A Quick Note from Your Editors

First and foremost, we would like to thank the libraries and the patrons who participated in our first Spooky Connecticut writing contest. Jasmine and Nicole started Spooky Southington back in 2023, and when Nicole left for another library, we wanted to keep it going. Our first thought was to do a dual town book, but after hearing from other librarians who were interested, we ultimately chose to open the contest to any library that had staff who had the time and were willing to do the heavy lifting. From marketing to fielding questions, to reading and editing all the entries, this is truly a massive undertaking.

That said, we couldn't be prouder of every individual who participated. The creativity across the age ranges is truly impressive. While our state might be small, our imaginations and creativity are anything but.

Below you'll find a list of the fifteen libraries who participated for the first annual Spooky CT. We expect that the list of participants will grow in time. Here's to many years to come.

Brookfield Library–Brookfield
Case Memorial Library–Orange
C.H. Booth Library–Newtown
East Lyme Public Library–Niantic
East Haddam Library–Moodus
East Hampton Public Library–East Hampton
Farmington Libraries–Farmington
Ferguson Library–Stamford
Guilford Free Library–Guilford
Henry Carter Hull Library–Clinton
Killingworth Library–Killingworth
Oliver Wolcott Library–Litchfield
Scoville Memorial Library–Salisbury
Southington Public Library–Southington
Welles-Turner Memorial Library–Glastonbury

Jasmine Cedeno/Teen Librarian
Southington Public Library

Nicole Kent/Head of Reference and Adult Programming
Henry Carter Hull Library

October 2025

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Child Entries

Sleepover at the Spooky Library

Annabella Clinton
Oliver Wolcott Library

Once upon a time there was a little girl, Lisa, and she loved Halloween. She always went to the Oliver Wolcott Library, because her grandmother worked there. One night her grandmother said, " I have a surprise; you're going to sleep here tonight! There are many books to read!".

Lisa got her sleeping bag out and set up a cozy spot right next to the Halloween section. Her grandmother warned "You might have some nightmares; there are some spooky stories here".

When the grandmother fell asleep, she wondered what it would be like to wake up here on Halloween morning. Lisa and her grandmother were going to get pumpkins first thing in the morning.

Suddenly, Lisa heard a loud SQUEAK. It was only a mouse. She looked at him, and he looked terrified. She picked him up and started to talk to him. She asked the mouse what it was like to be here at the library on Halloween. The mouse said, "The library really comes to life on Halloween, and there are a lot of spooky sounds. You never know when you'll hear them."

Next, Lisa saw a flash of red! The mouse squeaked "I think that's a jack-o-lantern running through the yard!"

"Maybe we should catch it and see why it's here," said Lisa. "It is getting pretty spooky here," she said to the mouse. They ran to the door, put on their boots, and then ran straight into the dark night!

Suddenly they saw another pumpkin. They chased them at full blast. Lisa and the mouse realized they were suddenly surrounded by trees.

"What do we do now!?' said Lisa.

"I don't know!" said the mouse.

"Maybe we should try going back the way we came."

The mouse yelled, "We don't know the way we came!"

Out of nowhere the pumpkins jumped out! Lisa and the mouse were so scared.

Lisa had an idea. "Let's smush them!"

So that's just what they did. The mouse had a great idea. "Let's make pumpkin pie for your grandmother."

The two ran back to the library. They found the library kitchen, and they started to bake pumpkin pie. When the pie was done, they put it on a tray with whip cream for the morning.

When Lisa's grandmother woke up they gave her the pie. Lisa and the mouse shouted, "HAPPY HALLOWEEN!"

“Thank you very much, where did this pie come from?” asked the grandmother. Lisa and the mouse looked at each other and then said “Well, crazy things can happen on the night before Halloween, especially at this library!”

It Came with the Thunder

Sophie Dowling
Welles-Turner Memorial Library

The night Lenore disappeared, there was a thunderstorm. She was fast asleep when the first clap of thunder woke her. It banged so loud she jumped right out of bed. Her windows were open and she crossed the room to close them. Outside, the October night was cold. The yard was full of leaves.

Three things struck her as strange. For one, it wasn't the season for thunderstorms in Connecticut. For another, the ground was bone dry and there was no rain. For a third, she felt like something was watching her.

She slammed the window shut quickly and pulled the drapes closed. She heard another sound like thunder and screamed, then let out a sigh of relief. It was only Henry, her old Boston Terrier. He was standing at the top of the stairs outside her room, begging to go outside.

She peeked in her mom and dad's room to see if they were awake, but they were fast asleep. She decided not to wake them up and to put Henry out herself. In spite of the storm, it was a very quiet night. The only sound was the sawing of crickets. Normally, this part of the forest was full of hunting coyotes. Lenore lived close to the woods, and so it sometimes sounded like the howling was right in her room.

Tonight, the yard was silent, except for the thunder. The dark flickered white with lightning. She opened the back door to let Henry out. He took off like a shot. Lenore could only see a little bit of a blue glow reflected in Henry's collar. The moon was out. It lit the trees silver. She thought she saw in the shadows between the trunks. But when she rubbed her eyes, there was nothing there. The only thing in the yard were mosquitos.

"Yuck!" she said and swatted at her arm.

She slammed the door shut and waited for Henry.

Ruff, ruff, ruff.

Henry was scratching at the door. *Already?* she thought. Henry always took longer than two seconds to sniff out a place to go to the bathroom. She opened the door. The mosquitos were all gone. The crickets had gone quiet. There was not a single noise in the backyard, except for Henry, who went ticking inside across the floor. His collar wasn't there anymore. She thought maybe it got stuck on something.

I'll go get it in the morning, she thought. *It's too dark out right now.*

When Lenore went back up to bed, Henry followed and hopped up onto the edge of her bed. Usually, Henry curled up tight to sleep. Tonight, he just sat and stared at her without blinking.

"Lay down, Henry," she said, but he continued to stare. "Come here, Henry, it's okay," she said, trying again. He still didn't move. He sat bolt upright, eyes wide.

Maybe he's freaked out by the thunder, she thought. She was a little freaked out by the thunder, too.

She was about to fall back asleep when she heard a panicked bark. She got out of bed and opened the drapes. In the dark she saw a shape scratching at the back door. Another boom of thunder and clap of lightning and she saw Henry's black and white fur. The flicker of lightning glowed in his collar. All the hair on the back of her neck stood up. It was impossible. Slowly, she turned to look at the dog that was sitting on her bed. It was gone.

Lenore quickly grabbed her father's old baseball bat that she kept on the shelf as a decoration. She turned on the hall light and tip-toed downstairs to open the door for Henry. He raced inside and shook himself off. His fur was standing on end like it did when he was terrified. Outside, the thunder rumbled like a snarl. There was still no rain.

"I think there's another dog in the house," Lenore whispered to Henry, but as she said it, she couldn't shake the feeling that something menacing was happening. It was weird to have a thunderstorm in October, especially one with no rain. But then she remembered how that first crack of thunder had startled her awake. Maybe the dog got scared by the thunder too, and escaped its yard.

She led Henry upstairs and let him into her mom and dad's room. Henry didn't do well with other dogs. Lenore's plan was to catch this strange dog and put it in the garage for the night. Her parents could help her figure out what to do in the morning.

Just as she closed her parents' bedroom door, there was another loud boom of thunder. It rumbled like a train, shaking the whole house. The lights clicked off. Lenore tried to flick the switch, but nothing happened. The hallway was pitch black. She heard talons ticking across the floorboards. Holding the bat tight, she stood there waiting.

"Come here, doggy," she said. She tried to sound brave, but her voice shook.

Lenore heard the dog snuffling as it got closer. *It's just a dog,* she thought. *It's just a dog.* There was a hum of electricity and the lights clicked back on. The dog was standing directly in front of her. But it was all wrong. It wasn't standing on all fours, but on its two hind legs. Its knees were bent backwards like a flamingo's. Its front paws hung limp. Slowly, its snout stretched open in a wide, sharp-tooth smile.

Lenore screamed.

Boom! Another crack of thunder. Another flash of lightning. In the room across the hall, Lenore's parents sat up in bed. Henry was barking and pawing at the door. Something felt wrong.

"Let's go check on Lenore," said Dad.

They walked across the hall to Lenore's room. The door was open just a crack. The yellow light of a nightlight shone out from beneath. They stepped inside the room just as a faint thunder rumbled. The storm was passing.

In her room, Lenore sat upright in bed. She stared up at them without blinking, smiling a wide, toothy smile.

Playtime
Natalie Freeman
Brookfield Library

"Finally, time to go home!" a boy yelled, as he slung his backpack over his shoulder and walked up the steps to the bus. "This place is lame."

Sophie was supposed to be heading home from her field trip now. They were at the Connecticut State Carnival to celebrate their coming graduation from middle school. She wouldn't exactly call the place lame, but it wasn't the most interesting place to be. There were your average hot dog stands, ferris wheel, and games, but nothing too exciting.

She felt around her jean pocket for her phone, but it wasn't in its usual spot. *Oh no. Oh no, no, no.* Her mind panicked as she recalled the last places she'd been. There were too many for her stressed brain to think of. So she followed her instinct. She ran straight into the carnival.

"Sophie!" a voice called out to her from an open window, causing her to stop in her tracks. "What are you doing? The bus is leaving soon!" It was her best friend Kylie. What was she supposed to say to that?

"Tell the bus to wait for me while I go find my phone that could be anywhere!" or "One second, I'm just going to search the entire state carnival for my phone!" No, she couldn't make her best friend worry like that. But what was she supposed to do? Leave her phone in the carnival? No, her parents would kill her on the spot if they found out. Go looking for it? Maybe. Once she found it, she could ask her mom to pick her up. So she turned on her heels and shouted back to Kylie, "I'm not taking the bus! My mom is going to pick me up!"

Kylie nodded back and shut the window. Simultaneously, the bus doors shut and rode off into the distance, leaving a cloud of dust. There was no turning back now. Sophie was officially on her own.

She started her search with the closest option, the ferris wheel cubbies. All Sophie found was a red beanie that didn't belong to her. Sophie looked in other places too, like the benches by the hot dog stand and the tables by the cotton candy station. There was no phone to be found.

When all hope seemed lost, she peeked into the bathroom. And there her beloved phone was, sitting on the counter in the same position she had left it. A wave of relief washed over her and she skipped over to it.

She tapped the screen. Black. *My phone is dead?* Sophie thought in fury. She stared at the dark screen, willing for something to happen. This was her only chance of getting a ride home, and as quickly as she was filled with relief, all of it deflated out of her like a balloon.

Sophie shoved the useless device into her pocket as she held her head in her hands. What was she supposed to do? Sophie sulked out of the bathroom.

Suddenly, she smacked into a man with a shaggy black beard who was clearly startled. The contents of a huge box of cleaning supplies that was once in his hands was scattered along the ground. He heaved a dramatic sigh.

“Oh my! I’m so sorry!” Sophie exclaimed, bending down to pick up the items. “I’m so, so sorry!”

The man pushed her hand aside. “It’s fine. I’ve got it.” He wore a red sweatshirt that said in bold letters on the back: CARNIVAL STAFF. He gestured towards Sophie’s shirt which read Whisconier Middle School. “Hey. Weren’t you supposed to take that bus that just left?” he asked suspiciously.

Uh oh. “Yes. I mean - no. My parents are picking me up,” Sophie blurted out, a bead of sweat starting to trickle down her back as she awaited his reply.

The staff member looked at her in disbelief, but he decided to let her off the hook. “Alright. Run along.”

Sophie exhaled the breath she was holding the whole time. She decided her best option to get home was to wait for the town bus, which was hopefully going to come before the carnival closed. She did not want to be at a carnival at night. Just thinking about it gave her the creeps.

Sophie jogged along a dirt path that led to a hayride. She veered off to the side and hid behind a large stack of hay, around the area where the bus would stop to pick people up. From where she was hiding, she had a good view of the parking lot, and she was out of sight of the staff.

Over the loudspeakers, she heard a voice say, “Alright folks, this is the last run of all rides! The carnival will be closing in twenty-five minutes, folks. Twenty-five minutes!”

Sophie started to panic. Twenty-five minutes. She didn’t know if the town bus would come in time, or worse, come at all.

The sun went down, leaving a full moon and bright stars in its place. Slowly, she stood up from behind the haystack to see what was going on around her. Workers who were wearing the same red sweatshirt as the man she ran into were cleaning up games, taking out trash, and closing down the hot dog stands.

Turning around, she faced the parking lot. No bus. No parents. No way out. Now what was she supposed to do? She couldn’t call a taxi, couldn’t take a bus, couldn’t ask for help…

Clinkkkkkk. An ear-splitting noise went off a few yards away from where Sophie was. Alarmed, she quickly ducked behind the haystack, leaving just enough room for her eyes to see what was going on. An empty soda can was rolling right next to the tent across from her. The can glistened in the ghostly moonlight. What made it even freakier was that the tent curtain was swaying. Back and forth, back and forth.

Who made it move?! Sophie panicked. She heard soft rustling behind the curtain. She tried to relax. It was probably just a worker who was finishing cleaning up, she thought, Besides, clowns… Nope. She wasn’t going to go there.

Sophie thought of all the text messages she was probably getting from her parents, who were most likely panicking about where Sophie was and why she didn’t take the bus. And..

“Come,” a voice boomed. Chills crawled up her spine. She froze, not daring to move.

Sophie peeked through a hole in the hay. No one was there, but the curtain was still swaying.

That wasn't in my head, right? she thought, No, that voice was definitely real.

"Come," the voice repeated, in the same loud, enunciated voice. It filled her head with all different types of horrifying thoughts of horrors that she was terrified of as a little kid. Sweat trickled down her neck. She fought to try to find her way out of the mental horrors, but she couldn't.

"Come, Sophie," echoed the chilling voice. "Come. Come play!"

Sophie started panting. A million thoughts ran through her head. *How does it know my name? Should I run? Who is this?* But one thought was the most pressing. *I NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE.* Any way she could, she had to leave. But her body was frozen, not daring to move. She couldn't bear to see who was behind the curtain. *Just look,* she told herself. *What's there to be afraid of?*

Then, as she peered through the hole, a figure from her childhood nightmares pulled back the curtain… Her heart stopped. At least she thought it did. She could feel a wave of nausea wash over her as her eyes burned with terror.

Sophie begged herself to tear her eyes away, to forget this happened, and believe that it was all in her head.

It was too late. Standing before her was a towering figure with skin as white as the moon above her. Its jet black eyes stared into her terrified ones for so long, Sophie was sure she was going to pass out any second. And its nose… Bright red. A clown.

Sophie swallowed the fear that was rising up inside of her. *No, no, no!* Sophie thought, as the clown slowly crept towards the haystack she was hiding behind.

She tore her eyes away from the figure, curling into a ball so she wouldn't be seen.

"You can't hide," the voice boomed, with a hint of delight. "It's too late."

Sophie froze as she felt a shadow loom over her, but she didn't dare to look up at what was above her. Its cold lips brushed against her ear. "I f-ou-nd you." The sing-song voice echoed off the walls of her terrified mind.

Then she gave in to the fear inside her and slammed her eyes shut as a long, bony hand grabbed her blonde hair and dragged her away… There was a lot to be afraid of.

A Spooky Season Adventure
Raelynn Heinicke Umana
Southington Public Library

Introduction:

Most stories begin with “Once upon a time” and end with “Happily ever after”. But not all stories are the same. And with the chill of a spooky mist covering the town of Southington, *nothing* makes the story of the 12-year-old friends, Ash and Reese, normal. Halloween is not about plastic skeletons and fake potions. *Real* witchery haunts the places where you least expect it– and sometimes calls the overlooked to the journey of a *real* Halloween story. And it begins right now.

