

It becomes a puddle of flesh and fur and I feel my dinner crawling up my throat. I have to clamp my hand over my mouth to keep from throwing up, my body lurching forward with a suppressed gag. It's—*it's moving*. This *melted dog* is *moving* around the tiles of my kitchen like some kind of *snake*. I'm frozen, watching it slowly slide towards the doorway of the kitchen. I quickly switch back to the hallway camera once I lose sight of it, and watch. Its body molds to every bump it glides over, the velvety flesh acting as a wrapping paper to whatever object it covers. It starts up the stairs and my heart stops. It knows I'm up here.

I stand from my seat quickly, the wheels propelling the chair back until it hits my bed. I rush over to the nightstand, unplug my phone, and turn it on. I look around the room for somewhere—*anywhere* to go. My eyes land on the closed closet and I sprint over to the doors before throwing them open.

I quickly toss my phone to the top shelf and use the built-in cubbies as a ladder, scrambling to quickly climb to the top. I sit hunched over and lean down to close my closet doors before sitting back up and grabbing my phone to shakily dial.

"Oak Hollow Police Department, how can I help you?" The familiar woman's voice rings in my head and I feel a spark of hope ignite in my chest.

"God—Cathy, you **have** to help me. There's some—some *thing* in my house and I think it's coming to—"

"June? Look, you can't call every time some kids play a prank on you. This number is for emergencies, you should know this by now."

The spark of hope is smothered out.

"No—Cathy **please** that's not—"

My face burns as I hold back tears.

"June, we have to keep this line open. Goodbye."

•••

She hung up on me.

I sit, closing my eyes and holding my breath. *Maybe it'll think I'm gone, that I somehow got out, that I'm at a neighbors, that I'm*—

My eyes shoot open and I stare straight ahead. That same soft fur I held hours ago...when I thought I was just helping some pathetic dog...is crawling up the side of my leg.

* * * **

A man, his wife, and their infant son sit at the table in their kitchen, the early light of the sun peeking through the curtains above the sink. The woman sits on one side reading the newspaper, her husband typing at his laptop on the other, and the baby settled in his high chair in the middle making a mess of **'Turkee-O's, the**

Thanksgiving Breakfast!"

The wife sighs, "Another missing person," she says, "not too far from here. Y'know Oak Hollow? That area."

The husband hums and gets up from his chair, walking over to the coffee maker to refill his mug.

"A woman this time, maybe we should consider moving." The baby fusses in his chair.

"*Maybe*." The husband looks out the window above the sink as he waits. The baby starts wailing.

"Honey?" He squints at the tan bundle of fur by the sidewalk. The wife sets the paper down and stands up to tend to the baby. *"There's a dog outside."*

*

THE HARVESTERS Victoria Gogol, 15

The woods surrounding the town of Blackwater stretched for miles, a thick, almost suffocating expanse of trees. Every child in town was warned never to stray too far, but none of them understood the true reason why. Maren had been one of them, but at seventeen, she no longer feared the woods. What scared her was what lay beyond the trees—secrets buried under dirt and blood.

It began with the whispers. Maren heard them from her parents late at night, muffled through the thin walls of their house. Words like 'the Harvest' and 'lottery,' uttered in hushed, reverent tones. It was the town's greatest secret, one they kept guarded with their lives. Every fifty years, something in the woods called to them, and they answered with the flesh of their own. A firstborn from each family.

Maren had always felt out of place in Blackwater. Adopted as a baby, she had grown up surrounded by whispers of her past. Her parents were well-off and people envied their wealth, but it came at a price she hadn't yet understood—until she stumbled across the records.

Dust-covered and hidden in the attic, they detailed names and dates, cryptic notations about children who had vanished throughout the decades. Their names were marked with red crosses, victims of the Harvest. Her own name was there. But unlike the others, it wasn't crossed out.

The ground felt unsteady beneath her as she realized what it meant. Her real parents had abandoned her, left her to die, and her adoptive parents had spared her for a reason. Her blood ran cold when she realized that the time for the next Harvest was near. And this time, they wouldn't let her go.

* * * **

The night of the lottery came, and the town gathered in the square. A large black box sat on a raised platform, its surface chipped and scarred from years of use. The town's elders, men and women with hollow eyes and sunken cheeks, stood beside it. Each child's name had been written on a slip of parchment, folded neatly and placed inside. Maren stood among the crowd, her stomach churning. She watched as one by one children were called to the stage.

The tension in the air was palpable, thick with dread and anticipation. Families clutched their children's hands as if holding on would somehow protect them from the inevitable. The first name was drawn. A girl, barely twelve, her eyes wide with terror. The crowd parted as she was dragged forward, her screams echoing off the walls of the square. Maren's heart pounded in her chest as she watched. She had seen nothing like this in her life—no one had. The rituals were kept secret from those too young to understand. But she understood now.

The elders tied the girl's hands and feet and led her through the forest, the entire town following behind in a silent procession. The trees seemed to grow taller and more twisted the deeper they went. The light of the moon filtered through the canopy, casting long shadows that danced across the ground like specters. The air grew colder, and the unmistakable scent of decay wafted through the breeze.

They reached the clearing—the heart of the woods. It was a place Maren had never seen, a wide circle of dead trees surrounding a massive stone altar, blackened with old blood. Around the edges, crude symbols were carved into the bark, dripping with fresh, wet crimson. The girl was placed on the altar, her body trembling as she cried for her mother.

The elders moved swiftly. A blade, jagged and cruel, was raised high above the girl's chest, and without a word, it came down. The scream that erupted was like nothing Maren had ever heard—a sound that tore through her very soul. Blood sprayed across the altar, pooling at the base and soaking into the earth as if the ground itself was hungry for it.

The girl's body was left on the altar as the elders stepped back, their hands soaked in gore. The ritual was far from over. From the shadows, a figure emerged, tall and hunched, its skin a sickly gray, its eyes gleaming like wet stones. It moved slowly, deliberately, as it approached the altar. Maren could barely breathe as she watched it reach out with long, skeletal fingers, pulling the girl's limp body toward its gaping maw.

The sound of crunching bone and tearing flesh filled the air as the creature fed, its jaws working methodically, swallowing chunks of meat with wet, guttural noises. The townspeople stood still, their faces blank, their eyes dull. They had seen this all before, too many times to care. But Maren cared. And for the first time in her life, she knew she had to escape.

Back at home, Maren's adoptive parents were waiting. Their faces were ashen, their eyes clouded with regret—but not for what they had done. For what they would have to do next.

"Maren," her mother began, her voice hollow. "The Harvest must continue."

The words sent a jolt of fury through her. "You knew!" she shouted. "You knew what they do, what they're going to do to me!"

Her father's gaze dropped to the floor. "We saved you once, but the pact—"

"The pact?!" Maren's voice cracked. "You're going to let them kill me?"

Silence fell over the room, broken only by the soft shuffle of footsteps. Maren's father took a step toward her, holding a slip of parchment—the same kind that had been drawn from the lottery box. Her name, written in black ink, stared back at her like a death sentence. Her hands trembled as she ripped the paper from his grip. There was no going back now. The town would not stop until they had her on that altar, her blood spilled like the others. But she wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. Maren's eyes burned with a cold, fierce resolve.

"No," she whispered. "I won't be their sacrifice."

And with that, she ran.

* * * **

The night air was sharp against her skin as she bolted through the trees, the distant howls of the creature ringing in her ears. She knew the town would come for her, the elders would hunt her down, and the monster would not rest until it fed again. But Maren had something they didn't. She had the truth. And if she couldn't destroy the monster, she would expose the darkness at the heart of Blackwater—for everyone to see. The Harvesters would pay. And this time, it would be their blood on the altar.

Maren ran faster than she ever had in her life, branches clawing at her skin as she tore through the woods. The darkness pressed in on her, thick and suffocating. The air was colder now, almost unbearable, and her breath came in ragged gasps. She knew they were coming—the elders, the townspeople, and the thing in the woods. She could hear the distant sound of her footsteps growing closer, but she didn't stop. She couldn't stop.

As she reached the edge of the woods, her heart leapt. Ahead, she could see the outline of a small, crumbling cabin—abandoned, forgotten, but still standing. She sprinted toward it, throwing open the door and slamming it shut behind her. The darkness inside was complete, but it was safe. For now.

Maren leaned against the door, trying to steady her breathing. Her mind raced. There had to be a way out of this, some way to end the Harvest for good. She couldn't be the first person who had tried to escape, but she had to be the one who succeeded. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the slip of paper with her name on it. The ink was still fresh, the letters smudged from her sweaty palms. A sudden thought struck her. There had to be a reason why she hadn't been sacrificed as a baby, why her name hadn't been crossed out like the others. Maybe there was more to the ritual than anyone knew.

Her eyes scanned the cabin, searching for anything that might help her. In the corner, half-hidden beneath a pile of rotting wood, she spotted a stack of old, tattered books. She rushed over and began flipping through them. Most were useless—ancient farming manuals, forgotten family records—but one caught her attention. It was small and bound in black leather, its pages brittle with age. The title sent a chill down her spine: *The Pact of Blood*. Maren's hands trembled as she opened it.

The pages were filled with strange symbols and diagrams, detailed instructions for the ritual of the Harvest. But as she read further, she realized something. The book didn't just describe how to perform the ritual—it also explained how to break it. Her heart raced as she scanned the ancient text. The pact had been made centuries ago by the town's founders, a desperate group of settlers who had sought protection in the woods. In exchange for wealth and safety, they had promised their firstborn children to the creature. The pact could only be broken if the blood of a chosen one was spilled willingly—by their own hand.

Maren froze, the weight of the realization crashing down on her. The town had been sacrificing children for generations to avoid this one, terrible truth. The only way to end the Harvest was for someone like her—someone whose name had been drawn—to take their own life before the creature could claim it. Her blood, freely given, would sever the pact.