PART I:

Every town has mysteries to be solved, and questions to be answered. Doors to be opened and keys to find. Heroes and villains. Victory and loss. And most times, the heroes have to find themselves in places where their bravery does not. And when the heroes get called to the quest, what happens? Well, you're about to find out.

Ash and Reese were not necessarily what most people would call heroes. They enjoyed being with each other, reading, and selling home-made weaved products, like pot holders and keychains. They mostly kept to themselves while around others. But that is where all of their similarities stop.

Reese was more out-going with people she knows, and was up for any challenge– especially if it involved being the last one standing to declare glory. Reese could make you laugh at anything, even just by sticking her tongue out.

Ash was more like a mouse. Quiet, but mysterious. One day she could have her nose stuck in a book, but the next, she would be scrap-booking under a willow tree. She was way more laid-back, but could impress the most energetic person with just her interests. In fact, that's how Ash and Reese met.

Ash was drawing with chalk on the first day of kindergarten at recess, when Reese’s ball knocked her in the head. Reese immediately walked her down to the nurse, telling jokes and making Ash laugh. Ash shared her interests in the world to Reese, and she was hooked. By the next hour, they were inseparable. Since then, they've done everything together.

“Attention, everyone! The movie is about to start.” Miss Kellden announced to the town of Southington, all gathered at the last night of the summer drive-in movie theater. Ash and Reese squealed with delight, shoving popcorn and candy in their mouths. *Aquamarine* started projecting onto the big, white, screen. Just as the movie began, the lights flickered. Then, all the

cars stoped, along with the movie.

"Reese, where are you?"
"Ash, I'm right here," Reese reached over for her hand, when she saw a tiny black figure jump into the shadows, as if the shadows were itself, followed by no one.
"Reese?" Ash called out as the movie lit up again and the cars began to purr back to life.
"Did you see that?" Reese questioned, too quickly to understand.
"Let's just get out of here, I'm creeped out."

The girls walked home, surrounded by the inky black sky, covering them like a blanket of forever darkness. The street lights mysteriously popped on and off, while Ash and Reese walked in dead silence.

"What do you think that shadowy thing I saw was? At the drive-in?"
"I didn't even see it, Reese." Reese waved a hand at Ash, "Forget it, it was probably nothing. Like a rabbit or something."

Just as they reached the street near Ash's house, they heard steps behind them, so light and delicate. The soft prancing haunted them with each step they took toward home. This time, both girls jumped, shocked by what was in front of their eyes.

A black cat, the same color as the inky dark night, was sitting cross-legged, his perfect circle eyes staring into theirs. The moment felt like it was frozen; iced and chilled, starstruck with wonder. The cat gazed at the girls, eyeing every small movement they unleashed. The time was still too long, every second was almost identical to an hour.

Finally, the cat seemed to lose interest in the girls, lightly walking back in the direction of the path he came from. Startled, the girls stared at the cat turned to nothing, wandering into the darkness. Ash brushed aside a piece of her brown hair, beginning to say something, but horror of what the answer may hold stopped her.

"Cat got your tongue?" Reese joked, nudging Ash on the shoulder.
"I guess you could say that."

Together, the girls walked home, sharing smiles, but curiosity stuck in their heads. Shoulder to shoulder, arm to arm, heart to heart, they strolled home, as a dangerous mist covered their town and the adventure began.

PART II:

It was autumn. Leaves covered the ground and the crisp air possessed a chill that made sweaters a necessity each day. People began to make soups, chili and pies each week. Every day,

a few more pumpkins or hay bales appeared on front stoops and porches.

As the townsfolk of Southington put out pretend ghosts, watched spooky movies, and picked out costumes, things seemed to get weirder each day. Cars were stolen, the electricity faded out almost each week, and the shadows seemed to grow close, particularly around one house – the old lady's house. Much seemed odd to the people of Southington, but when the sunset faded into the quiet darkness of a fall evening, hiding the world away, people seemed to forget.

The mayor's car gone? Only eight hours the people remembered. When the whole town's lights went off? They couldn't care less. And the creepy shadows lurking near the old lady's house, growing closer each day? It was startling for about four hours. Something weird was happening, and no one remembered – except for Reese and Ash.

> "And it's happened again. The lights went off at 7 in the morning yesterday, and nobody's given a holler 'bout it. *Nobody.*" Reese proclaimed, sitting down next to Ash at the lunch table.
> "I asked *everyone*. My parents, the principal, my grandpa and gramma, even my dog. *No one.*" "Maybe it slipped their mind- like what happened to my mom when her flowers disappeared last week."
> "Ash, seriously? Your mom's *life,* or a little bit of it, *is* flowers. She would have never forgotten." Reese shook her head, trying to figure out why these odd things were happening around town. Ash took her lunch out from her bag, when a lightbulb idea went off in her head.
> "Reese, I've got it!" Reese turned her view to Ash. "I'm listening." She says through mouthfuls of cheesy pizza.
> "Tomorrow's Saturday. There is no dance class since the teacher is sick; I got the day off!" The lunch bell rang as Ash got out of her seat. "We can go around town and investigate! Meet me at the Lion's Den Coffee Shop at 8. We'll talk there." Leaving with a smile, Ash ran off to Study Hall, with Reese trailing to 5th period.

The idea seems great, but will it work? Reese wondered, twisting the locker code into her wheel.

Yeah, Ash's ideas always work. This will be great.

Reese rode her old bike to the Coffee Shop. The wind blew a few wisps of her bangs against her face. As she was parked her bike, Ash waved her hand for Reese to see. "Reese, over here!" Reese nodded and headed toward the shop.

The Lion's Den Coffee Shop was a welcoming place. The strong smell of coffee buzzed around, and a variety of sweet treats were displayed in the glass case. The shop was full of chatter, and staff swiftly received orders and went to fulfill them. Ash and Reese sat down at a

nearby table, and ordered smoothies with a side of fruit tarts.

"So, let's get down to business." Ash declared, pulling out a journal. "We go around Southington and ask questions to the people around here; see if they remember anything weird going on."

Reese thought about it. She liked it, but something seemed wrong. "But how do y'know that people will respond? I mean, how will folks know that we are tryin' to crack a case and not get the inside scoop on their lives?"
"I guess we don't. But we can still try."

And with that, the girls swooped around town, asking the people if they remembered when the Mayor's car was stolen, or when the lights went out. Most of the townsfolk shook their heads 'no'. Occasionally, they called the girls crazy and walked away. No luck. But they kept it going.

At Panthorn Park, they asked the softball team and parents with kids on the playground. They interviewed workers at the check-out at the local grocery store, Tops, the people at the library, and all the kids who went to their school. Nobody remembered!

The last place they headed to was the Farmers Market; they had to set up their booth anyway since they were selling their weaved products today. Like always, they got many customers. People liked the potholders the best, but they did finally get someone to buy the headbands. Just as they were packing up, an old woman wrapped in black shawls appeared with a cat beside her. She had a face covered with a tsunami of wrinkles. Her hair was as white as a snow rabbit. Her spectacles were round, and worn out. The cat beside her walked swiftly, prancing lightly, its fur the color of a black, hopeless night sky.

The crowd murmured, stepped back, and brushed aside kids from the sense of it. The woman and cat seemed to have their own world. They acted like nobody was ignoring them. They bought squash and broccoli at the farm stand and a new collar for the cat. Lastly, they stopped at Ash and Reese's stand. Ash and Reese's mouths hung open.

"That quilt, please. How much, dears?"

The girls were startled. Somehow, though, they managed to speak. "Twenty-five dollars, Ma'am. No tax, but tips are appreciated." Ash quivered.

The woman rummaged through her pocket. She put down 25 dollars, along with a quarter and a dime. Reese could no longer hold herself. She bolted questions at the old woman.

"Have you seen weird things going on around town? Why, if you know? Has this happened before?"

The woman was not weirded out like the others. She did not look around to see if other people were looking at her. She did not call them crazy. Instead, she looked at the cat. And the cat nodded his furry little head.

"Come with me."

Now, the girls knew not to go with strangers, but something seemed to be pulling them, forcing them. The old lady walked to a small brick house. It was covered with mums and pumpkins, it looked like any other house on the block except for one thing.

"Ash, shadows! All the shadows are near this house! Nobody remembered this–" Reese explained.

Ash's face paled. Her hands quivered. Her whole body shook. "Tereesa Kye Miller. What in the world have we gotten ourselves into?"

PART III:

The old lady's house was different from most on the inside. Old, dusty photos were hung with cobwebs. The 'rug' which they stepped on was made out of broken glass that didn't hurt them. Every spot in the house was framed with knick-knacks and bottles of disgusting things.

"Tereesa and Ashlynn, follow me over here."

Reese and Ash expanded their bravery. Whatever this old woman was doing, they did not like it. Reese, being the one who started this, decided to end it.

"You never answered my questions. Have you seen anything odd going around? Start talking so we can get out of here." Reese puffed with as much pride she could muster.
"Pumpkin cookie or pumpkin pie, dears?"
"Start. Talking."
"The cookies have chocolate chips in them." Reese was losing it now.
"Reese–"

Reese swatted Ash's hand away.

"If you want answers, then you must want cookies or pie."
"Cookies, please, for both of us." Ash piped up.

The girls quietly ate the cookies. The woman poured them both milk, too.

"Now, children-" the way that she said 'children' made Ash's and Reese's spines tingle.
"Tell me why, exactly, the mysteries of this town now suddenly startle you to question.

“Everyone forgets-”

“Not everyone. You girls did not.”

“The weird stuff going around town. You are the only person that did not.”

The girls bit into their cookies and went pale. The cookies were cursed!

PART IV:

Right after the cookies were taken, eaten, and digested, a world of answers and wonders were revealed. Reese and Ash were knocked out. They couldn't feel, touch, or hear anything. While the magic cookies were doing their part, the girls found themselves in a world of wonder. Slowly, the past was revealed to the two girls that were passed out in an old lady’s house who fed them cookies.

Soon the image became clear to them. Snippets of the past were revealed. They saw a young woman with blond hair and a small nose. Her skin was a fair tone, and had freckles scattered on her soft face. She wore a black cloak, the color of a deep night sky. A cat the same color stood near her. The woman held a broom, clutching it as if her life depended on it. There she stood in a court-like room.

“Lorannia Mistery, daughter of Maxwell and Onna Mistery. Say why, exactly, you are here.”

The young woman– Lorannia– spoke up. “I am here because of the evil villain haunting my town, Southington, Connecticut. He pushed a very powerful mist over Southington, making odd things happen and then everyone forgot after sunset. Please, I am begging you, end this!”

The council witches looked at each other. They huddled together, mumbling powerful words that would determine the whole town's future. Finally, they made a decision.

“You will encounter two young girls,” The witch with what seemed like the most power spoke, “The mist will go until the year 2025. The same thing will happen, but those two girls will remember. You give them the answers. You feed them this to make them think of this moment.” He handed her a small, wrinkled, brown paper.

“Cookies and pie? What good will that do them?”

The powerful witch looked offended.

“You think that we are giving these to little kids on Christmas? No, you give these to the girls who remember, and this moment in our time will be seen. Now go! Out of my sight!” The powerful witch thundered. With no emotion, he snapped his fingers and Lorannia was gone.

So, she aged. And aged. And aged. She went from 16 and graduating, to 30 and having kids. Then 55 when the kids moved on. And finally turning into the 88-year-old woman who sits there and knits. Ash and Reese saw it all. The magic spell wore off, and they awoke.

PART V:

"Mmm-hmm. That's me, Lorannia Mistery."
"So, you're a witch?" Reese questioned.
"Yes."
"And the girls in the vision who remember, are us?" Ash piped in.
"Yup. You two are the reason that this town is still standing. If girls like you never existed, Southington would be under control by the worst enemy we witches fear."
"And his name would be…?" Reese implored.
Lorannia's face wrinkled. "Saying his name is a sin, but for you young ones, I shall tell."

She led them into a dark, dark room. There were carpets on the floor, and the walls were covered in pictures. Reese was amazed, and Ash was simply petrified. Lorannia took out a candle and broke it in half. Then she put ice cold water on top of the candle, and lit it. There must have been magic in it, because the candle was not melting. It simply was freezing, creating a thin, clear sheet of ice.

Ash and Reese looked closer. The candle formed again, and was on top of the sheet of ice. The ice had letters on it, written in a foreign language the girls could not understand.

"*The one*?" Reese read, confusion spreading on her face.
"His name only gets read on ice. He came one day and has been evil ever since. Nobody knows where he came from, or what his role in the world is.
"What is his real name though?" Ash asked.
"That *is* his name."
"*The one*?"
"Don't say it in public– only with me or Reese."
"Okay," they vowed.

With Reese's mind looping, she came back to the original question. "So, he cursed the town? That's why weird stuff goes on and nobody remembers after sunset?"
"Yes, knowing why is still a mystery."
"Why does this matter to us? Why not any other girl or boy?" Ash piped in. As usual, she was the curious type, when questions popped into her mind, they could not be ignored.

Lorannia sighed. As much as she adored the kids, she would have to tell them. Tell them the real reason that nobody ever heard of.

“I am old.”

“Duh,” Reese said, completely without thinking. Ash nudged Rees’s shoulder.

“When a witch hits 88, their powers stop working. They can either let them fade away, or...” “Or what?” Reese said, again, without thinking.

“Or they can give them to another soul. Put all the power they had for a few people.”

“And that would be us.” Ash concluded.

“Yes. You two girls are the reason the town is still alive. You were human since you were born, but now you will become witches. Do you girls accept it?”

Ash and Reese looked at each other. Their choice affected the rest of their life.

“Yes, we accept,” the two best friends said together.

12 years later

The cold wind howled. The remaining silence felt as if it could last forever. Ash and Reese stood tall, in black clothes. In the cemetery. In another world. The witches' world.

“Lorannia Mistery. Beloved wife, mother, daughter, friend,” The preacher spoke.

“And witch.” Reese whispered, feeling tears appear on her face.

“May her spirit last forever.” Ash quietly said. The funeral ended. But the girls stayed. Then words were spoken in their head.

“*Defeat* the one. *We all know you can.*”

And with that, the lives of Ash and Reese went on. Through every adventure they went on, all new roads gave doors to open. And those new doors they opened together.

The End

The Dark Halls of Doom
Vienna Kalish
Henry Carter Hull Library

Once upon a time in Clinton, Connecticut... there was a house, a cold, abandoned house on Alden Drive. One night on Halloween, the year of 1985, a family of five came there to trick or treat. They went toward the door, knocked, and the door swung open. The parents and three children went into the house and the door shut. The mother tried to open the door, but it was locked. The family started to panic.

Then all of the sudden, a creature came out of the dark hallways of the house. It was ugly; it looked like a cross between a goblin, a hyena, and a fly. The family, who was frightened, screamed so loud the whole town could hear them.

The creature cackled and said,

"I hunt, hunt, hunt and families start to run,
and they scream so loud, the whole town comes to save them.
Yet I only feed off their screams and lead them to my secret laboratory.
There I feast on some, force others to be my servants,
and they are never heard from again!"

He continued, "Lucky for you, I have just eaten and am not hungry for more. So, I will make you my servants instead."

The family screamed again and they never came out. It is told to this day, never to go into the house because the creature, El Chupacabra, enslaved them! But that is not the end of this story. No, there is more.

In 1987, two years after the family was enslaved, two boys dared each other to go into the house. Just like when the family came, as the boys went inside, the door closed and locked.

They heard a woman screaming (so told, she was a banshee). But the boys were tough and although trapped with a banshee, they were not afraid. So, on the boys went, to the next level of the house. There they saw statue heads and scary portraits. But still, the boys were not afraid. So, they went to the third level. There were statue heads, statues, coffins, and portraits. But still none of those things scared the boys. So, the boys went to the last level: the attic, the scariest place of a house. Nothing scared the boys, so they went up. There was nothing but a few cobwebs and a sheet.

The boys yanked the sheet up. There was nothing underneath. Nothing at all, but then they heard El Chupacabra cackling and heard footsteps coming up the stairs. The creature cackled and said,

"I hunt, hunt, hunt and families start to run,

and they scream so loud, the whole town comes to save them.
Yet I only feed off their screams and lead them to my secret laboratory.
There I feast on some, force others to be my servants,
and they are never heard from again!”

The boys looked at each other and looked behind themselves and saw El Chupacabra coming through the door. They screamed and tried to jump out of the window nearby, but it was locked. So, the boys although panicked, grabbed a shovel and a spear that was on a statue downstairs and started to attack the creature. They wounded El Chupacabra badly enough to escape the house. But still, El Chupacabra lives, ready to get its revenge. No one has been in the house since, no one at all. Not yet.

PUMPKINS

Vienna Keifer
East Haddam Library System

Fred is going to the Moodus Pumpkin Walk. He is dressing up as a princess because his little sister dared him to do it. He is not happy.

On the day of the pumpkin walk, he is distracted. All Fred is thinking about is his Star Wars pumpkin he carved.

At the end of the day, he gets picked up from school to go straight to the pumpkin walk. When he gets there, he plays on the monkey bars with Jack, Henly, and Carson till it gets dark enough to see the pumpkin's designs. When it finally is, he walks along the trail and sees a cool pumpkin: black as stone with a cold-hearted face. The next pumpkin is the exact same. The next and the next too, no mistakes.

He runs along the trail looking for his pumpkin. No Star Wars pumpkin. His next round is the same except the face pops out in a weird way. Still no Star Wars pumpkin. The pumpkins are now following him and he swears that there is also a ghost behind him… The LEAST scary thing is his princess dress.

TO BE CONTINUED...

The Spooky House on the Guilford Green

Charlotte Keung
Guilford Free Library

It was Halloween night! Two best friends, Anya and Charlotte, were super excited to go trick-or-treating together.

"I can't wait!" shouted Charlotte as she put on her gold, white, and black Zoey K-pop demon hunter costume. She pulled on her black boots and tied her hair into two pigtail buns.

"Me too!" exclaimed Anya, fixing her long purple wig and straightening her blue, black, and yellow outfit.

"Let's go or we won't get any candy!" said Charlotte. The girls ran downstairs, grabbed their candy bags, and ran out the door.

"Bye, Mom!" called Anya.

Their first stop was the blue house next door. Mr. and Mrs. Luke were sitting on the porch with a big bowl of candy. "Trick or treat!" the girls yelled. The Lukes laughed and gave them two giant Hershey bars. The girls tore off the wrappers and ate them right away as they ran to the next house.

They went to every house on the Guilford Green—except one. At the end of Whitfield Street stood the spooky house that everyone was afraid of. People said a ghost lived there—one that got trapped inside over a hundred years ago because it played too many mean pranks on kids during Halloween!

Nobody ever dared to go in. But tonight, Charlotte was feeling brave. "Let's go in!" she told Anya.

Anya gulped. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! Come on!" said Charlotte.

The house looked old and creepy. The windows were cracked and covered in wood boards. Cobwebs were everywhere. It smelled super gross—like rotten eggs and old fish. The steps creaked loudly as the girls tiptoed up the porch.

Charlotte rang the doorbell, but it didn't work. So Anya knocked. No answer.

Charlotte turned the rusty doorknob, and—BANG!—the door flew open by itself! The girls screamed, but went inside anyway.

The floor creaked with every step. The wind whistled through the broken windows. Everything was messy and covered in dust. Then they heard a loud screech.

Suddenly, a glowing blue ghost floated right in front of them! "Who are you?" yelled Anya.

The ghost frowned. "Why are you here?" it said in a spooky voice.

"Were you making all those sounds?" Charlotte asked.

The ghost nodded and shouted, "Because you're about to get tricked!"

Before they could run, the floor opened, and the girls fell into a dark room!

“It’s a trap!” cried Charlotte. They stood up and tried to find a way out.

Suddenly, something slimy slid across Charlotte’s boot. “AHHH!” she screamed. Candy spilled everywhere, and when it hit the floor, it made funny boing-boing sounds.

The girls realized there were invisible ropes everywhere! They carefully ducked and crawled under them (with the help of the spilled candy) until they reached the kitchen.

Just when they thought they were safe, a big German Shepherd dog jumped out of nowhere! It barked and chased them around and around the room. Candy wrappers were all over the floor.

“I think it likes candy!” said Anya. Charlotte threw her candy bag at the dog, and it stopped barking and started sniffing the candy instead.

The girls ran away and leaned against a wall to catch their breath. Charlotte’s elbow hit a big red button. “Uh oh,” she said.

Suddenly, the floor opened again, and the girls dropped down—whoosh!—into a colorful treehouse full of toys! There were stuffed animals, LEGO sets, toy cars, slime, and jewelry kits everywhere.

“Wow!” said Anya. “This must be the ghost’s secret room!”

They started playing with the toys until—SNAP!—a big net trapped them and hung them upside down! Then they fell again—this time into the basement!

“This never ends!” yelled Anya.

“I think we got pranked again!” said Charlotte.

The girls sat down and tried to think. “Maybe the ghost just wants someone to play with,” said Anya.

They called out, “Ghost! We just want to talk!”

The dog ran in again and started licking them. Charlotte said, “Wait… are YOU the ghost?”

The dog shimmered and turned into the blue ghost! “Finally, someone to play with!” the ghost said happily.

Anya smiled. “You can trick-or-treat with us if you promise no more pranks.”

“I pinky promise!” said the ghost. But the spooky house didn’t believe him and wouldn’t let him leave.

“Don’t worry,” said Charlotte. “We’ll fix this place up so kids can come again!”

The ghost’s eyes lit up. “Really? Can I help?”

So the three of them cleaned and fixed the whole house.

When they were done, Charlotte took a picture and Anya taped it to the door. It said, “House for Sale!”

Soon, a family with two little kids moved in, and they lived happily ever after.

Every Halloween, the ghost went trick-or-treating with Anya and Charlotte—and it never played pranks again.

Trust Me… Or Not…
Keilyn Kitahara
Ferguson Library

Anna turned up the collar to her jacket against the fierce wind. She was walking down Bedford Street and just passed the Ferguson Library under a crisp, autumn sky. The wind buffeted her as she struggled into the doors of her apartment building.

Once inside, she stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the twelfth floor. The rusted steel doors clanged closed, and her phone buzzed in her jacket pocket. Anna pulled it out, wondering if it was another message from her boss. Stocks were dropping, and Anna's boss was having her work overtime. Instead, the message was from someone unknown, and it read: **"Don't trust them."** Just as suddenly as it appeared, the message disappeared. Anna's fingers tightened around her phone, and she shivered as chills shot up her spine. Her mind was whirling, who is this person, and who are they?

The clock on her desk read 11:45 p.m., but Anna couldn't sleep. She had to just finish one more email, but she couldn't focus, not with the unknown message on her mind. The lamp on her desk threw shadows against the walls as she typed out another sentence.

Something beeped and her computer showed her an email. Heart thudding, she read it. The email address caught her eye, **Tru$t.M3@vanish.com.**

Trust me? Anna thought, *wasn't that what a betrayer would say before things went bad? Wasn't she warned not to trust someone? Is this a trick?* She quickly read the message. Two words, **"Trust Me…"**

A soft scratching noise filled the room, and Anna's head snapped to the window, her green eyes frantically searching the night. Something dark was just there, but that wasn't possible, this is the twelfth floor, nothing could get to the window.

Another message, same email address, **"We're coming…"** Her phone beeped, the same number as the one in the elevator. **"You need to get out, they're closer than you think."** Then the message disappeared, just like last time. Her computer told her there was a new email. It read, **"I see you…"**

Suddenly her lamp's light was extinguished, and darkness fell. Anna's heart stopped. The only light was from her computer, and peering at the screen made her blood run cold. Something was happening to her screen, the edges of it looked blurred, smeared, and the letters were moving as if something, or someone were rearranging them. Her hand went to grab her mouse, but before she could reach it the screen went black.

Anna sat as still as possible, wondering if she would dare move. Then, the words **"Trust ME"** appeared, as if written by an invisible hand. They shimmered and contorted, as if glitching

uncontrollably. The familiar lines of the room began to blur, then pixelate and snap back to reality. *Was this real, or was this all in her head?*

Awful laughter filled the air, and Anna didn't move. *Where was the sound? The walls, the window, or in her imagination?*

Her phone showed her a message **"They're almost in the building, RUN."** Some part of Anna knew she should obey, but she was rooted to the spot.

Her lamp, which was perfectly still a second ago, was violently thrown against the wall, filling the room with the sound of shattered glass, and for a heart-stopping moment Anna swore she heard distant, evil laughter.

The same eerie scratching noise penetrated the room, and Anna was thrown to the floor.

In a heartbeat, Anna was pinned against the floor by something unknown. Anna had no air, she couldn't scream.

Then her phone beeped a foot away, producing a message: **"I told you not to trust them."**

She heard distant laughter, echoing from her computer, the last sound she ever heard before the world went dark.

Her phone, now forgotten next to Anna's lifeless body, illuminated one last message: **"Too late…"** New words appeared on the computer, **"You belong to us now."**

Hours passed, and the ruined apartment grew steadily darker, only illuminated by a phone's flickering screen. Everything was dead still, until suddenly, **a pair of green eyes snapped open...** And the phone's light finally died.

The Curse of the Black Cat

Molly Kovar
Case Memorial Library

“RING, RING, RING,” The school bell rang signaling dismissal at Turkey Hill School. Everyone was excited because it was the last weekend before Halloween. Izzy grabbed her backpack and burst through the school doors, overjoyed for the weekend. She walked down the sidewalk for two blocks when she heard a rustling in the bushes. “Hmm, what’s that sound?” she thought to herself.

Izzy pushed the bush aside and discovered a small, adorable, black kitten! “Hi, little guy,” she said. “What should I name you?” Izzy sat down and scooped up the cat. The precious little cat snuggled against her. “I’m taking you home,” she said. She picked him up and gently placed him in her backpack. Izzy was very careful to walk slowly and steadily so she didn’t hurt the kitten.

The kitten only meowed a few times, but other than that he seemed to be a friendly kitten. As Izzy walked the next few blocks she thought to herself, “What about the name Ginger? No, the cat is black. That doesn’t make sense.” She thought and thought, and just as she was about to lose hope, she thought of the name “Jinx.” It was perfect!

Izzy walked through her front door, and then something strange started to happen. Jinx started meowing constantly. Izzy picked him up and petted him, but the meowing didn’t stop. “Oh, come on, Jinx, please stop,” she said hopefully. “Jinx, if you don’t stop I’m going to dump you back in the bushes!” Jinx froze and stopped meowing immediately.

Just then, Izzy’s mom walked into the room. “Why was there a cat in your backpack, Izzy?” her mom asked.

“Oh, I found Jinx in the bushes. Please can I keep him?” Izzy said.

“Fine, but I’m not paying for any of his stuff,” Izzy’s mom said.

"Okay, Mom. I’ll take him to the pet supply store right now,” Izzy said quickly, because she was eager to head to the store.

Izzy sprinted up to her room with her backpack. Izzy’s room was huge, bigger than her older sister's room. It was also really messy but she didn’t mind. Izzy dumped her backpack out into the enormous pile of junk on her desk and grabbed her tiny wallet with flowers on it. She raced back down the stairs to find Jinx sitting on a note. Izzy looked around confused. “No cat is smart enough to write a note! I barely remember where the pencils are,” she thought. Izzy lifted Jinx off of the note and read it.

Dear Izzy,

You have just made the worst decision of your life. The second you picked up that black cat you offended The People of the Black Cat and cursed your family. Terror will come and you will die within weeks, unless you have the power of your generation to stop it. If you become the bravest of your generation, these words will help you along your journey: All that matters is The People of the Black Cat, for they will give you freedom for all you have suffered and all you have lost.

Sincerely,

Unknown

"What?" Izzy whispered out loud. This made absolutely no sense! Izzy thought this was just an ordinary day… except for finding a black cat before Halloween that was sitting under a note that said she was probably going to suffer?

Izzy placed Jinx in her backpack and threw it on. Then she opened the door to see Mrs. Watson sitting on her front steps staring right into Izzy's eyes. Mrs. Watson was an old lady who lived alone in a big house across the street from Izzy's house. Everyone thought she was a creepy witch who was thousands of years old. Izzy, on the other hand, thought she was a normal person and that there was nothing wrong with her. It did seem peculiar though, that she was staring right at Izzy.

Izzy gave her a nervous wave and ran off. She sprinted past the yellow house that her friend Mya lived in, and past the white house where a nice family of an eighth grader lived. Izzy turned left and walked a couple blocks. Part of the reason that she wanted to go to the pet supply store was because her best friend Olivia's family owned it. Whenever Izzy went to Olivia's house, she always got trampled by their two cats, three dogs, one bunny, and five chickens.

Izzy pushed open the door of the pet supply store. "Hello," Izzy said to Olivia's family.

"Hi Izzy. I didn't think you had any pets?" Olivia's mom said, confused.

Izzy took off her backpack and pulled out the kitten. "I didn't until I found him in the bushes today."

Olivia's mom looked up from the cash register and said, "Well, that's very unsafe because stray cats can have diseases."

Izzy replied, "Hmm, I didn't think of that. Maybe I'll give him away after Halloween."

"Until then, if he gets sick, just bring him to me. And if you run out of any supplies, let me know. You better start shopping," said Olivia's mom.

Izzy took a cart and went straight to the cat aisle. She picked out litter, a litter box, a brush, a bed, a food bowl, a water bowl, a cat carrier, and a few toys. Then she headed towards the cash register.

“That’s going to be eighty dollars, but since I know you, I’ll give you a forty dollars off coupon,” said Olivia’s mom. Izzy handed her two twenty dollar bills and strolled out of the store.

Izzy walked back home slowly and very cautiously. Her palms were sweaty and her breathing sped up. After a few blocks she heard the very faint sound of a siren. All of the sudden, Jinx started meowing, so Izzy decided to run. Her straight, brown hair was blowing against her face as she sprinted like she never sprinted before.

When she turned down the street, she discovered exactly where the sirens were headed. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon were standing by their mailbox in front of their house which was covered in flames. Mr. and Mrs Gordon were very young and had just moved into their house two months ago. They were very nice but hated all animals of any kind. Izzy sprinted towards them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Gordon, are you okay? Is anyone hurt?” Izzy asked.

“We’re fine,” they said.

“You can come to my house until you have somewhere to stay,” Izzy said, as she led them toward her house. “Mom! Mom! The Gordons' house is on fire!” Izzy screamed as she ran into her house.

Izzy’s mom raced to the door. “Oh, come on in,” she said kindly.

Izzy went up to her room and Izzy and Jinx laid down on the bed together. At this moment, Izzy really missed her dad who was at a meeting in Rhode Island. It was getting pretty late. Izzy took out her chapter book and read until she dozed off with Jinx beside her.

“Meow, meow, meow,” cried Jinx.

Izzy sat up immediately. She looked at her clock. “Hmm, exactly seven o’clock,” she thought. After a good night’s sleep, it was clear that there was no way anything that happened yesterday was a coincidence. She needed help.

Izzy threw on a pair of black leggings and a USA soccer jersey and walked to her bathroom to brush her teeth. Just as she was walking out of her bathroom she heard a meow. This meow was different. It was a hopeless meow. It took Izzy a moment to realize that she hadn’t taken out any of the cat supplies!

“You must be so hungry,” Izzy said to the starving kitten. Izzy ran down the stairs to the kitchen, grabbed the bag of supplies, and sprinted back upstairs. She filled up the food bowl, water bowl, and the litter box.