But there was another way. The book hinted at a loophole, an obscure passage that spoke of 'the blood of the betrayer.' If the elders—the ones who carried out the ritual were killed, their blood would fulfill the pact. The creature would be forced to take them instead, and the town would be free.

Maren's mind raced. She wasn't ready to die, not like this. But if she could get to the elders, if she could stop them before they got to her... she could end it all. She slammed the book shut and stood, her hands clenched into fists. She wasn't going to be a victim. She would fight back.

Outside, the woods were eerily silent, save for the distant rustling of leaves. Maren crept through the shadows, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew the elders would be gathering at the altar soon, preparing for the next sacrifice. Her blood was what they wanted. But she had a plan.

As she approached the clearing, she could see the flicker of firelight through the trees. The elders stood in a circle, their faces solemn, their hands still stained with the blood of the girl from earlier. The altar was clean now, scrubbed down for the next offering. Maren's gaze locked onto the leader of the elders—Old Man Halstead. He was the one who had raised the blade, the one who had led the town in its bloody tradition for decades. His eyes were cold, dead, as if he had long ago stopped caring about the lives he took.

She slipped silently around the edge of the clearing, her eyes fixed on Halstead. She had taken a blade from the cabin, a rusty old hunting knife, but it would do the job. Her breath quickened as she got closer, the weight of the blade heavy in her hand. This was her chance.

She lunged. The blade sank deep into Halstead's back, and he let out a guttural cry. Blood poured from the wound as he collapsed to the ground, his eyes wide with shock. The other elders turned, their faces twisted in horror, but Maren didn't stop. She pulled the knife free and drove it into Halstead's chest again and again, the blood spraying across her face.

The clearing erupted into chaos. The elders screamed for help, but no one came. Maren moved like a wild animal, slashing and stabbing, her hands slick with blood. One by one, the elders fell, their bodies crumpling to the ground in pools of crimson. When it was over, Maren stood alone in the clearing, her chest heaving, the knife trembling in her hand. Blood soaked the earth beneath her feet, seeping into the roots of the dead trees. And then, the ground began to shake.

A low rumbling growl echoed through the woods, and Maren's heart nearly stopped. The creature was coming. She could feel it—its hunger, its rage. But something was different. As the blood of the elders soaked into the ground, the trees began to move, their branches twisting and writhing like living things. The symbols carved into the bark began to glow with a faint, eerie light. The creature, massive and grotesque, emerged from the shadows, but it stopped short at the edge of the clearing. It couldn't enter.

Maren's heart pounded as she realized what had happened. The blood of the betrayers had been spilled, and the pact was broken. The creature was bound to the clearing now, unable to leave, unable to claim another life. For the first time in her life, Maren felt a glimmer of hope. The Harvest was over. But as she stood there, covered in blood, the weight of what she had done crashed down on her. The town would never forgive her. She had killed their leaders, destroyed their way of life. And though the creature was trapped, she could still feel its eyes on her, hungry and hateful.

Maren turned and walked away, leaving the clearing behind her. She knew she could never return to Blackwater. She would always be an outcast, a murderer. But she had survived. And as she disappeared into the woods, the creature's growl echoed one last time, a reminder that some pacts were never truly broken.

∗

INTO THE OCEAN Lauren McCormick, 18

Water was everywhere. The calm dark blue expanse was the only thing seen for miles. Choking down salty air, she treaded the water. She knew how to swim, but so did the creatures in the shadows underneath her. The panic of being in the water, not knowing what was below her, began to set in just as something slimy wrapped around her leg and pulled her beneath the surface.

She fought to get back to the surface while she was dragged down. Salt water filled her mouth, taking the place of air she desperately needed. Every time she managed to get close to the surface a wave would crash overhead, helping the thing around her leg keep her in the water. Opening her eyes, the salty sting urged her to close them again. The absence of air made her lungs burn and her head spin; her body begged to breathe something, *anything* to relieve this pain. Looking into the darkness, she couldn't see what was holding onto her but she could see the faint outline of giant bones, like whale bones, bigger than anything she had seen above the surface.

The slimy feeling wrapped around her leg let go and she swam with all her might back to the surface, praying that she could get air into her body before she passed out and never escaped the sea. She burst through the water's surface, gulping air down into her lungs. The shore was in front of her, filled with people; no one had noticed the battle she had just waged for her life. Her toes hit the sand she was now able to reach. She ran as fast as she could while still being in the water. She began to smile as the shore came closer with each stride.

The sand disappeared.

Everyone disappeared.

She fell.

Water embraced her, welcoming her back into its cold, dark eternity.

Seaweed began to encircle her body, tying her limbs together. She was pulled into the deep darkness; where she thought sand had been, nothing remained. There was only that darkness with seaweed-covered bones bringing her closer and closer to death's merciful arms. Anything would be better than this, better than being another victim of the ocean's brutality.

Her heart pounded as she thrashed against the seaweed trapping her. The slimy plant broke apart. She looked up toward the surface, it seemed like it was miles out of her reach. Kicking and ripping at the water, she began to propel herself forward. Desperation was her only source of energy as she felt herself slipping back into a lightheaded, burn-filled pain caused by the lack of air under the ocean.

Her hands were talons, grabbing the water and tearing it apart; she wanted to make it bleed. She had to show the water that if it tried to keep her here, she would be as brutal as the ocean was.

Someone grabbed her wrists. A rescuer, finally come to bring her to the safety of shore once again.

The skin of the person was slimy as it pushed her back under the water. It wasn't a rescuer. It was one of those things again, like the one that had wrapped around her leg. She would never be free.

The sea didn't take prisoners, only bodies, and she was next on its list.

*

THE CATWALK Oscar Ledbetter, 16

A man exploring an abandoned house found an old VHS tape that time left its mark upon. The tape didn't have any writing on it to perhaps give a clue to what the tape contained. But what the man, and the world, would find would be better left unfound...

The tape starts with a someone taking their camera into the woods; the person filming is chasing what looks like their pet cat. The cat runs into a hole in the ground, but this hole has doors. The man, clearly anxious about following the cat, climbs in the hole slowly. He drops the camera after missing a rung on the ladder heading down, so we don't see him climb the rest of the way. The man hurries down the stairs, exclaiming, "The doors just shut! How am I supposed to leave after finding my stupid cat!?"

He picks up the camera and shows the room he is currently in. The room is mostly dark and gloomy, but has an odd reddish-orange glow. The glow seems to originate from the opening into the next room. The camera shows him finding the cat, but the cat runs deeper into the next room. The man chases him through five different rooms; it is very hard to tell what is happening in those rooms due to the low quality of the camera and how fast he is running.

"Munkles, stop running away so I can feed you!" the man exclaims as he chases the cat deeper into this underground complex. Inexplicably, the man ends up in a train station. This train station looks exactly like the Grand Central Terminal, but any writing is unreadable. The clock in the center is missing all of the hands, so the current time can't be told. The man explores deeper in the train station and finds that no one is around. The cat can be heard running into where the train would collect passengers, and the man follows at a fast pace.

While there are multiple jump cuts in between, the man has clearly been running for at least an hour chasing this cat. Suddenly, a very loud noise, likely amplified by the tunnel's acoustics, screams from behind the man. We see a fast-approaching light source coming from behind him as well. He runs and luckily for him, there was another station to escape from what is likely a train. The train speeds off, not stopping for any passengers that could have been waiting. Yet there were no passengers, and it doesn't look like there has been for a while.

This train station looks exactly like the one he was at before, but it has that reddishorange glow from the second room the man had entered. This train station has its words in something more legible than the gibberish in the last station. A recent study of this section of the tape states that it looks like Latin, but rearranged to not be read accurately (Strokenger 17-18). The cat darts under the man's legs and runs into a bright light. The man chases after the cat yet again, not realizing that he may never be able to leave this place.

Running through the bright light, the man finds himself in a dark passageway with multiple paths. The man exclaims loudly "Munkly, stop running!" Earlier, as an anonymous post on some forum lost to the tides of the Internet states, "The man had called his cat Munkles earlier, but calls him Munkly here, I'm not sure if it's the camera's audio bugging or if he actually said that." This could be explored further but it's not necessary to understand the journey this man takes.

Due to the length of time the man takes to make his way through the labyrinth, the transcript was summarized to make reading it easier and less repetitive.

The camera shows four different paths, all on one side of the passageway. The man originally chose the first path he could reach, but after sustaining minor injuries from a sudden drop in the floor, he doubled back and chose the second. The camera suggests that he is limping through the second path, suggesting that he may have sprained or even broken it.

After spending thirty minutes on this path, a loud screech rends its way through the long corridor. After brightening the footage, the origin of the sound is revealed to be of avian origin, but looks like no bird or creature native to any continent. The head of the creature is similar to that of the *Aegypius monachus*, a carrion bird. The body is more similar to that of the mandrill, but has feathers ending at the mid-waist. The man runs away, even with the hurt leg, back towards the entrance. Oddly, he dives through a side door that wasn't shown before, and falls into what can only be described as a fiery hellscape. When he lands on the ground (if you'll call it that), he is quickly surrounded by more of those creatures, all varying in species. These creatures can be connected to the chimeras of Greek mythology (*the Iliad* as a prime example). These creatures cause the man to drop his camera and give us one of the only sightings of his face.

The man's face is a vivid representation of the pain being inflicted upon him. If it were a painting, it would be filled with anguish and regret. In fact, multiple different art pieces are made depicting this scene. All of them, oddly, paint his face in utter happiness as the chimeras rip into his flesh, which is not what is shown in the tape.

The c[*angels*]himeras leave the man to die, and the cat he has been following walks up to him. The camera is still on the ground, but we can see the cat's face for the first time, too. The cat's face is completely black, similar to that of the voids of interstellar space, except for two perfectly oval-shaped eyes that have black pupils in the middle.