Izzy walked slowly down the stairs. Nobody was awake yet since it was the weekend, and Izzy loved the quiet of the morning. The little fourth grade girl turned on the lights and helped herself to some cereal. Just as Izzy took her first bite, the wind started to pound (not the light breeze Izzy liked), the trees started to sway, and the rain started to pour. This was a disastrous storm. Before she knew it, she heard a huge “THUMP.” When she looked out the window, she discovered that the tree had fallen onto the power line. “Ahh, help me!” she screamed.

Izzy’s mom and sister came running. Just as Izzy’s mom walked in the room, lightning cracked. All of a sudden, Jinx came walking down the stairs and the storm stopped.

“What is that thing?!” Izzy’s sister screamed in horror. Izzy’s sister had brown, straight hair and was in middle school. She was the reason Izzy’s family never got a pet.

“Claire, it’s just a cat and he’s harmless,” Izzy persuaded.

“Okay, fine. Whatever,” said Claire.

Izzy’s mom went to turn off the lights, but when she flipped the switch nothing happened. “Mom, the big tree in the front yard fell and hit a power line,” Izzy said. Izzy’s mom walked to the front window to see a huge tree snapped in half with one half pulling down the power line. Izzy’s mom took out her phone and dialled 9-1-1.

Izzy was lying in her bed with Jinx trying to figure out what to do next, but she was distracted by all of the sirens buzzing around her house. For some reason, the only thing she could think to do was ask Mrs. Watson for help. After about thirty minutes, Izzy finally worked up the courage to go to Mrs. Watson’s house.

She put Jinx in his cat carrier with the note under him. Izzy pushed open her door and walked down the stairs. She went through the back door so she didn’t get in the way of the men fixing the power lines. Izzy walked around her house to Mrs. Watson's house and knocked on the door nervously. Mrs. Watson opened her door and her screechy voice croaked, “Come in, little girl.”

Izzy stepped inside and slipped off her shoes. “You can sit on my couch while I make us tea,” her voice croaked again. After a few minutes the old lady came in with two cups of tea. Izzy took a sip of the hot tea. “I can tell bad things have been happening,” said Mrs. Watson.

“Yes, not to be rude, but there are rumors that you're a witch and if that’s true then you may be able to help me,” Izzy said.

“Well those rumors are absolutely true and I can help you!” Mrs. Watson said as she sprang to her feet and fell back in her chair again.

“Mrs. Watson, I found a cat rustling in the bushes so I adopted him, but when I got home I found a note under him,” Izzy said. Mrs. Watson absentmindedly grabbed the cat carrier from Izzy and opened it. Jinx crawled right up on Mrs. Watson’s shoulders and fell asleep. Mrs. Watson read the note.

“Hmm,” she said a couple of times, “Izzy, you must know that there are two kinds of people: the modern people in your everyday life and the wizards and witches like me,” she said with a serious face. “There are different societies, and the one that is mad at you is *The People of the Black Cat*.”

Izzy thought for a moment and then said, “Mrs. Watson, can you help me break the curse?”

“Yes, I can help you break the curse. Meet me at the park at eleven o’clock,” said Mrs Watson.

“Well, thank you for the tea,” said Izzy as she exited the house.

Izzy closed her eyes and tried to enjoy a moment of peace, but all she could hear were construction workers yelling. Izzy took a deep breath, but all she could smell were ashes from the fire. Izzy was so upset! After all, all she did was pick up a baby kitten! With a frown on her face, she walked around to the back of her house, pushed open the back door, and went right up to her room.

Izzy had homework to do so she opened her desk to get her computer, but there was no computer! “Claire, did you take my computer?” Izzy called but she got no answer. Izzy walked across the hall to Claire's room and opened Claire’s door. On the bed was not Claire but a note. Izzy picked it up and read:

Dear Izzy,

I told you terror would come and it has. Never take from The People of the Black Cat!

Sincerely,

Unknown

Izzy looked at the note. This was horrible. Her sister Claire was gone! Just then, Izzy knew what she had to do. She sprinted across the street to Mrs. Watson's house and slammed open the door.

"Mrs. Watson! They stole Claire!" she screamed in terror.

"Little girl, there is nothing to fear, as long as you meet at the park you will be fine. Don't worry," the old woman said kindly. "Even though you love your kitten, it belongs to *The People of the Black Cat*. At the park tomorrow, Jinx will no longer be your pet."

Izzy stood up and declared, "We will meet you there!" Izzy walked with her head down thinking about how sad it would be to have to give Jinx back to *The People of the Black Cat*. When she got home, she went up to her room and took out the biggest novel on her bookshelf. Izzy laid down on her bed and Jinx followed her. The cat and the little girl snuggled together on the bed as Izzy read her book. By the time Izzy was about a third of the way through, she fell asleep.

"Meow! Meow! Meow!" Jinx cried.

Izzy woke up and looked at the clock. "Hmm, exactly ten o'clock," she thought. "I need to be at the park at eleven." Izzy threw on some sweat pants and a cozy sweatshirt. She placed Jinx into the cat carrier and sprinted out of the house and down the street. She sprinted and sprinted until she finally made it to the park to meet Mrs. Watson.

"Hello, Izzy. Gather ten sticks and rocks please," Mrs. Watson said. Izzy did exactly what Mrs. Watson said. "Now put them in a circle." Izzy followed every word. "Now stand in the middle of the circle and recite the words that will help you in your journey," Mrs. Watson said as she handed Izzy the letter.

"All that matters is *The People of the Black Cat,* for they will give me freedom for all I have suffered and all I have lost. I will never take the cat again, I will never interfere with *The People of the Black Cat*" she said.

Suddenly, the ground started to shake and Jinx the cat faded away and Claire started to come in view. "CLAIRE!" Izzy screamed. She ran into Claire's arms. "I broke the curse," Izzy cried in joy!

THE END!

Spooky Story
Rosalie M.
C.H. Booth Library

Once there was a girl named Marie who lived in a tiny cottage in the woods with her mother. She loved to explore in the woods.

One day she was exploring and she found two pairs of tiny pink shoes by a tree. They looked like doll shoes. She touched the shoe. As soon as she touched it she heard a rustling in the bushes and sprinted all the way home.

That night she woke up to a thumping in her closet. It sounded like a little voice was saying “Let me out”. She opened the door and checked her closet. There was nothing.

The next morning she went back to the tree where she saw the shoes, but they were gone. She looked around some more, and saw nothing. Right when she was about to walk away, she saw a flash of something in the bushes.

She asked, “Is anyone there?”

There was no response. She checked the bushes and all she saw was a white porcelain doll hand stained with blood. She went to touch it and it grabbed her finger. She tried to pull her finger away but the doll hand was rooted into the earth and tried to pull her in closer. She stepped on the hand and it finally let go.

She ran as fast as she could trying not to look back.

When she got home she ran into her room and locked the door. She went under the covers and went back to bed. Marie must have slept all day because when she woke up it was dark. Her mom wasn’t home yet.

She looked out the window to see if the bushes were still rustling. They weren’t rustling. There was just a slight movement from the wind. Then she looked around to see if the other trees were moving. They were still.

Before she could realize that there was something in the bushes she saw a small figure come out of the shrubs and it was walking closer and closer to her window until she saw the white porcelain figure staring back at her. It looked like a doll. For a minute she just stood there doing nothing but just staring.

The doll started banging on the window. It was getting louder and louder. Marie was afraid that the window would break. She started panicking and shutting the window shades all over the house.

The window broke. The doll crawled into the house. Marie ran and ran until there was

nowhere to run. She had to get out of the house and fast. Then she had an idea. She took her foot and smashed the doll into smithereens.

After that she saw that more dolls came into her house. There was a whole army ambush of them. All of them looked the same with white porcelain skin and black hair. It was too much for Marie. She curled up into a ball and let the dolls cover her. She closed her eyes tight and she had a feeling she would never open them again.

The Tale of the Girl in the Blue Dress

Matilda E. Matthews
East Lyme Public Library

Have you heard, at the nearby funeral home,
There's something there that moans and groans.
T'was once a home with a lot of luck,
Ended up with leaky tear ducts.
And the house? T'was three stories high, I say,
Then came the horrid day.
Orange flames from a burning gire,
Rose and rose, higher and higher.
And in there was the girl in a blue dress,
Covered in prettiness.
Her giggles and shrieks can still be heard,
But she's never said a word.
The girl brings the smell of her mother's lavender perfume,
You get a hint in every gloomy room.
Rumor has it, John's there too.
But you won't show up half the time, let alone when you want him to.
The funeral home was rebuilt, and is now Nelian and songs,
I bet they miss their creepy nuns.
Next time you're on Grand Street, look over there,
There are hundreds of ghosts, everywhere.

The Neighbors

Stella Noyes
East Haddam Library System

There was once a 12 year old girl named Stella. She always had some weird neighbors, like weird, weird neighbors. You'll find out soon.

Stella just got home from a long day of school and after stopping at her most favorite local library in the whole world, The East Haddam Free Public Library, she headed home and went upstairs and flopped on her bed.

"Ugh." she said tiredly.

Suddenly, she heard her neighbors grunting so she looked out her window and saw her neighbors digging a hole in the form of a body in a bag? Surely she was hallucinating, or dreaming. She did have a long day at school...right? Yes, it had to be that.

Later that night, 12 am, to be exact, Stella was scrolling through Instagram on her phone and heard her neighbors yelling outside. Why did she hear them say "SHE KNOWS SHE KNOWS?"

"Don't worry, don't worry, Stella doesn't know" my neighbors said. She felt scared they knew she saw them digging a hole and putting something inside. Is something gonna happen to me?, she thought.

THE NEXT DAY…Stella was walking to my school and something felt off. Was she being watched..? Stella started fast-walking to her school. Then she started running. Then she saw my neighbors running after her.

"AHHHHHHHHHHH", she screamed. She didn't freeze. She kept running. But they caught up to her and grabbed her and said, "Hey, you won't tell anyone about this right?"

"About what?" Stella said with a stutter.

"About me and my wife building a Halloween park in our backyard!"

Stella paused and looked at her neighbors. "That's why we were screaming, "STELLA KNOWS STELLA KNOWSSSSS" yesterday night"

Stella looked at them, still confused."Then why were you burying something in a body bag a few days ago?"

The neighbors looked at Stella confused, "Huh? We didn't bury anything in a body bag. What do you mean?"

Then his wife chimed in, "Is someone trying to frame us and make it look like we were burying something?"

"I don't know," Stella said.

To Be Continued…

Untitled
Ella Polubinski
Scoville Memorial Library

One day I sat in my room brushing my hair. In the mirror I peered at my reflection. Suddenly, it changed. Sitting in front of me was a pale-faced, red-eyed version of myself. Just then my mother called me:

""Mia, time to go to the library!""

I rushed out of my room. Even though I knew that the mirror was a figment of my imagination, I was still scared. On my way to the door, I passed my mom's large, full-piece mirror. I squeezed my eyes tight shut and walked by. But I couldn't help stealing a quick, sneak peek at it. At first, I was relieved. I didn't see anything at all. Not even my own, normal reflection. But then it faded into place: the same red eyes, pale face, and malicious grin as before. I dashed, gasping and panting, to our car, where my mother and brother awaited me.

***

I rushed to open the big yellow doors that led to the library. I held the door open for my family and we all entered the large, brick building. What awaited me was a change. Inside I noticed new, pale wood bookshelves, brightly colored books and...the large grand old mirror standing by the end of one of the bookshelves. I decided that I wanted to be brave and tell myself that it was just in my head.

So, I slowly approached the mirror. My reflection approached me too. As I got closer and closer, the image got more vivid until it seemed 3D. I reached a clammy finger out and touched the hard surface of the mirror. My reflection's hand met the fragile glass too, but it went through like a fish surfacing from water. I stumbled backward and ran over to my mother.

"Can we go to the lake now?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. We all left the library and entered the car.

***

At the lake, I walked to a dock at the edge of the water and stared down into it. Suddenly, my reflection appeared in front of me. An icy hand grabbed my face and I fell into the black water, never to be seen again.

Untitled

August Schaufelberger
Scoville Memorial Library

As I come to my senses I feel odd. This body has limbs that are too long, this body has grotesquely thin fingers, this body is pale white, and this body is not my own.

The Bloop in the Connecticut River
Anthony Spagnoletti
East Hampton Public Library

Chapter 1: Hello, Bloop

Once long ago in the Connecticut River, something very mysterious happened. Seven ships and two planes mysteriously went missing. Many people and even scientists tried to figure out what happened, but it took two months and 17 days until they figured out that there was more than one Bermuda Triangle. Only this time, in the Connecticut River.

They tried to see if a sea creature caused it, so they used a submarine to find it- but a problem brewed. There was an error, and the navigational equipment stopped working. One submarine wasn't good enough. After nine more months of hard work, they made a submarine that had a stronger computer connection. They tried it out, and it did survive, but they didn't figure out what had caused the navigation to break the first time.

The team got a huge crew and went in search of the creature, but it was taking too long, so they gave up and headed back to the shore.

A few years later, another giant sea creature came to the Connecticut River and made another ship crash and sink, they called it the Bloop. Soon it left. Then they wondered if the Bloop had caused the trouble.

Chapter 2: Did the Bloop Cause the Trouble?

Soon after the Bloop left, they realized the Connecticut River was being haunted, but what could it be? Witches casting spells? Ghosts? Or even the Bloop itself? It really was a mysterious mystery.

After a while they decided to rest, but each night the ground mysteriously shook, and one night it almost shook a house down! One time it shook and made a crack in the ground. The crack connected to the river! Water began pouring into the crack. "Hehehehe" said a voice- but no one was there. The water was still pouring into the crack! "Wahaha!" said the voice again. Still, no one was there. Then they saw a looooooooong tail. It was almost the size of 24 elephants, trunk to tail! It was much longer than the Bloop's tail. What could it be??!?

People were getting really nervous. Then they saw it again and realized it was an even LARGER Bloop- the Bloop had a twin! Only it was muuuuch bigger. And it seemed VERY angry. And it was pretty...dangerous looking. It let out a HUUUUUUUUUUUGE roar. And then

they saw its eyes were… red. They knew something wasn't right, and they knew red was the color of evil MAGIC.

But what could it be? It could be ANYTHING evil… witches, evil wizards, bad people who escaped jail. No matter what they HAD to deal with the evil Bloop FIRST.

Chapter 3: Stopping the Witch

Unfortunately, the people and the scientists had NO IDEA how to stop the evil Bloop. After some research they found what they needed.

[Their list]
salt
butterfly milk plant leaf (mush it)
ginger root

They got into two teams to get the ginger root and the butterfly milk plant leaf, and they headed out. Soon after they found the leaf and the ginger. Then they mashed the leaf and ginger and mixed it together. Then they added salt and stirred. Then it was finally ready. Now they had to figure out HOW to give it to the creature.

They needed bait. But what does it eat??!? They did some research, and they got the Bloop's bait... LOBSTER PLANT. They headed out in a plane and attached some bait to a line and lowered it toward the creature. While it was distracted, they fed it the mixture that would cure the evil magic spell. It worked! And now, they had to find the witch that cast the spell and stop them!

They looked into the night sky to see if they could spot the witches flying their brooms. They caught sight of one just before it flew behind a building, and they followed it. They followed the trail until they got to the witch's mansion. The witch caught sight of them and decided to send a monster made of brick after them. Thankfully, they were able to use their swords to defeat the monster and came upon a closed door. They needed to say a spell to open the door- thankfully they were prepared with a spell book. They found a spell and said the magic word: ALOHOMORA!

Once inside, they used another spell to take the witch's powers away, and then used a teleport spell to send the witch straight to prison! The Connecticut River was safe once again.

Spooky Halloween

Sandra Velasquez Maineri
Farmington Library

Once upon a time, it was Halloween day. But this Halloween day was not like any other; it was a spooky Halloween day because, on this night, the Halloween decorations came to life! We have all seen the decorations that fill our neighbors' yards; skeletons, goblins, and ghosts that line the streets. But on this Halloween, they all came alive!

The Halloween decorations wanted to play a game. Everyone was too scared to play a game with the decorations; everyone, except Sandra. She was small but brave. She told the decorations she was not scared of them and that she would play their game.

The decorations asked her what she was afraid of and challenged her to a contest: whoever got scared first would lose. If Sandra won, the decorations would turn back into ordinary decorations. But if she lost, they would stay alive forever!

The decorations tried everything to scare tiny Sandra. First, they tried heights, because many people are afraid of heights, but Sandra was not afraid. Then they tried other things people fear: roller coasters, bugs, spiders, cats, dogs, and many other phobias. Finally, they tried to scare her with a dark hole, which really frightened Sandra, because she was scared of the black hole, but she stayed brave, and she won!

Many people wonder how she managed to scare the decorations and win. Some say she touched a disgusting, dirty sponge and the decorations were impressed! But what truly frightened the decorations was her bravery and determination to never give up and win.

Teen Entries

Dead Man Walking
Maddison Barnum
East Hampton Public Library

The thing that used to be Marcus stood in the basement of the old Hartford Insane Asylum at 3:47 AM, and when it opened its mouth, something that wasn't quite a tongue unfurled like a wet and wilted flower.

“Jesus,” whispered Tyler Reeves, the night security guard, backing against the water-stained concrete wall. His tired, soft mocha eyes widened. “Marcus? Marcus! What happened to your face?”

The once fluorescent lights flickered, casting faltering ghost-like shadows across what remained of Marcus’s features. His jaw hung too low, dislocated and swaying slightly, revealing not teeth but rows of tiny grasping fingers where his molars should have been. Each finger ended in a translucent nail, and beneath the nails, Tommy could see things moving. Wriggling. The sight made him sick.

“Tommy.” The voice bubbled up from somewhere deep in Marcus’s chest cavity, wet and sickeningly thick, almost sounding like he was drowning somewhere too deep for Tommy even to begin to comprehend. “It came from the drains, Tommy. It's been in the water system for weeks. Since they started the renovation on Asylum Avenue.”

“Oh God, oh God--” Tommy’s hand found his radio, but his fingers were shaking too badly even to try pressing the call button. “What-- what is *that*? What's wrong with you, man?” Tommy’s voice cracked slightly, sounding like he was on the brink of tears.

Marcus took a step forward, his legs bent backward at the knee with a nauseating sound like a splintering twig. He didn't seem to notice. Dark fluid of some kind seeped through his work uniform, spreading in an uneven pattern across his chest. When Tommy looked closer, he could see the fabric moving, pulsing, as if something underneath was breathing independently of Marcus’s own struggling lungs.

“It gets in through the mouth first,” Marcus continued, his ruined jaw working up and down with each word. A thread of black saliva stretched from his lower lip to his chest like the overly stretched out gum of a middle schooler. “You drink the water. Just one sip. That's all it takes. Then it starts to rebuild you from the inside out.”

“I need to call---someone needs to---”

“No one’s going to help, Tommy. I’ve been reborn. And you---” Marcus’s head tilted at an angle that made Tommy’s stomach lurch. “You had coffee tonight. From the break room. I *watched* you.”

Tommy's bladder loosened slightly, warmth spreading down his leg. The coffee. The goddamn coffee. He'd poured it from the pot at 11 PM, barely conscious, barely thinking. The water came from the building's old, rusted pipes despite the building having been recently renovated a few years ago. The same pipes that ran throughout all of Hartford's aging infrastructure, a network of corroded metal and crumbling concrete that stretched beneath the city like diseased veins.

"H-how long?" Tommy managed.

"Hours. Maybe less. Who knows!" Marcus's chest suddenly split open vertically, the skin peeling back like a banana to reveal what lay beneath. Tommy saw ribs, but they were moving, *flexing*, like fingers trying to grasp something. Between them, instead of organs, there was a dark, wet cavity filled with what looked like translucent eggs, each the size of a tennis ball, each one containing a tiny, curled shadow.

Tommy then gagged before he could stop it. He couldn't help it. The contents of his stomach splattered against the concrete floor, and in his own sick, he saw them--little black threads, squirming, writhing, already starting to burrow back toward his shoes as if trying to return to their unwilling host.

"No," he whimpered pathetically. "No, no, no, no, no---"

"It's beautiful, Tommy. You'll see. The pain only lasts a little while. Hours, maybe. Then you'll understand. Then you'll *feel* what it wants."

"What does it want?" Tommy was crying like a little baby, pressing himself harder against the wall. His stomach cramped, and he felt something shift inside him, almost like a fist unclenching.

Marcus's smile split wider than any human smile should, revealing the full garden of fingers growing inside his mouth. They waved at Tommy, beckoning him.

"To spread, Tommy. To fill every pipe, every faucet, every glass of water in this whole goddamn city. Hartford first. Then the Connecticut River carries it south, and north, and--" Marcus convulses, his body jerking like a puppet. More fluid gushed from his chest cavity, splashing across the floor. "It's already in the reservoir. In the treatment plants. There is no escape. They can't filter it out. It's just too *small*."

A sound echoed from the pipes above them—a groaning, rushing sound, like water moving through metal. But underneath it, Tommy heard something else. Voices. Dozens of them, maybe even hundreds, all speaking in that same wet, bubbling tone.

I'm going insane…. I've finally hit my breaking point like everyone warned I would when I took this damn job….

The basement drain in the corner began to gurgle. Black water backed up from the grate, pooling across the floor. In the water, Tommy could see things moving. Swimming. Crawling toward him with purpose.

"Marcus, please man---" Tommy's legs finally unlocked, and he lunged for the stairs.

Marcus moved faster than anything human should be capable of moving. One moment, he was ten feet away; the next, his hand--cold, wet, wrong--clamped around Tommy's throat. The fingers weren't fingers anymore. They were tubes, and as Tommy struggled, he felt them probing, searching him for that soft spot, the openings.

"Don't fight it," Marcus whispered, his breath reeking of sewage and rot.

"Fighting just makes the transformation *harder*. I fought. That's why I look like this. But you---you could be beautiful. Perfect. If you just *accept* it."

Tommy's response was to drive his thumb into Marcus's eye socket (if you could even call it that anymore). The eye burst like an overripe grape, spraying a dark, glue-like liquid across Tommy's hand.

But instead of blood, he saw little black, fungus-like worms moving around.

If anyone had told Tommy that this was going to happen to him today, he would have hysterically laughed in their face and called them nuts because how could *this* be real?

Marcus didn't even flinch; he *laughed*. It was the kind of laugh that makes every hair on a person's body stand and sends chills down your spine.

The kind of laughter that sends off every single alarm in your brain, telling you ***this is it. This is how you die.***

"Too late now, Tommy boy, *way* too late"

The cramping in Tommy's stomach then intensified, and he began to feel something tear inside of him. Not painfully, not exactly---more like something that was coming *unsealed*. His throat was closing up, and when he tried to scream, he felt it in there: the movement.

The *remaking*.

The lights went out.

Oh. ***No.***

In the darkness, Tommy heard the water rising, heard the voices growing louder, felt Marcus's grip of steel relax as something else--many something elses---took hold of him instead. They pulled him down into the black water that looked like a void, and as his head went under, his last conscious thought before the transformation that he never asked for was completed was of his daughter.

His daughter, who lived in the Parkville neighborhood.

His daughter, who brushed her teeth every morning and night with Hartford tap water.

His daughter, who was probably awake right now, was getting ready for her 4 AM shift at Hartford Hospital, making coffee, drinking it down, never being cursed with the thought of what's hiding in the pipes beneath her feet, an entire city being reborn as we speak.

By dawn, twelve more unknown security guards across Hartford's downtown buildings had failed to report for shift change. The police had done welfare checks. They found the basements flooded, the drains overflowing, and in the dark water, shapes moving just beneath the surface.

When officer Sarah Chen reached down to feel if the water was cold, something grabbed at her wrist. "It's beautiful," a distant raspy voice whispered from the drain. "You'll see."

She tried to pull away, but the grip was like handcuffs on her wrists, and the water was rising faster now, pouring from every faucet, every toilet, every pipe in the building.

Hartford was thirsty.

And Hartford was *drinking*.

The city would be rebuilt by noon.

By evening, the water would reach the Connecticut River.

And by next week?

Well.

Everyone needs water to survive.

In The Garden

Alexa F Coogan
Welles-Turner Memorial Library

Some people say they can still see her. The girl who went missing a few years back. They see her in the woods and on the side of the road. The sightings only come at night but they know it's her. The girl's striking red hair always gives away her identity. The townspeople have stopped reporting the sightings, they know it will do nothing to bring her back because this girl can't ever come back. She went missing after a party she couldn't find a ride home from. Her body turned up two weeks later with a knife in her abdomen. She was in a ditch when she was found, only two minutes away from her house.

Everyone had their suspicions. They always do. The prime suspect was a local trucker who had been in town at the time but when the cops showed up to his place he was missing. Two weeks later his body turned up in the same spot that the girl was found.

The police stopped investigating after anonymous threats started showing up at the homes of the girl's neighbors. However, the police ignored the threats. All of the neighbors went missing. They were never found.

The police did uncover that the killers of the girl and the trucker were her parents. The very ones who had made the call reporting her missing. After questioning they discovered her father had picked her up and they had gotten into an argument. He stabbed her before pushing her out of the car. Then the two buried her in a ditch.

A young couple moved into the little house on Coldbrook. This was the same house the girl grew up in. They had moved to the suburbs after life in the city became too stressful. The house was their dream home. It was in the middle of a large field surrounded by dense trees. The man made the spacious sun room into a beautiful office and the woman planted a large garden out back. The first few weeks were quiet and although Coldbrook had a few houses lining its pavement, they hadn't met any of their new neighbors. In fact they hadn't even seen any of them. Their attempts to introduce themselves had failed, for when they knocked on the neighbors doors, no one ever answered.

One night in October, when fog filled the field just enough to see a few meters in every direction, the man and the woman sat down at the kitchen table for a nice dinner. The man told the woman about how his boss had given him a promotion and the woman told the man about how she had made many sales at work that day. They congratulated each other before receiving a strange phone call.

The person on the other line sounded frightened asking for help. She said she needed a ride home from a friend's. She kept calling the woman Mom. The woman had only ever had one child who died young, so she told the girl she had called the wrong number before hanging up the phone.

Who was that? The man would question, the woman explained how a girl had called and she was looking for her mom, but it was just a wrong number and nothing that concerned them. The two shrugged it off and they moved into the living room to watch a movie. Not long after they received another phone call.

The man went to answer it this time. On the other end of the line was a scared girl asking for a ride home from her friend's. The man explained to her that she had the wrong number and went to hang up the phone. The girl began shrieking and begging for him not to hang up the phone. She told him he would regret not helping her. He told her that no threat would frighten him and hung up the phone. The woman asked him who it had been and he explained it was just that girl again.

They shrugged it off once more and continued their movie. The woman told the man she remembered they were out of bread and needed some more so the man went out in his car to buy some. When he returned the woman walked into the kitchen to fetch herself a glass of water. She noticed the absence of a kitchen knife from the chopping block. She stood at the sink filling it and gazed out the window at her beautiful garden. She saw the rows of carrots and potatoes. The lines of squash and pumpkins. Her eyes scanned the entire patch of land before she caught a glimpse of a figure outside. It was a girl hunched over in the dirt.

The woman called out to her husband and he soon joined her by the sink. The couple crept out the back door and down towards the girl in the garden. As they got closer they could see her hair. Bright red and pulled up out of her face. She looked as though she'd been thrown out of a truck. Her face and clothes were covered in dirt and scratches. The man called to the girl but she didn't respond.

As the two got closer and closer they could see the girl wasn't just unresponsive she had a blade stabbed into her stomach. The girl was barely holding onto life as she lay in the dirt. The woman gasped, she thought the girl was dead. She would tell him and the man explained to her that she should go into the shed and grab some shovels. The man explained how they should bury the girl in respect. The woman agreed and the couple quickly got to work.

They loaded the body into the car and drove to a nearby ditch. They dug a shallow grave and tossed her in. They said some prayers to mourn for her before the man and the woman got back in their car. They drove home and went to bed soon after they arrived.

The man went to work as normal the next day and the woman woke up after he had left. She walked into the old bedroom of the girl who went missing a few years back. She stood there for a bit taking it all in before going downstairs to make a call. She picked up the landline and dialed 911. The dispatcher answered asking what her emergency was and the woman answered sounding panicked. My daughter never made it home last night.

The Cupboard: A Short Story

Zoe Hough
Henry Carter Hull Library

There was once, in an old house in Connecticut, a simple blue cupboard with a brass handle. Well, perhaps 'simple' is not the best word.

It squatted on the right hand side of the fireplace and might have been used, under normal circumstances, to hold logs or kindling, if it had not been for the undeniable fact that no grown man or woman had ever been able to notice it before.

Children were a different case. For instance, on cold autumn nights when Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher, the owners of the house, sat comfortably by the fire, reading aloud stories of dragons and knights to their three children, the need would often arise for more wood for the fire. Mr. Fletcher would set the book down and exclaim, "If only the builders of this old house had thought to place a handy cupboard by the hearth for wood, we would be able to find out if Saint George did indeed slay the beast… instead of having to wait for me to get more logs from outside!"

"But Father," eight-year-old Peter would say, "there is such a cupboard."

His two little sisters, Alice and Jill, would nod their heads in unison and say: " Tis true, Father, there!" And they would point it out.

But Mr. Fletcher would just shake his head and scold them for telling silly lies, then send them off to bed.

On one such night in late October, after Mr. Fletcher had scolded and told them to go to bed, the three children pleaded with their parents to be allowed to sleep downstairs by the fire.

"It's so cold!" they cried. "Oh please!"

Their parents really were rather indulgent, as far as parents go, so they kissed their heads and tucked them into quilted coverlets, and the children were soon fast asleep.

Peter gave a peaceful little snore. Alice and Jill kicked off the too-warm blankets. And, unbeknownst to them, a tall, slim figure slunk across the moonlit lawn and made his way to the house.

His black eyes gleamed as he peered through the wobbly glasspaned window, his eyes overlooking the figures on the floor, instead catching sight of Mr. Fletcher's money bag hanging on a hook on the wall.

The thief chuckled softly to himself. "Handed to me on a silver platter..."

He reached into his pocket. Almost lovingly, he pulled out a long, thin knife. It glistened in the moonlight.

He slid the end of the knife through the crack between the windows and pulled up, undoing the latch. "So easy," he smirked.

Carefully, he began to push open the first window. But then–

A strong gust of wind flung the windows open with a loud - BANG!

The man threw himself against the wooden clapboards and held his breath.

The children jerked awake.

"What was that?" Alice asked, rubbing her eyes.

Jill pointed. "The window! But how—"

"The wind must have blown it open," Peter said. "I'll close it."

The thief had been listening carefully. "These are just children," he thought. "I know how to deal with children…"

He waited until Peter had reached the window before jumping through. He pressed a hand over the boy's mouth and a knife to the boy's throat.

"So much as a sniffle from any of you and I swear this knife will be put to use," he spat. He turned to Alice. "You, little girl, stand up and get me that money bag there. Quickly!"

Alice stood, not quickly at all. Peter was either a very brave boy or a very foolish one—his

parents and sisters could never decide. Whatever the reason, bravery or foolishness, he bit down hard on the man's hand, causing him to cry out in pain and drop his knife.

Peter broke free and ran for the cupboard. "Quickly! Jill, Alice, get in!"

"You little—" the thief dove forward and caught Peter around the ankle.

"I've got you now you-you-ahhHHHHH!" For he had just caught sight of the two girls who appeared to be—well, let me put it this way: they did the opposite of appearing. From the thief's perspective, the two little girls vanished into the blank wall.