"Foolish ma[*human*]..." the cat says, but with no mouth to utter those cold, bo[*heart-rending*]ne-chilling words. "You should have known that I was not your only source of happiness in life."

The man screams, rage filling in for his sadness: "Where is he!?"

The 'cat' brings up a screen that shows the real cat waiting for his food back at the man's home. "This...is where you go when you di[*born again*]e" says the 'cat.'

"So this is He[aven]ll, then?" asks the man, tears streaming down his face.

"You could call it that," the 'cat' says.

* * * **

The last frame on the tape shows the man having that face of gaiety the paintings depicted. His smile is so wide, it disfigures the rest of his face, making him no longer look human. The chimeras, while widely popular in the science forums, are never seen again. Christian viewers, in some cases, use this as evidence of Hell being real, and incite fear in multiple small neighborhoods. The wider news channels denounced this as a "frivolous art project." Yet the scenes depicted could not have been supported financially. No one knows who the man actually was, many considering him never to have been real in the first place. The footage was taken down five days after it was published, and never seen again...

*

ALL IN YOUR HEAD River Wasserburg, 16

woke up with a start, my mind attempting to sort reality from fiction. The visions happened again. I went to my bathroom to wash all the sweat off my face and, still shivering, tugged clothes onto my body and packed my bag for school. After putting my barely-finished work in my bookbag, I returned to the bathroom to take my daily meds. I took out the bottle of CalmX and swallowed my required two pills for the morning. The medicine cleared the harrowing thoughts from my mind, and with it, I headed downstairs. Looking around my living room, I saw my mother drunkenly passed out on the couch. I sighed, grabbed a piece of toast, and walked out the door.

Sitting in the classroom, I watched the teacher roam around asking people to answer the questions on the board, like a jailer would ask his prisoners to mine rocks. I would rarely be called on. The teacher knew that if she ever did, she would have a three-hour fight on her hands, for I loathe answering questions in front of the class. Every time I even think about getting up in front of so many people, I can only imagine myself making an embarrassing mistake. I can only imagine everybody in this room laughing and pointing at me. This doesn't mean that she doesn't ask me to do it sometimes, though. Sometimes she does ask me to go up in front of the jury, and sometimes I can force myself to follow the obey her. Sometimes it goes well, and I don't hear anybody laughing at my expense. I get the question right, and I sit back down. But I know that deep down in my heart, all of their minds were making fun of every little thing I did.

After class, I quickly leave to go back home. I make sure to keep my head down and stay out of the way of everyone; with my eyes pointed at the floor though, they don't see the person walking directly at me. I bump into them, dropping the books I was carrying in the process. I scrambled like an egg on a hot pan, trying to grab my possessions. My heart starts racing as my mind encourages it with visions, visions that the person I bumped into will announce my mistake to everyone. I gather my stuff and race out of the school. I get home, ignore my mother who has her back to me watching TV, and run up to my bathroom to take my CalmX. Quickly lunging it down my throat, I curl up into a ball in the corner of my bathroom, waiting for all of it to go away. I stay like this for a while, getting so tired I eventually pass out on the spot, being forced to live out that night's nightmares on my rusted floor.

* * * **

The next morning, I woke up the same way I always do. After getting up off the floor, I checked the time and upon noticing I awoke an hour early, I headed to take a shower. The shower cleansed me of all the dirt and grime my bathroom gave to me over the night. It was one of the few places I could close my eyes and breathe, for it was something that wasn't alive.

I got out of the shower, dried off, and got dressed. Walking by the mirror, however, I noticed a bit of acne on my face. In revolt, I went to attack it and remove it from my skin. I tried the normal route of simply popping it, but it wouldn't budge. No matter; I am prepared for these scenarios. I went to my closet and pulled out my tools. Going back to the mirror, I started to dig, I started to prod, I started to jab, I started to stab. I had to do more and more, for it wasn't going away. When I felt a sharp pain, I considered stopping, but the vision of my classmates laughing at my horrid face was what drove me on.

Longer and longer I worked, until eventually I set down the bloody knives and looked in the glass. I was appalled at what I had done to myself; for what I saw were numerous, bloody gouges going through my body. Newly open, pulsating, bloody messes; tunnels cutting through me. Cave-like gaps in my skin, going down to my inner core. They were disgusting, sickly red, with dim shadows cast at the ends of them. I stared for eons, watching as more and more drops of blood and flesh fell between the tunnels I had created. I watched my blood pour down my face and down my body like a red waterfall falling over a mountain. I felt numb to the pain that I was receiving, as if my mind wasn't even registering that it was a puzzle with no middle pieces in it.

Eventually, my mind snapped back to consciousness and I started to throw water in my face in an attempt to wash the horrors away. The cold water stung my wounds, but the gaps persisted. I knew that I couldn't talk about this to my mother or a doctor; what if they called me a freak? I had to do something to cover this up, for no one could see me as this monster. I put on a mask and sunglasses to build a fake face for anyone who might look at me. Still the throbbing, etching pain shivered all along my skeleton. To attempt to stop all of it, I grabbed my bottle of CalmX, taking three pills before shoving the bottle back onto the sink and storming out of the house and to school.

Sitting at my desk, I could feel everyone's eyes on me. I could feel them judging me, judging me for being a freak. A normal person wouldn't do this, a normal person wouldn't carve themselves up and go to school acting like nothing happened. A normal person wouldn't sit in their chair as blood pooled on their shoulders, weighing down their body and conscience. My visions continued to invade my brain, swarming me with what I thought people would do to me. They would drag me out of here kicking and screaming, announcing to the world what a monstrous creature I am. No one would ever talk to me again; I would be shunned and shamed.

"Jim? Could you come up and answer this question on the board for me, please?"

I looked up at my teacher glancing over at me, somehow unaware of the red ichor I was covered in. She held out her piece of chalk, silently begging me to get up and just go to the board. I started to grip my desk and hyperventilate. The visions of being mocked came back. And that's when I noticed another sharp pain, a different pain than the holes in my face.

I looked down and noticed that, somehow, there were nails in my arm. Construction nails pierced deep down into my arms. I tried to lift my arms, to get them away, but they wouldn't move; the nails had gone straight through the desk, locking me in place. That was when the nails started to cough out blood, bubbling out of my wounds. I looked back over to my teacher in a panic, my eyes begging her to help me, save me in some way. But she looked straight through me, becoming frustrated that I hadn't gotten up by this point.

I realized that I had to take the CalmX, one way or another, to attempt to stop all this pain. After that, I could just grit my teeth until all of it went away. Staring at my locked arms, I started to tug. I pulled up with all my might attempting to free myself. I roared into the air while my forearms slid over the nails, the rust and steel provoking my nerves and digging into my nervous system. I could feel my skin and cells being torn from me, staying on the clingy metal rods. With one last jolt, I ripped my arms from the desk, the blood spewing out of my holed arms like a faucet. Ignoring everybody, I fled from the room and headed straight to my house.

I tried to shield myself as I walked back home, but every time I raised my arms to hide my face, I would simply stare out of the holes that were in them. Finally, I got up to my door and fumbled for my keys. Opening the door, I was met with my mother. She was leaning up against the hallway, an almost-empty bottle of vodka held loosely in her hands, primed to slip and fall at any moment. Her face was flush with red; from the alcohol or the anger, I couldn't decide.

"Where were you?!"

I couldn't answer.

"The school called and told me you just dashed out of your classroom! What do you think you were doing?!"

I couldn't answer. I felt like all the breath in my lungs had taken its leave, leaving me gasping for air.

"Answer me, god damn it! You're my son, and you will do as I say!"

I couldn't answer. I couldn't breathe in, I couldn't breathe out. My lungs began to fight me. I opened my mouth, but no air moved. My eyes started to hurt, my lungs started to scream. The holes all over continued to bore into me, blood still spilling all over my white canvas body.

"I said, answer me!"

She slapped me; I fell to my knees. It was all just too much. So much pain, so much happening at once. My hand went to my chest as I gasped for air, gasped for anything. My brain was in overdrive, solely focused on processing how much pain I was in. I struggled to my knees, slammed my mother to the side, and ran up the stairs. I barged into my room and thudded into my bathroom counter.

I desperately fumbled to open my bottle of CalmX, and after getting around the stick of butter the lid was, I dumped multiple pills into my hand; hundreds falling out and onto the floor. I couldn't see due to how much blood was pouring into my eyes—it was like the world had slipped red glasses on me. I tossed pills into my mouth and forced them to go down without air. I braced for the impact, for all of it to go away.

But it didn't.

I opened my eyes, and in a panic, started shoving more pills down my throat. None of them worked. More and more I had; thousands, it felt like. All the while having visions of everybody around me calling me a freak, a monster. I felt another sharp pain in my back, the pain of multiple knives stabbing me. I kept swallowing and swallowing until it happened. I stood straight up as all of it faded away in an instant. I felt happy for the first time in my life, but only for a second.

For as all the pain went away, all the holes and stabbings, a new one came to me. A pain that wasn't sharp, but inflated like a balloon rising in my chest. My body started to spew out foam, as an opened bottle of champagne would after being shaken. I could hear my heartbeat echo throughout the room, it getting slower, slower, and slower.

And then, I faded. I faded from existence. My body dropped to the floor, just like how my consciousness fell from reality.

I hit the ground, and I died.

* * * **

There was a white padded room. A double-sided mirror was on the fourth wall. The only object inside was the lifeless body that once belonged to Jim Truman. Jim lay flat on the floor with wide eyes and a puddle of foam formed around his mouth. Jim wore an orange jumpsuit, the back labeled with his number. The mirror swung open as a man in a blue janitor uniform walked in and went to pick up Jim's lifeless body. He lifted him by the shoulders and dragged him out of the room; Jim's eyes still dazedly looking at his once-called home.

Two scientists sat in the room on the other side of the mirror. One looked at the other and said, "Such a shame, you know. After five years of having him here, we were still unable to cure him."