"Ghosts!" he yelled. "Witchcraft! Get away from me!" He pushed Peter forward and stumbled back, knocking one oil lamp to the floor and sending another straight into the fire.

Peter jumped into the cupboard, slamming the door shut just in time.

"Are we safe?" Jill asked. "What's that smell"

"Smoke!" Alice said. "Oh, Peter, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know!"

After a moment Jill spoke. "I feel funny…"

"Me too," Alice said and the two girls closed their eyes.

Peter felt that as the oldest, he ought to comfort them, even though he was trembling himself. "You'll be all right," he said. "Just… Just…" Peter felt his eyes getting inexplicably heavy. "Just sleep…"

The fire leaped around the room, bounding from the bookshelves to the table, devouring the coverlets in a ravenous crackle. The thief stumbled about. The smoke was making it hard to think. Should he escape? Grab the money? Had three children really just vanished? Was it all a nightmare?

Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher tumbled into the room, drawn by the strange sounds and the swirls of smoke. They choked on the foul air.

"Fire!" Mrs. Fletcher cried, pointing.

"Thief!" Mr. Fletcher cried, pointing.

The thief was having a truly terrible night. So many people had seen his facewhere on the crumbling, burning floor. He tried to jump out the window, but his path was blocked by flame. All of a sudden, he spied something—there, next to the hearth. A blue door, with a brass handle.

He wrenched it open and dove in.

"Wasn't there someone there?" Mr. Fletcher choked, as his wife pulled him outside to safety. "We have to call the fire brigade!" He rushed in the direction of one of the neighbors but was stopped by Mrs. Fletcher's horrified scream. "The children!"

Her husband's face went pale. He turned, speeding to the burning building.

The ceiling collapsed just before he could enter the doorway. The rush of hot air pushed him backward and to the ground. The last thing he heard before it all went black was the sound of his wife screaming his children's names.

It took a year for their house to be rebuilt. It mirrored the old one in every way. Mr. Fletcher had wanted to sell it, to move as far away from Connecticut as they possibly could. But his wife kept dreaming of the children. They called her back to the house. They were startling dreams, vague and precise all at once. Her children's faces—clear as day—surrounded by flickers of blue and brass.

So they rebuilt. Everyone in their town helped, more out of pity than anything else. To lose all your children in one night... Unthinkable.

Mrs. Fletcher didn't talk much anymore. She cried a great deal. No one blamed her. Mr. Fletcher also mourned. But instead of tears, he turned to anger and annoyance, snapping at anyone or anything that provoked him. No one blamed him, either.

And so it happened, that on the anniversary of their children's death, Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher were sitting by the fire holding books but staring at the floor. Mr. Fletcher, seeing the fire getting low, muttered in his new, annoyed way: "If we had put a cupboard in that wall when we rebuilt it, I would not have to go out in the cold to get more wood."

That made Mrs. Fletcher look up, her glazed eyes blinking into focus. "Remember," she whispered, "how Peter would always tell us that there 'was such a cupboard,' and the girls would say

‘yes, ’tis true’ and point at the wall by the hearth?”

Mr. Fletcher nodded. “And I would always scold them for telling lies and—and…Oh,my poor children!” He fell to his knees, his face in his hands, sobbing.

Mrs. Fletcher lasted only a moment longer before she was on the ground, too, her arms around her husband's neck, sobbing just as violently. They stayed there for some time, crying together, taking what comfort the could in each other's company.

A small sound interrupted them. Like the sound of old hinges opening.

“Mama?”

“Papa?”

Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher spun round.

There, crawling out of a cupboard with a blue door and brass handle, that they had never noticed before, was Alice.

She blinked her eyes and yawned as Peter and Jill clambered out behind her, also rubbing their tired faces.

Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher stared at the children for a moment and then at each other, and then— It is most difficult to describe the sheer immensity of the astonishment, shock, and overpowering joy which was felt by the children's parents in that moment.

Tears were again streaming down their faces as they ran to scoop up their very much alive children in their arms, kissing them again and again, running fingers through gloriously messy hair, and telling them the most important thing: “I love you! I love you! I love you!”

The children in turn had no idea what was going on, but finding that they rather liked it, they joined the fray, kissing their parents lovingly on the cheeks.

“But you—but you are all really here!” Mrs. Fletcher laughed, touching each blessedly rosy cheek. “But how?”

Peter jumped up and down. “We crawled into the cupboard and fell asleep when that frightful man— oh, he is gone, Father, isn't he?”

Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher couldn’t hear him over the rejoicing and laughter. His sisters looked once or twice around the room, then shrugged to one another.

The grown up Fletchers went on kissing the small ones for another hour yet, ’til they all went to bed. And I am most pleased to report they lived happily for the rest of their long lives.

As for the thief, he was never seen again. No one ever missed him.

And as for the cupboard… Well, it behaved rather normally after that. But each year on the anniversary of that magical night, it has been known to just slip the notice of every grown man and woman. The children can see it, of course. And on the clearest moonlit nights, they can hear a sound from within. A sound not unlike that of a man groping about in the dark, looking for a knife that he will never, ever find.

The Hour the World Forgot

Srikari Kona
Ferguson Library

Iris stared at the ceiling, her eyes wide open. She could not sleep, not now. Not after her teacher had told Iris she needed a story idea by tomorrow. “Write a creative fictional story. Anything you want, as long as it’s original. Use your imagination!” Mrs. Taylor had announced to the class. *Easy for her to say*, Iris thought. Mrs.Taylor wasn’t the one up at 2:58 a.m. stressing over the assignment. Her teacher was really sweet and Iris loved her, but she had no idea what to write. She sat on her bed for several hours, and still she didn’t know what to write about. Dragons? Too cliché. Romance? Cringe. Talking animals? Nope. Fairies? Definitely not.

Just as Iris was about to head downstairs for a break, or even a midnight snack, a loud BANG from the street shattered the silence. She jumped a little. Half frightened and half curious, she pulled back her curtain, frowning. A trash can had fallen over, but the trash was frozen mid-air, like someone had hit pause on the world. Iris blinked and rubbed her eyes, hoping she was just imagining things. Nope, the trash was actually floating in the air.

She quietly ran down the stairs and was about to head out the front door when she noticed the leaking faucet. Well, technically the faucet wasn’t leaking anymore, since the water droplet was now levitating a few inches above the sink, looking like a crystal. The kitchen clock read 3:00 am, but the thing was, the second hand on the clock was no longer moving.

She ran out the front door to make sure the garbage was really floating in the air. As Iris stepped outside, the cold air wrapped around her like a warning. The street was completely still, too still. Sure enough, the garbage was really floating. She then noticed that a car in the middle of the road had its headlights on, frozen mid-turn. The driver’s face was locked in place with one hand hovering just above the steering wheel. Not even a blink.

Iris’s heart thudded in her chest. She took a shaky step forward, her slippers brushing against the pavement. The air felt thick like she was underwater. Even the wind had stopped. No rustling trees. No hum of electrical wire above the street on Vine Road. Just silence.

“Hello?” she called softly, though she wasn’t sure who she expected to answer. Her voice sounded muffled, swallowed by the quiet. The street stretched out before her; it was empty, frozen, and completely still. Her breath came out in small white clouds. She turned in a slow circle, half-expecting something to jump out. That’s when she saw movement.

At first, she thought she was hallucinating, yet she saw a figure walking at the very end of the street. Not frozen, not paused. Moving! Iris’s stomach dropped.

“Hey!” she called, trying to sound braver than she felt, but her shout came out as a shaky whisper. The figure turned. It was a boy, about her age, with dark hair that glowed faintly in the moonlight. He blinked at her, surprised.

“You can move,” he said quietly as he walked towards Iris.

“So can you,” Iris replied in shock. “What’s going on? Why is everything…like…like this?” She stuttered.

The boy glanced around and motioned for her to follow. “Not here. It’s not safe to talk out in the open.”

Iris hesitated. “Not safe? From what?” But the boy was already walking away before she could even get his name. Against her better judgment, Iris followed closely behind. Her curiosity had officially won over her fear.

They walked in silence until they reached the playground. It just so happened to be her middle school’s playground, Turn of River Middle School. The swings were frozen mid-sway, and the merry-go-round was stopped halfway through a turn. The boy stepped over a patch of frost and sat on one of the benches, motioning for her to join him.

“This is the Secret Hour,” he said finally. “The hour the world forgot. It happens every night for exactly sixty minutes, between 3 am and 4 am. Time stops for everyone… except for a few of us.”

Iris frowned. “A few of us? What do you mean?”

He looked at her carefully. “We’re called the Awakened. No one knows exactly why this happens. Some say it’s a glitch in time, others think it’s magic, but every now and then, someone new wakes up during the hour. Like you.”

Iris tried to take it all in. “So everyone else is just frozen?” she questioned as he nodded.

“Completely! The world goes quiet. You can explore, but you have to be careful. There are… Others that move during the hour,” he said in a deep tone.

Iris choked on her words. “Other things?”

The boy stood up and motioned for her to follow again. “Come on. I’ll show you.” They walked behind the playground and down a narrow path that led to the old library. It looked different—older, somehow. The windows shimmered faintly, and strange symbols glowed along the walls. The boy pressed his hand against a door in the back, and it creaked open with an eerie sound.

Inside, the air smelled like old paper and rain. Shelves lined the walls, but the books weren’t normal. Some of them floated slightly above their shelves, with their pages actually turning by themselves. Others had glowing titles that changed when Iris blinked. “What is this place?” she whispered.

“The Time Vault,” the boy said. “It only exists during the Secret Hour. It’s where lost stories and forgotten moments in time go. You can read anything here, there are books about people like us and the Others, but if you take something with you when the hour ends…” He trailed off, his expression darkening.

“What happens?” Iris asked.

He met her eyes. “You’ll never feel the same way again.”

Before Iris could respond, a low hum filled the air. The lights flickered, and shadows began to move across the walls. Dozens of whispering voices rose from the shelves—soft, echoing words that seemed to form her name. “Iris…Iris…Iris…”

The boy grabbed her hand. “We have to go. The hour’s ending!” They ran out of the library, back through the still streets, as the frozen world began to stir again. The headlights blinked, the faucet dripped, and the clock in Iris’s kitchen started ticking once more. When she looked at the time, it still read 3:00 a.m.

The boy was gone. Only one thing remained. A single glowing bookmark appeared in her pocket with words written in silver ink: See you next hour. She definitely had her story idea now, but this was more than some typical school story.

Iris ran up the stairs, hoping not to wake her parents up. There is no way she could possibly sleep for the next 3 1/2 hours. So she sat at her desk, typing everything that happened in the past one hour. Iris couldn’t even control her own hands, they were moving at lightning speed, not missing a single detail. At first, her fingers shook. But the more she wrote, the faster her words came spilling out through her fingers. She wrote about everything—the frozen trash, the still air, the boy, the Time Vault, the shadows, everything. Her mind kept racing. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the boy’s face and heard the echo of those whispering voices in the library.

By 3:30, the glow had faded. The bookmark looked completely normal now, just a strip of paper, but Iris knew better. When her alarm buzzed at 6:30, she was still typing. She had nearly six full pages done and a hundred questions she couldn’t answer.

At school, Iris moved like she was half-awake, her head still caught between two worlds. She could barely focus through math and science. Every clock she passed made her uneasy. What if one froze again? What if she froze this time? She didn’t tell anyone, not even her best friend. Who would believe her? The rest of the day went by in a blur, and soon, it was time for her last period, ELA.

Mrs. Taylor stood by her desk, her usual friendly smile perfectly in place. “Alright, everyone,” she said. “I hope you all have turned in your draft essay.” When the bell rang, everyone rushed out of the classroom. Everyone except Iris.

“Iris?” Mrs. Taylor said sweetly. “Could I have a quick word with you before you go?”

Iris stopped.

“Sure.”

Mrs. Taylor waited until the room was empty before speaking again. “I was reading through your outline.” She paused. “It’s… very interesting. The Secret Hour, the boy, the frozen time. Where exactly did you come up with all that?”

Iris hesitated. “It just came to me,” she said carefully.

Mrs. Taylor’s smile didn’t fade, but her eyes sharpened. “Just came to you? Not from… experience?”

Iris blinked. “What do you mean?”

Mrs. Taylor leaned closer, lowering her voice. “You see, Iris, I’ve taught for a long time, and every few years, one of my students writes about them. The Awakened.”

Iris froze. Her mouth went dry. “How do you know about that?”

Mrs. Taylor sighed softly, like she had been waiting for this question. “Because, my dear, the Secret Hour isn’t as secret as you think.”

Her shadow on the wall stretched strangely, even though the light above them wasn’t moving. It grew taller, twisting along the floor like spilled ink. It reminded her of the shadows creeping along the walls in the Time Vault. “I was once one of them too,” she said quietly. “Until I borrowed something from the Time Vault for too long.”

Iris took a step back, but Mrs. Taylor didn’t move closer. Her expression stayed kind, too kind.

“Tell me,” she said softly, “did the boy tell you about The Others?”

Iris’s pulse quickened. “He mentioned… things that move during the hour.”

Mrs. Taylor nodded slowly. “Yes. The ones who can’t leave it. They envy the Awakened, the ones who still belong to time.”

Suddenly Iris didn’t like her favorite teacher as much. She no longer felt safe around her. The teacher that Iris thought of as a friend, was now turning against her. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it might echo through the empty classroom.

The clock above the whiteboard had frozen again, exactly 3:00 a.m. It was 3:00 p.m. a few seconds ago and now the world around her shimmered faintly, the way it had that first night. Mrs. Taylor was gone. The door stood half-open, the hallway beyond dim and silent.

The bookmark Iris clutched in her hands was glowing silver in the still air. Iris reread the words again: You’re not the only one awake this time. She was surprised that the words changed, but she should have known anything is possible in this mysterious world.

She turned toward the hallway, gripping onto the bookmark tight. The school, usually buzzing with noise and laughter, was now silent. Lockers stood open mid-slam, paper airplanes hung frozen midair. She walked carefully, her footsteps sounding too loud in the quiet.

“Hello?” she whispered. No answer. Only the hum of time that wasn’t really moving. Then she heard footsteps. Soft, deliberate ones, echoing down the corridor.
Iris spun around, ready to attack. However, it was only the boy from the night before. He stepped into view, the same faint glow around him. Relief washed over her.

“You came back,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

He nodded. “I had to. The hour’s changing. Something’s not right.”

“What do you mean? You are always telling me bits and parts of the whole story! You're being so confusing. I need you to explain!” Iris yelled, frustrated. She didn’t mean to take out all of her anger on the boy. He was also a kid her age, probably as confused as she was. Nevertheless, she demanded answers. “You haven’t even told me your name! How can I trust you?”

“I will tell you everything once you calm down.” The boy responded politely.

Iris took a deep breath to make his lips start moving again.

“My name is Leo, and I’m here to help. The Others weren’t always monsters. They were like us once—Awakened. But they decided to disobey the rules and steal items from The Vault.

Every time you do that, the hours will claim your memories, your voice, and your reflection, leaving nothing behind that was ever human."

"Hi Leo! My name is Iris and I'm sorry for snapping at you." She replied, sounding awfully positive. "That makes a lot of sense. So… What's your plan?" Iris's question caught him off guard, but he managed to answer.

"My plan," he whispered, "is to end the Secret Hour once and for all."

Iris blinked. "End it? Can you even do that?"

Leo hesitated. "Not alone. The Time Vault holds a core. It is something that keeps the hour alive. A kind of heartbeat for the still world. If we can find it and destroy it before the hour resets, maybe everything will go back to normal."

Iris wasn't sure she liked the word destroy or the chances of this working. However, she didn't want to live the rest of her life wondering when time would freeze again, or whether her teacher would vanish into shadows once more.

"Then we'd better hurry," she said.

They moved through the school, following the pulsing energy that seemed to vibrate under the floorboards, brushing the walls, growing stronger as they went.

Leo's eyes narrowed. "It's here, I can feel it. The core is near."

When they reached the school's library, the air shimmered, the walls seemed alive, and Iris understood why. This place had always been different. The hour's heartbeat was strongest here, and the core must be somewhere inside. The walls were lined with glowing symbols again, and the air shimmered faintly. Books drifted lazily through the air, pages fluttering as if whispering to one another. At the center of the room stood the same table from before, though now something rested on it—a glass sphere, filled with swirling silver light.

"The core," Leo breathed.

"It's beautiful," Iris said softly.

But the moment she stepped closer, the whispers started again. They grew louder this time, clearer. The voices weren't random—they were hers. She heard her own laughter, her own cries, and then the sound of her typing in the middle of the night.

"It's showing you your memories," Leo said. "It wants you to stay."

The light inside the sphere pulsed brighter. The shadows that crept along the walls began to take form, stretching and reaching.

"We have to do it now!" Leo shouted.

"What do I do?" she asked.

"Touch the book mark to the sphere," he said, his voice shaking. "The bookmark's from the Vault—it's the only thing that can break the link."

Iris almost forgot that she was still holding on to the bookmark. She was about to put it on the Core when the whispering grew louder until it filled her head.

"Stay," the voices pleaded. "Stay where time is safe. Stay where no one forgets you."

Her hands trembled. The light was hypnotic, warm, almost comforting. For a moment, Iris felt herself slipping, wanting to listen.

“Iris!” Leo’s shout cut through the noise. “Don’t let it take you!”

She closed her eyes and slammed the bookmark against the sphere. There was a blinding flash of silver light, followed by a low, rumbling sound that seemed to shake the air itself. The whispers turned into screams, then vanished all at once. The light from the sphere dimmed, flickered, and finally went out.

When Iris opened her eyes, she was sitting in her classroom again. The clock on the wall ticked normally. Students chattered, pencils scratched paper, and Mrs. Taylor was handing back assignments with her usual calm smile. Iris looked around wildly, half expecting to see Leo, but he wasn’t there. Everything looked perfectly ordinary. Iris assumed that everything was back to normal—no more shadows, no more Others, and no more demonic Mrs. Taylor. Except the bookmark. It was still in her hand, no longer glowing but heavier somehow, like it remembered what had happened. She tucked it into her notebook just as Mrs. Taylor approached.

“Wonderful work on your story, Iris,” she said warmly. “Very imaginative!”

“Thanks,” Iris replied quietly. Although Mrs. Taylor seemed like her past self, she couldn’t unsee what she was before.

As Mrs. Taylor turned to walk away, Iris caught a glimpse of her reflection in the window. The teacher’s shadow lingered half a second longer than her body did—stretching, moving on its own before snapping back into place. Iris blinked and looked again. Everything appeared normal. Mrs. Taylor clapped her hands to get the attention of the class. “I would like everybody to welcome our new student, Leo!”

Iris’ face turned pale in shock.

When the clock struck three the next morning, the bookmark on her desk began to glow again, soft silver light spilling across the room, followed by a faint whisper that made her sit bolt upright in bed.

“You are now set free. The hour will miss you.”

Seven

Tyler Mezrich
Guilford Free Library

The gun went off, and her body thudded to the grass. Lila muttered a curse under her breath. She had always been jumpy before races, and this time she had jostled Casey, their best runner, to the ground.

Lila was a tall, brunette girl, with a pretty smile. But that smile was nowhere to be found, since they had just taken a bus two hours away, at dusk, on Halloween, to the middle of nowhere -the woods of Voluntown, Connecticut, for the Halloween Invitational. Lila would much rather have been out with her friends, but she had been forced to go to this race, since their seventh best runner had mysteriously fallen ill. As the other girls sprinted ahead, Lila helped Casey up, apologizing as she stopped her from being trampled. Lila then settled into the back of the pack of girls, their spikes rhythmically slapping the ground.

The race started in an open field, and almost immediately headed into the woods. The course was lit by strung lights of different colors, giving it a festive feel. The girls entered the first bottleneck into the woods, jostling and fighting for position. Suddenly, the strung lights, previously fun and Halloween themed, flickered, and without warning all went a dim color of red.

Lila was confused. Was this part of the race? She just chalked it up to it being a harmless Halloween prank. When she heard the high pitched scream from the front of the pack, she also thought it was just sound effects designed to scare them. She continued on, following the girls in front of her, breathing heavily, her pink-and-white spikes pounding through the mud and grass, as she narrowly avoided large tree roots, and the narrow course threatened to swallow them whole. Lila reflected back on how she missed making the volleyball team, and wished she had made it so as not to have to endure this hell. Her insides already burned. She could barely see, but just then, a thick fog rolled through the woods, limiting the visibility to the back of the jersey two feet in front of her.

Lila was running with four other runners, two from Orange, and two from Lexington. They reached a fork in the woods, but they couldn't see the markings on the trees due to the fog and eerie lighting. The girl in front went left, so they all followed blindly. Lila thought she saw a white arrow going the other way as she passed, but she assumed it was only her brain playing tricks on her.

The path at that moment became winding and dark, with fewer and fewer lights strung up. Lila tripped over a branch, and let out a gasp as she fell to the ground. One of the girls from Orange helped her up, and she panted out a thanks.

As they turned to continue, they saw a dark flash, and a dark silhouette flashed through the woods, moving as though possessed. The dark creature flew directly at one of the girls from Lexington. She screamed, and turned, ending up facing Lila and the rest of the girls. They all

looked on, in horror, as the dark figure appeared to envelop the girl, and she wailed in agony as it lifted her off the ground, and suddenly she let out a last, ear-piercing scream, as she disappeared into thin air, her purple and yellow spikes thudding to the ground.

All at once, it was spookily silent, and there was no trace of the dark figure or the girl. Lila walked cautiously to the girl's spikes. Around them, there was a pool of blood. The pool of blood mysteriously seemed to resemble the number one. All three girls shrieked; two sounding terrified, the other a mixture of scared and excited.

Once Lila, and one girl from Orange, who in a traumatized voice introduced herself as Tessa, got to their feet, they turned back and began to sprint the way they came. They stumbled through branches, and reached the fork in the woods, where they encountered another pack of girls.

"We have to get out of here! A girl just disappeared…" Tessa began, before breaking down in hysterical crying. "There's something in these woods. A dark figure. It took a girl away." Lila said, her voice shaking, but she tried to keep a calm facade.

The other girls gave them questioning looks, then laughed. "Nice one. It's Halloween. Probably just a deer," one of them said.

"I'm serious. We have to leave." Lila said.

The girls just shrugged, and kept running. Lila and Tessa had no choice but to follow. They were scared of being in a small group. They figured safety in numbers was best. However, the fog thickened, and in an instant Lila found herself only able to see one other girl, this one red-haired and from Arlington. They continued on, the only sound their ragged breathing and their spikes hitting the ground.

Suddenly, the redheaded girl slammed into a tree that appeared out of nowhere. Lila never saw the tree. One second, she and the girl were running, and the next second, there was a wide, dark, oak tree in the middle of the path.

As the girl crashed to the ground, a massive branch cracked. Lila looked up in horror. The branch was the length of a car, a couple feet wide, and was pure black. The same color as the dark figure.

Before Lila had the time to connect the dots, the branch crashed into the girl, smashing full force into her body. The girl had no time to scream. But when the branch hit her, the girl went up in a cloud of thick black smoke, which smelled of fire and ash.

The fog lifted, and Lila realized that she was only five yards ahead of Tessa and the other girls. They slowed to a stop, and all looked on in horrified realization at what was left of the redheaded girl. A pair of red spikes and a puddle of blood which distinctly resembled a "2".

Two girls fainted. Lila and Tessa didn't even scream, they just turned to look at each other, unspoken thoughts shared between their terrified eyes. Tessa thought Lila's eyes looked strange in the light; the red light made them appear bloodshot and the color of blood. The third girl in their group, who Lila thought was named Kendra, began shivering uncontrollably, and muttering to herself, "No, no, no. This can't be happening. That's only a myth."

“What’s only a myth? If there’s something, you need to tell us. Now.” Tessa growled, her face hardened, towering over the petite Kendra with her lanky frame.

“There’s a myth… I heard it from camp. There was a coach who worked here, at Voluntown. He was an old guy, really creepy. His name was Burgess, I think. He was accused of assaulting a couple of his runners. Their parents went psycho on him, and ended up killing him. People say he haunts this forest, wanting revenge. The girls made it all up. He was found innocent the day after he died.”

“We have to get out of here. Now. I don’t care if that story is real or not, something's happening. And we’re going to die if we don’t finish this race. We’re closer to the finish than the entrance to the woods. The girls in first are going to come by on their second lap. We can join them, and warn them.” The girls nodded at Lila. They left the two girls who had fainted. It was every girl for herself.

The girls walked carefully through the woods, Lila leading the group, Tessa bringing up the rear. They all held hands, and Kendra gripped Lila’s hand so hard her knuckles turned white. A crisp breeze made them shiver under the thin material of their jerseys. After only a minute or so, the leading girls ran by, a group of eight, moving at a fast trot. Tessa, Lila, and Kendra blocked their path, calling for them to stop. The girls shoved through. By accident, as one of the girls, this one from Westport, pushed between Lila and Kendra, she clipped Lila’s ankle, and stumbled-directly off the side of the path. She tumbled down the cliff, bouncing through bushes. Just when it seemed as though she would be fine, she crashed into a bush of razor-sharp prickers. But as Lila watched the girl, she noticed that the prickers seemed to be pitch black. It happened faster than the other two. The girl hit the black thorns, screamed, and was gone. Lila didn’t even have to look. She knew what would be there. Spikes, and a number “3”. “WE HAVE TO GO! THIS COURSE IS HAUNTED!” Tessa screamed, no longer able to suppress her fear and anguish. None of the girls objected.

They sprinted down the course, helping each other, quickly navigating the woods. Except the woods seemed to be stretching, longer and longer. The red lights continued to flicker, putting the girls into almost pitch darkness. Tessa counted ten girls, and tried to remember their names. There was Lila. Kendra. Three girls from Glastonbury. Four girls from Ridgefield. And one girl from…Tessa couldn’t get a good look at the girl's face. As she thought about it, she started to wonder how many girls she had actually seen in the group. Didn’t she list everybody? Who was the other girl running with them?

“Who’s the eight girl running with us? At the back? I can’t read her jersey.” Tessa panted to Lila, out of breath from their desperate running. The fast girls had slowed down to accommodate their pace, wanting to stay in a large group. Safety in numbers was always a safe policy. “That’s…I don’t know. Where did she come from? I thought we had ten. How many do we have?”

Tessa and Lila scanned the group, but there were only ten of them. Lila and Tessa looked at each other, confusion visible on their faces. They both sped up. They reached a large rock, which let them know that they only had half of a mile before the finish of the race. The race

exited the woods right before the finish, which in their minds meant safety. Lila knew she wasn't going crazy. She looked through the group one more time, scrutinizing their faces. And there it was again. The dark figure. In the silhouette of a runner. Right behind the two girls in the back, both from Ridgefield.

"WATCH OUT BEHIND YOU!" Lila screamed. Too late. As both of the Ridgefield girls whirled around, the dark figure simultaneously raised two dark, glowing cross country spikes, the spikes the color of night, their blades as long as Lila's middle finger, sharper than anything she had ever seen. It drove both spikes into the girls, and the fog thickened around them. They didn't even get to scream. While Lila and Tessa couldn't see the girls' demise, they knew with a solemn certainty what had happened to them.

"They're gone! Don't slow down!" Tessa yelled to the rest of the girls, who had begun to stop and investigate. They listened to Tessa, evidently viewing her as understanding the mysterious deaths. In reality, Tessa had no more of a clue than them. "I think I understand the numbers." Kendra practically whispered to Lila. "There were seven girls who accused Burgess. His whole varsity team. I think there's going to be seven deaths." "There's been five so far. We don't have much farther to go. We have to be careful. It could be any one of us."

The girls picked up their pace, as the wind intensified around them. Lila's hair was blown backwards, her ponytail coming undone. She could hear nothing but the wailing of the wind. She could see nothing but the dim figures of the runners, and the dark shapes of trees. It was almost serene. And as they passed the sign signaling two hundred meters to go, the girls began to have a glimmer of hope. They might actually survive this.

Kendra ran right behind Lila, barely missing Lila's spikes. She knew she couldn't keep the pace much longer. But as she saw the white lights of the finish line, she pushed on, pushing her body to the limit. She faintly remembered one more detail about Burgess, but it was in the back of her mind, and she couldn't recall it. The girls ran closer and closer to the finish, seeing the white lights grow brighter and brighter. The air seemed to get hotter and hotter. Wait, why is it getting hotter? Kendra wondered with a growing alarm. She struggled to remember what her campmate had said.

In that moment, it all popped clearly into her head. And it turns out he was innocent. Really sad, actually. James said, as he turned the flashlight off, letting only the campfire cast a warm light on his face. The night was warm and muggy, and flies flew around. They were toasting marshmallows on sticks, and telling campfire stories. James' was the only one that sounded real. The best Kendra could come up with was a silly ghost story she had heard from her parents.

Focus, Kendra. You're off topic. She snapped back to the campfire, focusing on James' story. And the worst part was how he died, James continued. The parents of the girls kidnapped him, brought him into the woods. They made a circle of the girls' spikes, the ones he supposedly assaulted. And they lit the circle on fire. Burned him alive.

Kendra snapped back to the race. That was it. They burned him. They were almost at the light, the heat growing unbearable. "This isn't right. This isn't the finish." Kendra said, but to her

surprise, there was no fire. It was the finish. But where were the people? One girl crossed the finish line, then two. Kendra thought she had just been making things up, imaging things. She was fifteen meters from the finish, step for step with Tessa. Lila crossed the finish line. Kendra had ten meters. Five. And as the eighth girl crossed, the course was set ablaze.

Kendra and Tessa screamed, but it was too late. They ran straight into the wall of fire, black as obsidian, and disappeared, their spikes dropping to the ground. Lila walked over to their spikes, the fire having disappeared along with Tess and Kendra. She picked up their spikes. Slowly, a twisted grin spread across her face, and she let out a laugh as if she was possessed. She bent down in the dirt, drawing something. A black aura surrounded her, as she looked down at the numbers “6” and “7”. That was for you, Dad. That’s seven for you.

Bloodline
Night Michaelson
Case Memorial Library

October 5th, 2025

Dear Diary,

This is my first time writing to you so I guess an introduction might be needed, huh? My name is Guinevere, but I like to be called Gwen. It's easier to remember and doesn't stand out as much. I am seventeen years old and in my senior year of high school. I'm not really sure there's much else to tell, I'm just the weirdo no one ever really liked. Nothing I can do about that, right? Ah right, I'm supposed to say something cool like my dreams for the future or something. Uhm, well, I'd like to be a singer…but I don't have the talent. Sucks right? I'm not pretty either. Oh well. I have school tomorrow, we'll see how it goes. Maybe I'll get lucky and some storm gives us the day off. Not that it's snowed like that in years but hoping never hurts.

Wish me luck,

Gwen

Houses whizzed by as I stared out the window of the bus leading to Amity Regional High School. It should be illegal to be forced up so early. I couldn't name a single adult who wanted to be up at six in the morning, much less us kids. There were literal clinical studies showing we were better off up at seven or eight.