The second scientist looked down with guilt, silently acknowledging what the other had said, Jim's seizure still bright in his mind. He grabbed Jim's folder, opening it to see his documents. On them was written, 'Jim Truman. Diagnosis: Severe Early-Onset Schizophrenia. Age: 20. Status: —'

In the blank status reading, the scientist grabbed his pencil and, like a reaper finishing his kill, stenciled in, 'Deceased.'

"You know, you still haven't told me how you escaped those things."

The second scientist looked up from the folder, looking for an answer to what the other had said.

"Well, it was tough, but what ended up snapping me out of all of it was just ignoring it. I took a stance and told all of it to go to hell. I wasn't going to let it control me anymore. And when I finally decided that, I woke up. That was it. I just had to realize that it was all in my head."

*

If you or someone you know are struggling with thoughts of self-harming, please consider reaching out to COPES Crisis Hotline (918.744.4800) for support.

THE SNAKE MADE OF HATE Izabel Baker, 15

The life of Nancy Wallace seemed stuck in place. Her life had dug in its heels and resisted even the slightest change. A small black snake with large yellow eyes slithered across her shoes. It couldn't have been bigger than her hand. *It's mocking me, going to and from while I have to stay here.*

Inside, the TV blared. She could hear it even from outside. *Won't he just end it already!* Her father, Alby Wallace, was always sitting in his chair in the living room, watching the television and being as useless as ever. The thought always came to Nancy through gritted teeth. She couldn't help but furrow her brows every time she saw him. Every time she saw him doing *nothing*. Never helping, never raising a single finger. It made her sick.

Every day, her parents did nothing but yell and bicker, a never-ending cycle. Never once had her parents ever seemed happy, or proud, or pleased.

"Nancy, get in and chop the carrots," snapped her mother, Susan Wallace. She was a short woman with unkempt hair and a wrinkled forehead.

"I am," Nancy sighed. *Oh, how I wish you were gone*, she thought to herself. She walked to the door and out of the corner of her eye saw the snake slither under the porch, but she could have sworn it was larger now.

She grunted and went inside. She could hear her father's boots tapping loudly against the floor in the living room. She could hear him grunting and sighing.

"How long is that going to take you?" he shouted.

"It wouldn't take so long if you'd just be quiet," Susan yelled at Alby as she thrust her ladle into the pot.

I want to put an end to this, Nancy told herself.

Once dinner was done, and the darkness of night fell over the Wallace house, commotion erupted outside. Squawks and screeches and the clacking of claws against the fence.

"Nancy," her father yelled, "calm those god-forsaken birds!"

Nancy left the unwashed dishes in the sink. Her boots stomped down the steps out

the front door. Across the yard she could see the chicken coop and the surrounding pen. The chickens were jumping frantically around.

Nancy grabbed the pitchfork that was leaned against the side of the house and carried it with her. She raised the pitchfork above the pen and then brought it down upon the insufferable birds. One stab then another. The last chicken stopped its frightened calls and fell as a corpse to the ground. In the center of all the blood and feathers was a large black snake, already feasting on the chickens.

Nancy paused. The creature looked harmless, just a long mass of dark black scales and two bright yellow eyes. It had to be at least half her height.

If her father came out to witness the gruesome scene, he would yell and bring his gun. The creature that had simply done what it must do to survive. *He would be* furious, *wouldn't he?* Just like when she made the smallest mistake or when things weren't quite to his liking, just like now. But she had to calm the chickens somehow. The snake had to survive somehow. It had to eat them, and now by killing those bothersome birds she had prolonged the life of that poor snake.

I had to kill them. That was right. The snake could only obtain what it needed by eating the chickens. And wasn't it for the better for everyone? The chickens always caused such a ruckus, always took the time and energy of Nancy. But when they were all dead, when the snake ate them, all the sound had stopped. So it was for the best, and yet everyone would tell her what she had done was horrible.

Nancy looked back at those yellow eyes, those curved white fangs. At first, the creature seemed so intimidating, but now she looked upon it with familiarity. It had empathy for her; it understood her. It was grateful to her. She placed down the pitchfork and nodded to the snake, who appeared to nod back.

She returned to her house with a gaze of stone upon her eyes. Her mother was nowhere to be seen. Her father was once again sitting in his chair. His balding head stayed still on the screen even when he spoke to Nancy.

"You finally got them under control, took you long enough," he said in a coarse voice. "You never get things done when I want them done," he scoffed. Nancy felt all her muscles tense and felt her fists clench. *Soon, soon, it'll all be over.*

And soon it was the following day; she continued about how she normally would but with a lift to her spirit. The anticipation and excitement had a grip on her. She could barely wait till dinner time. She started her day early to clean up the chicken pen; she placed the dead into garbage bags and shoveled the red hay out of the pen and replaced it. She went to the shed and hid the gory bags and took a small can with a graphic of a rat on it. A grin curled up the side of her lips.

The sun set so that moonlight and mist fell over the small homestead. Inside, the Wallaces were preparing a meal together. Nancy had prepared the wine; its typical deep red color was lightened a little though it was barely noticeable to anyone but Nancy. She held her breath until the first sip was taken.

Her father lifted his glass to his lips and took a gulp. He squinted his eyes, as if confused, but then shrugged and took another. Her mother took a sip, then another, then her father took one. In between bites of food, the couple took sips and gulps.

Nancy waited, she waited patiently, not even eating her food, which now seemed revolting as she thought of the better things to come. *Soon, just a bit longer, it has to settle;* she told herself. She could barely keep still. Her father's behavior turned bizarre. He started gasping and his shoulders shook. He lurched up with a yell. He threw himself this way and that way. Glassware and food fell onto the floor.

Her mother looked at her with fearful eyes. "You monster, what have you done?"

"Just wait a moment and it'll all be over," Nancy murmured in a chilling tone. Her mother screamed. At that moment, her father fell over onto the table in a spasm of choking and gasping and then he went still, as cold as a grave.

"How could you," Susan yelled. She grabbed her steak knife and held it out in front of her. "Get away from me, I'll—," she started to say. But she never finished those words. Her hands clamped up, and the knife fell. She stumbled around the table and reached for Nancy with a twitching arm.

Susan tumbled to the floor in a twitching heap and eventually went still. Nancy kicked the repulsive form just for good measure. Then she grabbed her father from the table and took up her mother by the foot and dragged them out the door into the yard.

She stopped on the steps. There was the snake again, its length was pulled up to almost Nancy's height. It seemed even bigger now; it had to be as big as her, if not larger.

"What a grisly scene," said the snake. "Don't worry though, I don't discriminate against the unfortunate. Those born into terrible situations shouldn't be denied a happy ending."

Nancy stumbled towards him, her parents still in her hands. "Please, I did what I had to do. Can't I be free now?"

"Come closer and I will give you all you wish for," it hissed.

Nancy dropped her parents onto the dirt and approached the snake with her arms held out wide. The snake flicked its tongue out, its body pulled back.

She let out a bloodcurdling scream.

FLORENCE TOWNSHIP

Kealeigh Weatherford, 16

Interview 01 Excerpt. Case: 1382390 Subject: Florence Township. Interviewer: Interviewee: Withers, Susanna Nicole. Date/Time: 2/13/93, 17:23.

: Hello, Ms. Withers. My name is , and I'll be interviewing you tonight. Do you mind if I sit? Withers: Go right ahead! It's not my chair. (She laughs.)

: Glad to see a sense of humor still on you. You've been through a lot in these past few months, huh?

Withers: Yes, I suppose. Uhm...what's the interview for?

: Well, ma'am, I'm sure you're very aware of what happened in your town.

Withers: Oh. I didn't think he was... (She pauses for a minute.) I didn't know anything about the church.

: This isn't an interrogation, ma'am, don't worry. I'm just going to ask you for your side of the story, and I'd like for you to answer honestly.

Withers: So you're not going to shove a lamp in my face and scream at me like in the movies?

: No, ma'am.

Withers: And I'm not going to get in trouble for telling you, right? I... (She sighs.) I'll be safe?

: Of course. You and your neighbors are protected, and if you ask me, I highly doubt we'd have probable cause to arrest you. Withers: (After hesitation.) Alright. Where do I start?

: The morning when Mr. Wood arrived at your home.

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Withers: Who?

: Mr. Oswald Wood?

Withers: Oh, Ozzie! Alright, let me think, I'll tell you all I remember.

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I: Good Morning!

It was a cool evening in January when he first arrived, lugging along a suitcase with a separate bag on top, performing an intense balancing act as the wheels hit the grooves between pavement up to the door. He recounts his mission to himself in a mutter, his eyes occasionally darting around to ensure no one could hear.

"Alright, be calm, just find your proof—" The thought dies in his throat as he sees the curtains on the front rustle closed. He mutters a curse before the front door opens, and a woman with far too much energy and a skirt that drags the floor appears from the house's maw.

"Hi! I'm Susanna, it's so nice to meet you!"

She grins, her curly hair bouncing as she shakes his free hand. "I've been preparing all day, come in, come in! Shoes off at the door, please." She practically pushes him inside as she drags his things in with them, trying in vain to drag it all across the carpet. She pants, "I can... take these to your room!"

"Please, I can get it later. Thank you." He sighs as he takes it from her.

"So, what brings you here, Mister ...?"

"Oswald Wood." He nods to her, setting his things to the side. "I'm just here to see if this place is right for me. I am confused as to why they would let me room with a woman, though." Noticing that statement clearly came out wrong, he goes to correct himself, but she stops him.

"Oh no, it's okay! I know it's a little unorthodox, but we're all like this! We all believe that it's completely fine for you to stay here. Some men are actually moved into women's houses here to try to spark relationships in town!" She giggles, as if this were normal.

He enquires further. "Is this something that happens often?"

"Usually only whenever we don't have enough houses to keep the community

growing. Frees up space for the new roommates to make more people, if you get what I'm saying."

He flushes. "I hope you don't think we'll be doing that."

"Oh no, no! You're my guest, I wouldn't..." She stammers, flustered and reddening as she tries to defend herself. "I mean...?"

He stops her with a chaste smile, choosing to ignore that topic for now. "So, where will I be sleeping?"

She recovers with a shaking sigh as she leads him down to a guest room, furnished with a bed and desk. "If you happen to need anything, I'm just across the hall. I'll let you get set up and leave you be."

She shuts the door softly behind her, and he prepares the space for his work. He takes out several files, tucking a few away beneath his mattress, and pockets a small pistol. He looks over some of his papers again, reviewing his story that lay alongside his name and assignment code emblazoned on the page:

You are here to see if this neighborhood is suitable to live in. You come from Massachusetts, and you've heard this place is nice. You were a friend of Marta Parker, who came here in 1992. Inquire about her whereabouts. Do not investigate alone.

The missing persons in this town, Marta and many more, brought him here in some way. He's here to find them—that is, if there are remains or proof of where they were. He's well aware of what they do to "sinners" in this town, but he isn't too sure anyone within its walls knows as well. The only way to know is to ask.

He crams his things in drawers and prays she doesn't look through his things, then goes back out to Susanna, who's trying to make lunch.

"Oh," she titters, not expecting him. "Did you want something to eat?"

"No thank you, I have my own food."

"...Why? That's not really...allowed. We all have to eat what's given the okay by the church." She tenses.

Improvisation was never Oswald's strong suit, so before he can break a sweat he blurts out, "I have allergies."

"Oh. Well, I guess that's... since you're just a guest... Just...clean it up."

"Would you mind telling me about the food restrictions?" he says, clicking a button in his pocket to record their words. "Is there anything I need to know?" Oswald watches her body language. He makes note of how she seems to flinch, drawing in a sharp breath, trying to continue her cooking as she dips her head a little lower. "Uhm...Father Bruno says the meat we're given here is the only food that's truly holy. Everything else here are things we have to garden or make ourselves, and even then there are things that are somewhat taboo."

"Like?"

"Well...apples, for a start. Those are used to trick people." She looks at him, and her expression drops when she realizes he expects more, now looking like a tired housewife rather than a friendly roommate. "Tomatoes are also a no, so are eggplants. While they're uncommon in this area, so are dragon fruits. Carrots are a no because they're comparable to biting off fingers and we don't want children to get ideas..."

If only she knew. "I see. Well, fortunately, I have none of that. Why is-?"

"Why is the meat holy? No one knows. I think it's because it comes from parrots." "Parrots?"

"Yes, and other talking birds. That way they can say they also love our God and consent to being turned into a meal."

Well, that's quite the statement. "...Is this what they say it is?"

Susanna chuckles sheepishly, "No, that's just what I think. No one knows where it comes from, really, but I think it's butchered here in town. I could take you to try some?"

"That won't be necessary." He clicks off the recorder. "I already know I won't like it, if that is an acceptable answer."

She shrugs. "Your loss, Ozzie."

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Interview 02 Excerpt. Case: 1382390 Subject: Florence Township. Interviewer: Township. Interviewee: Wood, Oswald Sebastian. Date/Time: 2/13/93, 09:02.

Spooky Stories • 2024

: So she had no knowledge of the disappearances? Wood: She knew they happened, but assumed they were just people moving out. She's wholly innocent on that matter.

: Did you meet this pastor?

Wood: Yes. It was then I collected my first piece of evidence of some form of crime. You read this in my report, yes?

: Yes, I did. Though, are you sure the entire township had no idea of what happened? That people were-

Wood: Mr. , I don't appreciate that line of questioning. If you must know my opinion then I suggest you read my report again.

: Alright, yes.

Wood: Now, to my statement on the day, Ms. Susanna was nothing but hospitable. She made breakfast and brought us both to church, and introduced me as a guest. The pastor greeted me directly and shook my hand, and I'd never felt more cold under someone's gaze. If eyes are the window to the soul, I say no one was home.

: (He snickers.)

Wood: I'm not calling him stupid.

: I know, I know. Please, continue.

Wood: She shrunk when she saw him. I thought she must've known something.

: And when you questioned her?

Wood: I didn't get the chance that day. (He clears his throat.) Father Bruno took her aside and told her to be wary of me, I believe, and then she was oddly quiet for a few days. I still don't quite understand what got into her.

: I see. Did she seem scared? Like she was threatened? Wood: No, it was more like she was confused and worried. I just...I wanted to help her understand and trust me. I figured a partnership would be mutually beneficial.

: Yes, you've mentioned this. That was...certainly a move. I wouldn't have done it myself, but I suppose you're lucky she's got such a strong will. I do have to ask, just out of my own curiosity though. Do you regret telling her the truth?

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(There's a prolonged silence.)
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Wood: I...don't know.



II: Have Some Friends For Dinner!

Susanna quietly swept for hours. It was way past clean, but Oswald assumed it was a soothing activity. Eventually she stopped and turned to him, her eyes never meeting his.

"I'm sorry I've been so silent...Father told me something about you, and I've been frightened to speak ever since."

He puts aside his book, clicking on his pocket recorder again. "Why is that? What did he say?"

She holds the broom to herself, looking antsy. "He...said you were lying to us. That you were some kind of spy."

...oh, no.

"I think he may be right. You don't talk much about yourself, and when you do sometimes things don't line up with what you said originally. Once you said you were from Massachusetts, lived there your whole life, and then another time you said you were from Mississippi. You said you have allergies, but you've eaten most everything I've given, save for the meat. When I asked, you said you didn't have allergies and were...vegetarian, was it? I dunno..."

"Susanna..." He sighs.

"I won't tell! I promise. Just...don't lie to me, please? Why are you actually here?"

He sighs. While he feels horrible to lie, especially to someone who clearly just wants to understand, it could be catastrophic to tell her. "Tell me something. What does the church dictate?"

"Almost everything, why?"

"When does this meat come in?"

"Why does that -? Uhm...after our 'rapture.'"

It was never just the "sinners"…was it? He thought. He looks at her with wide eyes, willing her to continue.

"The holy people get to join the church and meet God, they say. I don't know anything about it. I think it's just for when people move out to wish them well."

Oswald, befuddled, stands and tries to stammer out what he wants to say, but nothing of worth comes out.

She looks afraid. "You have to understand. There is no rapture, and no one is moving out of this town."

"What?"

"Those people are dead, Susanna."

For a moment she doesn't move, but eventually the ideas click together in her head—"holy meat," mass disappearance—and she starts to weep. He'd like to console her, tell her that none of this is her fault, but Susanna pushes away and lets her broom clatter to the floor, and her knees come down with it.

"No. That...we wouldn't...that's—no, you're lying to me!" She splutters, "Who *are* you? Why are you here if you just want to lie to me, and accuse my community of awful things!"

"Do you want my proof?" Now this was a little too far. This would traumatize an already distressed individual, but...prying her from the jaws of this brainwashing would be beneficial, right? Inside knowledge would help in the long run, and she knows at least something about the church. Though, the stress of knowing could just break her...

"This won't be a pretty sight. You'll learn things—disgusting, inhumane things have happened here, and I insist that, if you do choose to see what I have to show you, you keep in mind that this has nothing to do with you. If you'll listen to me, I'll tell and show you all that I can. If you won't, I won't make you, but all I ask is that you let me continue to stay here to continue my operations."

She stares at him, eyes wide and watery, clutching her skirt. She must have some modicum of an idea that he may be telling the truth, or else she would've shoved him out. He can see her thoughts, the wheels turning in her brain, her eyes searching for anything to suggest what to do. She squeaks, like a mouse cornered, "Are you...being honest?...trying to help me?"

"Yes. I think, maybe, if you knew what I know...you could help me get everyone stuck here out into the world. You just can't tell anybody."

Her face contorts through several emotions, choking back a sob as she tries to make up her mind. She wipes her eyes, and pushes herself up from the floor. "...I'll listen."

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Interview 03 Excerpt. Case: 1382390 Subject: Florence Township. Interviewer: The second secon

Withers: I think I threw up for half an hour. He had to stop me from trying to force more out.

: I see. I'm sorry that happened.

Withers: It's...awful. It's all absolutely horrible. I don't know how I hadn't figured it out. I knew that there was something wrong, sure, but...I never thought...(She sighs.)

: You couldn't have done anything. It's alright. Withers: How could this happen? I mean, why would anybody want to...? And those pictures! Those people surely didn't deserve...that. Oh,

: I understand this is difficult for you. You are not at fault for what happened, and we're getting you whatever help we can to help you adjust to normal life.

Withers: (Crying.) I was born there. I've been there my entire life.

: Ms. Withers, just because you were told to believe something, and believed it, does not mean you are a criminal, or a monster.

God...

Withers: Do I have a taste for blood now? I don't want to live in fear of myself-!

: Please, calm down.

Withers: Don't tell me to calm down! (Her crying intensifies.)

(Silence for a moment, other than Withers' sobs.)

: Alright. That's enough for today, ma'am. I'll get you some tissues and we'll arrange a ride home for you. We can talk more tomorrow. Withers: Okay. (She sniffs.) I...Thank you. But, uhm...what are you going to do about the township? About my family?

: We're working on that. Please, just calm down and don't worry about it. It's in safe hands now.

(End of tape.)

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WHISPERING SILENCE

Dominiq Webster, 17

If I was still just a kid, maybe four or five, it would've been the rain that scared me. If I was still a young man, around fifteen or sixteen, it would've been the creaking floorboards and dusty shelves that made me lie awake at night. But in this moonlight, I find myself not able to sleep because of the house many would call haunted or the storm some may deem violent.

Instead, it's due to the whispers.

I can't describe them. I hear them all but forget as quickly as my mind registers them. They flood in like waves, billowing waves! I can't hear myself think. I wonder, if I spoke, could I even hear that? I lay here on this cool autumn night for minutes that have now likely formed hours. I just want silence. Not sleep—I couldn't care about that. I just want silence!

The funny thing, however, is there *is* silence. Brief moments where the whispers stop. The voices pause at times. Maybe if I can find the source of the cursed whispers, I can have more silence. By some miracle, I can finally feel alone! Most dread loneliness, but I can only crave it.

It's been many years since I had my ears to myself!

No more of that, for now I must get up. Now I must find the ones who are whispering! Must be near, they must be near! I can hear them so clearly, yet the voices are so soft, they can't be down the hall. I get out of bed and look below it like a kid awoken during moonlight from a bump in the night. I find nothing but cobwebs and a spider.

I must keep searching; I have no choice at all. I've grown tired, not physically but mentally. I get up from the dusted wooden floor and walk over to the dresser in the corner of the room. I open each and every drawer, nothing at all but tattered clothes from previous nights and their insanities. I pull the dresser away from the wall to see nothing.

Is that a new sound filling my ears? Laughter, yes, and it is my own. The whispers are gone as I laugh and laugh, remembering that this is not the first night I've searched. But this will be the night I find the dreaded whisperers, it has to be. I get out my laughter and soon enough, the whispers return. Where are they if not in this barren room? Wait...I hear movement in the hallway.

I sprint out of my room and look left, then right. Nearby is the kitchen; it must be there. Of course, the whisperers were in my room! They knew I was searching and ran off to the kitchen! As I enter the dreary room where one family might make baked goods for a special event, I hear clearer whispers that I can remember long enough to respond to. "Your family misses you..." I hear them say. But I know they're wrong. They could never miss me. They left me here, after all.

"I'll find you!" I yell out to the fiend who invades my home. "Leave me alone already!" I search under the table, in the oven, in the pantries of minimum food. There it is. The source of the scurrying from before, but not the source of any whispering. A rat has walked around my floors for the past couple days. Now I have found it. Lucky me, this makes for a good breakfast when the sun rises. I know the rat won't leave anytime soon, so I leave it be. For now, I must search.

I turn away from the cupboard and look out into the dining room. I see small bones on the table, recently picked clean. Foolish me, I seem to have forgotten to clean up after my dinners again. I'd throw them into the neighbors' yard, but then they'd know where their cat went. Deciding the mess is a matter to be resolved later, I search under the table and then in the once-decorative and now worn-down cabinet.

All I see inside the cabinet is the human skull, so I greet it as I always do. "Hello, Brother." I close the cabinet and turn to see the window. I approach slowly, the view tantalizing enough for me to forget the whispers, that is until I spot my family's old house. They grow louder at that moment.

"They tried to help you," I hear before I clamp my hands over my cars. The whispers persist, louder even. "Remember your doctor? He helped, too." I know it's all lies, everyone from that time saw problems in me that didn't exist! The only problem I have now was the fiendish voices, wherever they were coming from!

Then I realized what the source was. Of all my agony, the source was dear Brother. I turn to the cabinet he had resided in for the past years and pull him out of his home. I could feel he was unhappy. I know the feeling well, for it was burned into my soul. "It's you! You are the one tormenting me! Just like before!" I shout at him.

My vision goes red, then dark...darker....yet darker. I can feel my body moving, the

ringing in my ears silencing the whispering that came from him. Now he was pleading, just like before. I didn't care then, I won't now. At least, I didn't care before I had done whatever my body forced out of me through rage. That was before, however. After was another story.

After...after was always another story. When my vision and ringing ears calmed, I saw what I had done. Smashed on the floor, underneath my heel, was Brother. No more red in my eyes, now there began to be wetness. Tears began to flow. "Brother...no, not again...Brother, I didn't mean to!" I cry out to him. This time is worse. I have nothing to salvage this time.

The whispers returned, but this time were yells, screams in my ears. I could not handle it; how could anybody? I dash out of my house while I feel my vocal cords vibrating. I know I am yelling but I can't hear it, the screams around me won't stop. "Brother is gone, who are you?!

Why are you following me?!" I scream in return as I run for the calmest place I can think of. I finally arrive at the neighborhood pond, and all goes quiet. I approach the edge of the water and smile down. I start to remember picnics in the sun, when I wasn't so pale. I remember playing games with Brother. Thinking of him brought forth the whisperers who had become screamers to start their assault again. I turn around to where they must be and see no one. "You made me do it! Stop talking, please! You made me...You made me!" I go to clutch my head and stumble backwards in an attempt to escape.

If I was still just a kid, maybe four or five, it would've been the fall that scared me. If I was still a young man, around fifteen or sixteen, it would've been the surrounding water and lack of breath that made me want to flail and cry. But in this moonlight, I find myself calm. The pond I fell into had something I craved. Silence. Finally, with the sweet silence around me, maybe I can sleep peacefully...

"WHY DON'T YOU FIND OUT?"

Chase Venoms, 18

"Why don't you find out?" Her voice is soft, velvety. I can see her smile; her eyes are upturned, her eyebrows slanted. She's not showing her teeth. In a way, she looks strained. Her shoulders bob up and down. Is she crying?

They spike up. She shivered.

Her hand is still outstretched towards me. I don't do anything.

* * * **

A record plays. I think it's Nat King Cole. I would assume it is.

The fire burns beside me as I sit and read a book. It's a very good one. I just picked it up off the shelf as I was waiting for him to come out of the bathroom.

He does, at the same time putting on his jacket. We lock eyes. "Ready?" he asks. I set the book down on the coffee table and get up.

"Yeah." I give him a downward smile and blush a little.

He walks over to me, taking notice of the book before heading for the door. "Dostoevsky?" he asks.

"Gesundheit," I responded. He laughs.

"The author of the book. The Double. You looked like you liked it."

I shrug, not remembering that as the title. "It was alright."

"Good," he responds, opening the door for me. I step outside. It's raining.

"Thanks," I say. I get out my umbrella.

The walk to his car is not long, but I find myself wishing he would get a house. It doesn't have to be fancy. It could be part of a duplex. I wouldn't mind. I don't hate apartments. But the walk to his car could be shorter.

Why do I want it to be shorter? I'd assume that people in relationships probably would say they wish it was longer. More time to spend with them. I understand that. I suppose I feel the same way. I guess I just don't like walking.

He opens the car door for me when we reach it. The parking garage makes the rain sound loud. I get in. He does too.

He starts driving.

* * * **

"Wow," he breathes, holding me by the shoulders as we stumble out of the restaurant. "You," is all he says after that.

"Me?" I almost laughed. I blink, feeling dizzy.

"You're you." He smiles. "I haven't seen that in a while."

"I don't know what you're talking about. It must have been the drinks."

"When was the last time you drank?"

I don't answer. He opens the car door for me.

"Are you driving?" I ask.

"Won't be far," he responds, kicking the engine in gear. I can hear the brakes squeal as he pulls away from our parking spot near the front. I don't know how to feel.

I can feel myself slipping...

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"...all," he stops the car. I snap back awake as he puts it in park. Was I asleep? "What?"

"The abandoned mall. Remember?"

I look around. It's dark outside. The rain still beats down overhead, hitting the parking garage just like it did back at the apartment. "Oh."

"Remember?" he repeats.

I don't.

"What are we doing here?" I say instead.

"You know, baby," he smiles. I do.

I don't think he's ever initiated intimacy this bluntly before. Usually, things lead up to it. Something happens, and it develops slowly. I think that's the way I've always liked it.

"Won't we get-"

"Abandoned. Word's there for a reason." He smiles.

We get in the backseat. We're kissing.

He puts his fingers in my mouth. I don't register it happening.

"You're warm," he mumbles. His sultry voice.

"Gahhak," I say. I don't know what I was meaning to respond with, but that's what it sounded like.

His expression falls.

"You're really warm," he repeats. He yanks his fingers out abruptly.

"What?"

"It was hot," he deadpans. "Not hot-attractive, but warm. Felt like an oven in there."

I briefly catch a look at his fingers. They're wrinkled and red now, like they've been in a hot bath for a while. He doesn't seem to notice.

My tongue laps around my teeth. It feels the same as it's always felt.

"Whatever. Must have been the drinks." He starts kissing my neck. "Did you know vodka naturally heats up your body?" he mumbles in between pecks.

"Mm."

"That's why drunk girls always strip." He says that last line with a twang of something different. I didn't like the way he said "drunk girls."

He's taking my dress off. I let him. I take my underwear off myself. I am stripped bare in front of him.

I think we've done this before. Even if we hadn't, I'd let him.

He keeps going. I let him.

He keeps going.

"You're..." I begin to say it, but I don't want to believe it. I act like it's not happening. I let him. It's getting hard to ignore.

I let it mumble out.

"You're splitting me apart."

I feel my hips begin to break. It hurts. It hurts so bad.

He doesn't notice that I've said anything. He's lost.

Every move he makes splits me open further, like abruptly, repeatedly, slowly tearing paper in two. I let him. He's tearing my legs apart as he does it, his hands slowly jerking themselves farther apart, holding onto the same places on my thighs. I let him. I can see it. I can see the split, starting below my waist, slowly making its way up to my chest. I let him. Right now, it's in the middle of my torso. It hurts so bad. I let him.

I look up at his face.

nothing

I slap it. When he looks back at me, it's there. What was once a blank tan oval—like a mannequin of flesh—now had the features of the boy.

"JESUS!"

He looks mad.

"But you—"

"Jesus Christ, what the hell? I was about to-"

"Your face, it was—"

"IT WAS WHAT?! What could have possibly been so important?!"

I don't know.

"I don't know," I repeat my thoughts. "I don't know what came over me. I thought I saw something."

"God," he sighs loudly and exasperatedly. "God dammit. Why can't you just do these things?"

I didn't know what he meant by that. "What?"

"Whatever. God. God." He begins getting his clothes back on.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He opens the door and gets in the driver's seat.

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He's getting gas. I think it's calmed down now. I think I fell asleep at some point.

I'm in the passenger's seat. I had to have gotten in there not too long after he got in the driver's seat. He smiles and waves at me through the window. It soothes me to wave and smile back. He pays for the tank, then opens the door.

"I'm gonna go inside and get some gum," he says. "Want anything?"

"No."

"Okay." He shuts it and leaves to go inside. I watch him through the side mirror. All

I see is him going inside. I watch him as he talks to the cashier. That's all I see in the mirror.

That's all I see in the mirror.

That's all I

where am i

There is nobody sitting in the passenger seat. But I'm sitting in the passenger seat.

I touch my face. It's there. I'm there, aren't I?

My hand trails down. I shimmy my dress up. I feel my stomach.

Skin juts out rashly, like two disjointed pieces of fabric sewn together. I can feel it.

It's there.

I let him.

I'm startled by the door opening. I yank my dress back down.

He's oblivious. "I got spearmint. Everybody loves spearmint."

"Yeah," I say.

My expression in the reflection is worried.



We're back in the apartment now. Or, we're walking in. We walk in. No, he's turning the knob. He turns it.

"Oh my God."

"What," he replies.

"I never turned the fire off."

He looks at me strangely. "Fire?"

"Yes. I was-"

He opens the door. There is no fireplace where I was sitting.

"This is a second-floor apartment," he says. "We can't have a chimney, goof."

'Goof' sounds silly. Like he's not actually mad. I try to appreciate it.

"Oh," I say. I decided it's better to stop talking now when I say wrong things.

I go to the small table I had set the book down at. "Who was that author? Dodo something?"

"Who?"

"He wrote The Double."

"Dostoevsky? Him, yeah. But I don't own anything by him,"

I pick the book up. It's The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka.

"Why do you ask?"

It takes me a while to answer. "Thought about it."

"Always wanted to, though. I love books like that. C'mon, baby. We should sleep. S'late."

I don't say anything.

I'm in my pajamas in the bathroom. I wear a slip dress. It's silk and it's cream-colored. I like this one. I like this dress. I like it. I like wearing it.

I'm brushing my teeth now. I wonder what's been wrong with me tonight.

"Why don't you find out?"

I choke, turning around rapidly. I don't see anything behind me. The voice was real, I know it. I've heard it before. My toothbrush is still in my mouth. Every time I breathe out, I get spit mixed with toothpaste on my dress. My favorite cream-colored slip dress.

I turn back around, and there she is.

I can see her smile; her eyes are upturned, her eyebrows slanted. She's not showing her teeth. In a way, she looks strained. She's wearing a cream-colored slip dress. It's clean.

"Get away from me."

She doesn't say anything. She just gives me that smile.

"Get away from me now."

"I don't think this is such a good idea," she says. Her expression stays the same. "Stop it."

"I've never done anything like this before, you know that."

"Get the hell away from me."

"You'll be there to protect me, right?"

"…"

"Do you know if any of this is even real?" "STOP IT!" I scream the last part, shutting my eyes closed. When I open them, she's gone. My cream-colored slip dress is covered in spit.

* * * **

His rocky hands slide up against me, holding me close under the covers. I try to be serene at this moment. It's hard.

I changed out of the slip dress. I'm now wearing an oversized shirt.

He feels my stomach. I feel his fingers graze over the skin, the skin that juts out. The skin from when he split me.

"There!" It startles him. "There what?" "There, you feel it, don't you?" "Feel what?" "There's a—" I grab his hand and put it over the skin. It's smooth. I stop talking. "There's a what?" I don't say anything.

* * * **

I don't know when I fell asleep. I don't know when I fell asleep that night.

* * * **

We were at a frat. Halloween party. There weren't many other girls. His friend brought out a Ouija board. I was dressed as the girl from The Ring. I wore a cream-colored slip dress.

"Let's summon some stuff," his friend boomed. I forgot who he was dressed up as. He set it down in front of me and him.

"I don't think this is such a good idea," I laughed nervously. I looked over to him,

dressed as Jason Voorhees. I wondered why he became friends with him the way he did; they were so different. He was shy, kind. His friend was brash.

"Relax, baby," he responded. "It's fun. We've done this so many times before." He kissed my neck. He never does that in public. He knows I don't like that. I tried to shove him off.

"I've never done anything like this before, you know that," I half-joke.

He laughs it off. It wasn't funny. "I said, relax. You'll be fine."

"You'll be there to protect me, right?"

He doesn't answer. He just laughs.

Time started blurring. My memory doesn't work right when I think about this. His friend's hands were on the planchette. He said something.

He-my boyfriend-said my name. What was it?

He kept kissing my neck. I think I told him to stop. I don't remember. I think I let him.

"Do you know if any of this is even real?" I say.

He pulls away from me and grins.

"Why don't you find out?"

I froze.

I felt it.

I felt myself becoming possessed.

I let it. I let him. My body was splitting apart. They were laughing at me. All of them. I felt the demon. The demon entered me. The demon was inside of me. The demon was splitting me apart. Over. And over. As everyone watched me.

I yelled for them to stop. I couldn't. They didn't. The spirit overtook me. It pushed the real me to the ground. It pushed me down. It pushed everything down.

I let it.

* * * **

"Why don't you find out?"

Her voice is soft, velvety. I can see her smile; her eyes are upturned, her eyebrows slanted. She's not showing her teeth. In a way, she looks strained. Her shoulders bob up and down. Is she crying?

They spike up. She shivered.

Her hand is still outstretched towards me. I don't do anything.

I know she's scared. She's been scared. She's been living in my body. All she knows is her life up until that night. I try not to allow her to see the outside.

My body. It's mine now.

I'm still learning things about her. I don't know her boyfriend's name yet. I don't know what her name is, either. I didn't know apartments can't have chimneys. I didn't know the difference between authors.

I will never take her hand.

I will never let her get this body back.

It's her fault. It's her fault for letting herself get possessed. For wearing that creamcolored slip dress. Maybe if she had worn something different, she would have kept this body. I would have found someone else to take. I liked that slip dress. It attracted me. They summoned me. I let myself in.

She went to that party. They summoned me in front of everyone. She asked for it.

I felt her coming out tonight. There were periods where I blacked out. I fell asleep. I don't know what humans call it. I don't know if there's a word for it in my own language.

I don't know why. I thought possessions were forever. Maybe they aren't. I thought possessions stuck with you. I thought they're always a part of you. Maybe they're temporary.

I won't let that happen.

"No," I responded.

"Why don't you find out?"

"I already know the answer."

She begins to cry.

"Why don't you find out?"

"Is that all you can say?"

"Why don't you find out?"

"I'm you now. You're gone. Where will you go now?"

"Why don't you find out?"

"You were so easy to take."

She only says the "wha-" before she howls. She screams. She wails. Her wails

would have hurt me if I had human ears.

I witness it. I watch her get split. Slowly, she splits open further, like abruptly, repeatedly, slowly tearing paper in two. Tear. Tear. Tear. Tear.

She falls into an overlapped heap on the ground, her organs spilling out and twitching occasionally. They cut her down the middle.

I was there that night. I was going inside her as it happened.

They all laughed. That's what the word is.

I taught myself how. I laughed too.

* * * **

I jolt awake.

"Babe?" The Boyfriend mumbles, rubbing his hands over my smooth stomach. "You good?"

"I'm fine," I say. "I've been having this recurring dream where I watch someone get hurt. It's getting annoying."

"They do that," The Boyfriend holds me closer. "You won't have to worry about me treating you like that."

I was there that night. I know he's lying.

No. If I was her, if she had this body, he'd be lying. But he's never hurt me, has he? I don't care anymore. I smile, falling asleep in his arms.

∗

CONTENT WARNINGS & AUTHORS' NOTES

Stories are listed in order of appearance

* *** * *** ** 8-11

The Tale of Raven Stump • Reese James

Ghosts, reference to deaths of children

Author's Note: Nothing inspired this story on the whole, but some minute details were not entirely invented by me. For example, the dog's name, Garm, comes from Norse mythology, where he is a hellhound who guards the entrance to the Underworld. When Peter's ball rolls into the forest and he finds Samuel Raven, this was inspired by a Native American legend of a witch who through her magical powers makes children's balls roll up hill to her cave where she would proceed to devour them. I hope you liked my story. Here's a little fact: Coraxville actually means Raven Town, from the Latin for 'raven.' Oh, and by the way, Samuel Raven is said to still haunt the world, looking for innocent victims. Sleep well tonight!

Reese J. James

The Boys of the Forest • Henry Alderson

Abduction, implied deaths of children, implied violence, undescribed creature

Author's Note: I want to thank my grandma for helping me with this story, we went through so many different ideas then landed on this one.

Thank you Nini

Henry Alderson

162

The Legend of Krampus • Konstantin Brandes

Forced restraint, home invasion, mild violence

Author's Note: First of all, I would like to thank Amy Kemper for helping to edit my story and I would like to thank my dad, Brian Brandes, for helping me to write this story. My story is about Krampus and the black-eyed children. I came up with this idea after listening to the podcast Cryptid Catalog. If you're into cryptids, then you should start listening to it. My hobbies are Legos, reading and playing outside.

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The Little Black Cat • Savannah Mathes Abduction/imprisonment, animals in danger

*

Becoming a Monster • Audrey Hurt

Body horror, werewolves

Author's Note: I always wanted to be an author when I grew up, so when I saw the opportunity to do it now, of course I jumped at the chance! I wanted to make a story that both others and myself would enjoy. I love animals, so I thought, "werewolf!" And I tried to think of a story. Every day at school, I would think about what I could add to the story. In a few weeks, I had the story that you just read! I hope you like it!

-Audrey

Bloody Midnights • Braelynn Huerta

Body horror, demons, descriptive death of family, gore, mention of insects

Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

The inspiration for this story didn't come from a person, but from an object—a beautiful grandfather clock that stands in my grandparents' home. There is something captivating about it, a mix of comfort and mystery. Its rhythmic ticking is soothing, yet at times, its presence is almost eerie.

The blend of warmth and unease sparked my imagination and became the heart of this story. It's amazing how an object so ordinary can carry such inspiration and creativity.

Thank you for taking the time to read. I hope you enjoy the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

∗

Sincerely, Braelynn Huerta

Braelynn

The Mystery of the Ghost Dog • Maximus Prestridge

Implication of animal death

Max

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Invisible Girl • Alleta Pinson

Vehicular accident causing death, pursued by attacker, ghosts, blood



Mama's Boy • Penny White

Murder of child, reference to teen pregnancy, vomiting

Author's Note: It's always been a dream of mine to have a book published, and it's finally happening!!! I wrote the story Mama's Boy off the struggles a child must go through when their parental guardian is a bad person, and how that can affect them, too. I wanted Taiyo to be a child that can potentially be seen in a sympathetic way, I wanted people to see the effects that a child can go through in the wrong house environment. Not all bad people are bad, it's their own life that can turn them into what they become when their needs and wants are not met to an extent.

Henry Will

Creature • Carter Cox Abusive guardian, death, gore, mutations

Author's Note: I have been interested in this contest since I first saw it a year ago. I tried to make a short story for it then, but ended up not doing it because I lost interest in the story. I could simply not bring myself to finish writing 3,000 words! My ADHD was unknown back then, so it was quite a lot harder to start, let alone finish that story. This year I decided that I would finally do it. Surprisingly, it's pretty fun to write a story when you can actually focus on it! This is the first story I have ever completed, I sure hope it's the first of many! I hope you liked it!

-Carter

∗

12-14

Visions • Kierian Trimm

Blood, burning bodies, description of rot/putrefaction, Ouija board, possession, rituals

Dendrophobia • Selah Harris

Evil presence, implied death of child

Author's Note: I got some of my inspiration for "Dendrophobia" from a nightmare I had about being trapped in a tree for all eternity, and it really stuck with me as I wrote this story. The characters Fio, Lee, and Mandy were based on real people who are very important to me. As for the characters' personalities, most were also based on people I know. Thanks to my friends and family for believing in me and reading my stories!

Séläh G. Härris

∗

Alter Ego • Yeriel Ko

Death of child & grandparent, doppelgängers

Author's Note: Everybody has their own childhood fears that result in wild, imaginative nightmares and long-lasting phobias. I myself grew up hand in hand with innumerable fears that still lurk within my mind to this day. These fears have always been unsettling and I could find no other way to cope with them except by writing horror stories to share with the public. Although many people find it very difficult to write stories, especially chilling and unique ones, I gradually discovered that all I have to do is let all of my past memories, dreams, hopes, and fears merge into a steady stream of stories by themselves and utilize my hands to deliver them onto paper. To all aspiring young writers, the biggest advice I can give you is to fully trust your memories to speak for themselves, and all you have to do is to put in the time and dedication to refine it into a masterpiece.

mako

My Lighthouse of Doom • Owen Lush

Child abuse, human sacrifice, abduction/imprisonment, torture, unsanitary conditions

When Mom is Sad • Ashley Esparza

Child neglect, murder/suicide involving child & parent, mental health crisis, reference to alcohol use (adult) and unsafe living conditions, reference to teen pregnancy, reference to vehicular accident causing death of child

Author's Note: While this story might be a drastic way to show it, I just wanted to portray the importance of grief and allowing yourself to grieve in a healthy way, without resentment or losing yourself in the process. Death is scary, but the consequences from it can be even scarier.

Hulley eparted

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Untitled • Alexie Stepp

Alcohol use (adult), gore/injury, murder of children/family, suicide, violence

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The Dwellers • Lillian Doty

Abduction, body horror, death/sacrifice, gore, supernatural monster

The Awakening • Olivia Gulisao

Blood/gore, body horror, child abuse/murder, reference to alcohol use (adult), torture, violence

¥

Love Knows No Bounds • Ami Ren

Abuse of a corpse, implied murder

Author's Note: I'm Ami and thanks for reading my story! Writing is a hobby of mine and sometimes I get some inspiration. This story was based on that guy who fell in love with a car. If you know, you know. I like Muenster cheese, drawing, and eating.

Mi hen

*

The Gray • Nathan Riffe

Abduction/imprisonment, blood/gore, cannibalism, descriptions of dead and/or injured bodies including infants; graphic violence, home invasion, mild language, murder of child & parent

Author's Note: Thank you to Anna-Maria Lane for helping edit and suggesting grammar changes.

Natham Riffe

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* *** * *** ** 15-18

In the Gray • Anne Paschal

Blood, cannibalism, dead bodies

Author's Note: I would like to thank my parents for their unrelenting encouragement and support; my brothers, you both will always serve as inspiration, and the Tulsa City-County Library for giving opportunities to young writers like me.

Annie Pacihal

*

The Dog • Emma Rayburn

Body horror, mild language, reference to alcohol use (teen)

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The Harvesters • Victoria Gogol

Blood, child death, human sacrifice, murder, reference to suicide, undescribed monster, violence

Author's Note: Writing The Harvesters was an exciting challenge that allowed me to explore the eerie, unsettling atmosphere I've always loved in spooky stories. The idea came to me while thinking about the blurred line between tradition and fear—how rituals can hold both a sense of comfort and unease. I'm incredibly grateful to my supportive friends and teachers, many of whom instilled in me a love of writing and encouraged me to tell the stories that intrigue me most. Their guidance and encouragement made this story possible. I hope you enjoy reading *The Harvesters* as much as I enjoyed writing it—and that it stays with you long after you finish, maybe even when the lights go out.

Victoria Dogol

Into the Ocean • Lauren McCormick

Deep water, drowning

The CatWalk • Oscar Ledbetter

Demons, description of Hell, description of corpses/decay, religious imagery and symbols defiled

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All in Your Head • River Wasserburg

Abusive parent, blood, descriptive self-harm/mutilation, mental illness, mild language, overdose/overuse of prescription medication, reference to alcohol use (adult)

Author's Note: I've been wanting to write this story for years now, for Jim's story is just a parallel of my own life. All the trials Jim goes through as a result of his anxiety and schizophrenia are trials I personally have dealt with. The acne and the many torturous hours picking and prodding at it, the feeling of being unable to move, the sense that you can't speak or breathe, thinking that everything you do is being made fun of; all feelings I personally have felt. And the idea that no one else is going through this, that everybody else is normal and you're the exception, is something I very much struggle with. And so I wrote Jim's story to speak about and describe all the feelings I feel right now, and how they can be horror stories. Which is why the ending ends with Jim overdosing and taking his own life, to show how serious these cases can be, how we should be so much more aware of teen suicides. But that's why the actual ending ends by showing someone did escape it. Someone was also in the shoes of Jim, he wasn't alone, and he got out of it. It's meant to show that you aren't dealing with this by yourself, and that you need to persist and to not give up, no matter how spooky your story gets.

River

Spooky Stories • 2024

The Snake Made of Hate • Izabel Baker

Alcohol use (adults), killing of animals, poisoning death/murder of parents, snake imagery, unhealthy home life

Author's Note: Although giant snakes that feed on the hatred of others might not be real, circumstances that breed that much hate do exist. Hatred, anger, fear; they are all a product of their own making. They exist in seemingly endless cycles, impossible to end. When one becomes stuck in a world like that they may grow to accept it and become like it. For all who see others caught in these circumstances where they are in danger or need help, I tell you my wish: speak up for those who don't have the strength to speak, for those who are too weak to fight. Never say 'it's not my business'; learn to be empathetic, to feel the pain of others and do something, anything, for those who need it. Help end these cycles.

-Izabel

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Florence Township • Kealeigh Weatherford

Cannibalism, religious cult

Author's Note: Writing has always been something I love, and with my activity in theatre, I've developed a fun new way to imagine my stories; my dialogue is my script, and my story descriptions are both the set and blocking for a scene on stage. I think this more threedimensional view of my writing helps to make things feel more real and particular, especially because I believe little details can go a long way in making a lasting impact. I can't honestly say that scenes in this story weren't acted out while writing them to ensure that they sound right. The strategy may be unique, but the result is that my stories feel a little closer to my heart. I plan to keep writing, and hope I get more chances like this to share my art.

Thanks to Will Wood for inspiring me through his music time and time again, and for his song 'Suburbia Overture' for spinning this little tale into motion.

Special thanks to my friends, who help me see when I'm being too hard on myself, and my writing.

Extra, extra special thanks to my mom, for always inspiring and pushing me to try to achieve my dreams.

Kealeigh W.

∗

Whispering Silence • Dominiq Webster

Mental illness, reference to eating a pet/causing death of animal, reference to murder of a family member

*

"Why Don't You Find Out?" • Chase Venoms

Demonic possession, Ouija board, reference to alcohol use/frat party, mature situations, mild language, unhealthy relationship

Author's Note: When I was 16, a boy I was friends with sent me a screenplay he wrote for fun. Through all of the surreal imagery and joke-y references, there was a singular, random, one-off line in it that just stuck with me: "Why don't you find out?" Ever since then, it randomly popped into my mind. For this project I decided to take those 5 words, make them the title, and come up with something. An explanation. A reason.

I've always loved possession metaphors.

Special thanks to the boy who wrote the screenplay for the title, Puyo Pop Fever 2 for its beautiful use of possession, the film Jacob's Ladder and the music of Nat King Cole for inspiring me further, and to every single person that I've ever called my friend.

If you're looking back here expecting me to tell you "what the story means," looking to uncover some sort of hidden layer, or just asking for a reason why, I only have one thing to ask:

Why don't you find out?

(had)

READER BEWARE!

Open this tome and you'll find thirty shivery tales that have clawed their way up through the minds of Tulsa County students and found a dark home in these pages.