Shaking my head, I grabbed my phone and tapped in the code absently. I wasn't awake enough to do anything functional but I could look at what the trending dances were. Maybe if I could learn a few I wouldn't only have my parents' number in texts like some sort of social recluse. Then again, I was in my senior year, so what difference would it make? It would be a pathetic call to make, really. Despite that, I still opened TikTok and started watching some random woman with a decent following do a dance transition to some viral song. In all honesty she looked ridiculous, but the couple million followers she had made me think that it might just be my uncultured butt that was the issue. I huffed a breath, drawing the unwanted attention of other half asleep high schoolers, and scrolled down. The post I saw made me cringe; it was one of my senior class's popular groups, in someone's house dancing with the caption titled "Senioritis hitting hard, can't wait for the real parties!" Whose house even was that? Actually I don't think I want to know whose house everyone's getting high at.

Shifting my weight, I leaned over and zipped open my backpack, rummaging around for my headset. I pulled out the ragged thing, it was some random off-brand bluetooth one I had used to the point of needing duct tape to hold itself together. Turning them on and connecting to my

phone, I closed TikTok and opened up GarageBand and began playing around with different beats. I lost myself in the rhythm, only realizing that the bus had arrived at school when everyone rose to leave. Grimacing, I pulled my bag over one shoulder and hauled myself off the bus to endure another day of hell.

Ha, I absolutely hate high school.

English class in senior year is exactly how you would imagine — boring, slow, and half asleep seniors pretending they still care about the literary tragedy of Willy Loman. I sit in the farthest desk from the front, way back in the left corner of the obnoxiously decorated room. So far, I've been left alone for the most part, but it's still the first period so I shouldn't get my hopes up. But regardless, the peace is welcome, and I settle into my seat and hunker down for the rest of the lecture.

"And so, with that, we will be moving into our quarterly project; a group presentation of *Death of a Salesman*. You'll find the rubric and requirements posted on Google Classroom along with your group assignments!" Mrs. Johnson finishes, seemingly oblivious to the look of outright hatred glaring from all sides of the room from the declaration, myself included. Nobody liked presentations, *especially* when groups were assigned.

I bit my cheek, an anxious habit, and really hoped I had gotten lucky. The generally quiet room went up in noise as everyone leaned down to take out computers to check the assignment requirements and groupings. Please, please, *please*, don't be them. I'll even take the goofy idiots, I don't care, so long as I don't have those people, I seriously don't care.

My heart dropped as I saw the names listed on the black hulky computer my school supplied. Any earlier calm vanished in an instant. This was *not* going to be a good week. The sound of floors being scraped filled the room as we pulled our desks over to each other into groupings and got to work. Well, everyone except our group. Talin, Selene, Roman, and me. Aside from The Twins, these three hated my existence more than anyone else. I sat there awkwardly, wishing that vanishing into thin air was an option.

"We'll each do our part for this, yeah? We can all split it equally." Selene flashed a fake smile at me before looking over to her friends. She was class of 2025's popular girl — a pretty blonde, up with the latest fashion trends, rich, and by some unholy curse, mean. Whoever decided being cruel was part of a popular girl's sacred responsibilities, I, Gwen Monstrasanguine, personally wish for your untimely demise.

I sat in defeated silence as they divided the project responsibilities into fourths. Well, until we all get home and they're free to drop the act. They'll leave it all to me. And unless I want to fail this class, I'll have to do it all myself.

“Remember everyone! This assignment is due the week before the quarter ends and you’ll be presenting the week after with your groups," Mrs. Johnson called after us as the bell rang and we rushed to our next class. Two months, it could be worse.

***

I stood frozen in the locker room behind one of the locker rows; I had been heading to the gymnasium for class when I heard them.

“You know, I’ll never get that girl,” Selene’s friend, Eleanor said. “She’s such a freak! I mean, who just sits in silence for a whole forty five minutes? I mean seriously, is she deaf?”

Selene and a few others laughed. The back of my throat began to burn and I felt my heart rate increase to match my swift breaths. I wanted to cry and I hated myself for it. Why should I care what those pompous bullies think? I stared down at the tiled floor, the muted blues doing nothing to help my mood. I could just pretend not to hear and walk out right now.

But even as I thought that my feet were already carrying me to the bathrooms to my left, away from the blatant shit talking going on the other side of a locker row to my right. The nearest stall was open and I slipped in just as the bell rang, feeling my eyes start to burn in tandem with my throat. This really was one horrible day. Raising a hand to my mouth to muffle the sound, I slid down to the floor quietly, tears making their way down my face.

Screw this, screw *all* of this. I was so tired. I was so done. What had I ever done to deserve this? What sin could I possibly have committed? What exactly did I do *wrong*? Because something I’ve done must have been wrong otherwise why do they ostracize me this way? I bit my cheek and clenched my free hand around my knees, hugging them close to my chest. My eyes burned more and more with each passing second and I miserably wondered if I should change out my mascara again.

Ow, ow, *ow.* Pain lanced through the back of my skull behind my eyes and I felt like my head was going to explode. I was in so much pain I was barely aware of my body's movements as I stumbled to the stall door and unlocked it, panic setting into my bones when neither the burning nor the sharp pain let up.

Groaning, I wobbled as I made a beeline to the paper towel dispenser, praying that it would be full for once. By some godsent miracle it was, and I eagerly grabbed the coarse paper towels and wet them in the sink. With no amount of elegance I began vigorously scrubbing my face, what the actual hell was in that mascara? I groaned again, a fresh wave of pain causing me to put a hand on the grey bathroom counter.

After a while the pain let up somewhat and realizing I’d been hyperventilating I began taking deep calming breaths. I was going to throw that mascara out first thing when I got home.

Flinching at the occasional throbbing, I dried my hands off. Reaching up to do the same to my dripping face I looked in the mirror and froze in terror. What. The. Heck. Unnerving emerald green eyes stared back at me. Not my brown ones. Emerald. Bright god damn emerald. What in the world? Thoroughly freaked out, I moved to the next mirror just to make sure I wasn't delusional. Upon seeing those same green eyes I pulled out my phone and reversed the camera app to triple check.

Oh my god. My eyes are emerald green now. How was this even physically possible?

***

I spent the night behind the locked door of my room freaking out over my newly changed eyes. For the first three hours I had desperately searched for any account of eye colors changing during puberty. When I had been met with nothing useful I gave up and changed into pajamas before dropping into my bed and lolling off to sleep, head still hurting from whatever the hell happened earlier that day.

The next day I barely paid attention to my classes because, well, I saw things in a way I wasn't sure I could before my eyes changed. Everything looked like it was in higher definition; watercolor art that hung in the hallways didn't look as flawless as it used to as my eyes zeroed in on the texture of the paper and the tiny brush hairs I noticed from a dozen feet away. It was surprisingly hard to pay attention to a lesson when you noticed flecks of dust moving through the air. Infuriating, too. And of course, someone had gotten around to telling The Twins my eyes had miraculously changed color overnight because they sauntered up during lunch period and made multiple attempts to catch my attention with rude gestures. It wasn't the greatest thing to live through, but at least my unnerving new eye color was an effective bully repellent. They didn't come within ten feet of me the whole time. What did they think I'd do? Shoot lasers from my eyes and go berserk?

I watched them from the corner of my eye warily as I finished eating lunch and opened up my computer and began to work on the English presentation. Early this morning I'd discovered that — shocker — Selene had sent a passive aggressive email with everyone's rehearsed excuses, leaving me to deal with the project on my own. She had also seen fit to make a jab at my eyes, which she assumed were colored contacts.

Ah screw it, I can't even concentrate when I see literal pixels that make up my screen. "Who knew there were that many colors in white?" I muttered in irritation.

My inability to focus due to my eyes did not improve throughout my next three classes, Environmental Science, Pre Calculus, and History — which was not in fact called History but we always learned the same things over and over again so now I stopped bothering to memorize the

course name and just stuck with what worked. By the time I was heading to my seventh period elective I was up to my waist in work I wasn't entirely sure I could complete.

Turning the corner of the beige-walled hallway, I ran smack dab into the people I was desperately hoping would forget my existence and leave me alone. The Twins, Selene, Talin and Roman stood huddled together in a corner, with blown-out pupils and smiles to match. Great. They tended to get meaner that way.

I backed up and made to turn away unnoticed, but, of course, one of my past teachers, Mr. Lyons, walked by at that moment and said hello. Heads whipped in my direction as Mr. Lyons continued walking, seemingly unaware he'd just handed me to the wolves. "Oh, well look who it is!" The twin on the left said gleefully. The left one's smile widened, looking downright possessed. Yep, definitely meaner this way. It was one thing to be bullied by Selene and her crew, but The Twins gave a whole new meaning to the term bully. It definitely didn't help that they were identical either. I couldn't tell them apart for the life of me. I also never got around to learning their names, something with a D? Maybe the other one started with an O?

I took a step back. I needed to get to class. Hell, I just needed to be anywhere except here. I'd never been physically harmed by them before but I wouldn't put it past them.

"Whatcha lookin' at," the right twin sneered. I could feel the adrenaline starting to rise in my core. My fight or flight instincts had kicked in, and like the absolute coward I was, I wanted nothing more than to turn around and run like the hounds of hell were giving chase.

"Nothing, I was just getting to class," I mumbled, painfully aware of how small I sounded in the larger corridor. Selene and Talin had noticed me now; Roman was engrossed on his phone screen, not seeming to notice his friends had found their favorite plaything. I stumbled a step back, fear now fully overtaking my system, running through my veins, urging me to—

Burning engulfed my feet, spreading swiftly up to my thighs. My knees buckled under me and I collapsed down onto the floor. I let out a scream of agony; this was *so* much worse than my eyes. Roman looked up to stare with Selene, Talin, and The Twins, both of whom had backed up a step out of surprise. Selene looked as though she was ready to bolt, color draining from her face as she watched me writhe. Oh screw it, if weird changing crap is going to happen now and officially out me as a freak, I should at least make a run for it.

Thank God for adrenaline, I thought, as I somehow found the strength to rise and hightail it out of there. Ignoring the sensation of being burned alive, I rounded the corner and made a beeline for the gymnasium, not caring what class was in progress, only that it led to the girls locker rooms, the closest closed off space I could think of. That and The Twins weren't able to go in there, out of all of them only Selene could. And one was better than five in my book.

By the time I made it into the locker room — with no amount of curious stares from the ongoing sophomore gym class — I slammed the flimsy bathroom stall door shut and snapped the lock into place before stripping off my grey sneakers and socks. My pants came off a moment after. Oh what in the name of all things holy, my legs are on *fire.* Struggling to think cohesively through the increasing storm of sensations assaulting my consciousness, I settled into the corner and decided to give it time as I had last time. But, unlike before, the pain was unrelenting and the burn only seemed to grow more intense with each passing second. I began to feel lightheaded. I let out another muffled scream through my hand, which I had clamped over my mouth. I didn't know what was happening but I was sure about one thing; absolutely no one could know.

Black began ebbing into my vision. Before this I had never fainted, but I guess there's always room for firsts. Remembering vaguely that it could be dangerous if I was sitting upright, I lowered my body completely to the floor, being careful to position my legs inside the stall. My consciousness faded and one last thought made its way through my sluggish mind as my mind slipped into the black.

What is *happening* to me?

***

Scaled hands touch my shoulder, shaking me as if trying to get my attention. I'm not sure why; this quiet calm feels so nice.

"Wake up, child." The voice sounds urgent. All I want to do is rest…I'm so tired.

"Child. I do not have time for this," a cold sensation shot down my head to settle in my spine and my eyes snapped open. I was floating…in darkness. But I could see? Oh…my eyes. Right. I'd forgotten about that. I turned toward the voice, floating around to come face to face with the source responsible for waking me up. I opened my mouth to scream. Her scaled hand clapped a hand over my mouth.

"Quiet child, they will hear you." I nodded vigorously, anything to get her off me. She lowered her hand and smiled at me, revealing serrated teeth. "You needn't be afraid of me, I shall not hurt you." I shrink back all the same, taking in her purple hair and glinting slit pupils. The woman's hands were scaled and her fingertips ended in pointed black claws. She wore an old fashioned dress that looked to be from the twelfth century, and jewels of black onyx and amethyst shimmered on jewelry around her neck. She returned my stare, that unnerving smile softening slightly into something…sad?

"Who are you? What are you?" The questions tumbled from my mouth before I could stop them. Well, crap. Ask the scary monster lady about herself after she tells you she won't hurt you. That definitely doesn't sound like every horror movie plotline in existence. Nope, not at all.

“My name does not matter. I am only here to explain.” The woman tilted her head at me, as if waiting for me to ask the questions that had plagued my mind since Monday. So I did. “What is happening? What am I?”

Something like shadows pool around in the darkness around the woman, “You are of a lost bloodline. Of ancient magics and grudges. Diluted over centuries so that you are the first in millenia. Because of this, you are changing accordingly.” I stared at her with something close to laughter bubbling in my chest. This is insane. Ancient magic? Lost bloodlines? I must be hallucinating.

“You are not hallucinating,” the woman said.

“And pigs fly,” I deadpanned, floating backwards as the fact she just read my mind registered. Something like exasperation crossed her face. “Do with it what you will, child. But know this, your bloodline was once a strong one. There is nothing stopping you from making that hold true once more.”

The shadowlike swirls surrounded her, and just like that, she was gone.

***

I stared at myself in my bathroom mirror as I carefully applied mascara, painfully aware of each speck that got on my eyelid. It had been almost a month since I had fallen unconscious and met the nameless monster woman. She might have been freaky, but there had also been something familiar about her, like I knew her from somewhere. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Not yet at least. But despite that, her words had stuck. Or maybe it was how I had felt when I woke from that weird voidlike space. I’d never felt so indifferent to the bullying or the doom and gloom that seemed to follow me around. I had felt *whole.* I had never before considered myself anything more than the painfully average person, but in that moment, you could’ve thrown me in front of God himself and I would have flipped the finger his way.

The feeling had faded as quickly as it had come and I swore I felt the woman's hands brushing over my shoulder, as if she had shown me what she meant. I glanced down at my hands, and focused on the odd sensation in my fingertips. After a few seconds my nails grew in length. I smiled at the success, when they had first changed into what I could only liken to retractable claws, I couldn't control them for the life of me. They came out whenever I got angry or scared — which was a common daily occurrence — and I had to take a few days off from school claiming to be sick in order to learn how to control them. It was either that or risk accidentally skewering Talin's stupid face in math class, the prospect of which had become *highly* tempting ever since my arms had gone through similar changes as my legs, becoming inhumanly strong and fast. The only downside to the changes were the adjustment periods in which I spent ample

amounts of time trying not to accidentally break any doors, furniture, dishes, or water bottles. I cringed as I began applying lipstick; the water bottles hadn't fared too well.

I had also learned that my movements — if I stopped paying attention to how much power I put behind them — were too fast for the human eye. I slipped up during gym class a couple times, earning very confused stares from classmates. If I wasn't genuinely concerned about the government coming to haul my ass off to some questionable facility, I would've stared right back and told them that they should consider it a small miracle I hadn't lost it and thrown a basketball through their skulls, especially considering Selene was everyone's favorite person. And I really did need to watch my temper because I definitely had the strength to pull some crazy crap now.

Some part of me wished that turning into, well, whatever I was turning into, had come with an instruction manual. But what was I supposed to do? Magically call back the very clearly not human woman who could read minds and yell at her for being a terrible explainer? No thank you. I'll just stick to self restraint.

Finishing off my lips with some clear gloss, I smiled, letting my canines slip into their full length as I admired the finished look in the mirror. Today I had picked out a loose fit black t-shirt and black sweats. Leaning back out of the bathroom door I grabbed my beige zip up hoodie from my mahogany dresser and threw it on over my top. Turning back to the mirror I stared at my appearance once more.

One month ago I would have been wearing a ponytail; I wouldn't have bothered with makeup and whatever clean clothes I had grabbed first would've done fine. I wasn't confident in my appearance back then. Now, that person didn't exist anymore, replaced by a seventeen year old who put out outfits the night before and spent plenty of time making sure she looked good. She had green hair a shade darker than her eyes and makeup that accented her features just right.

If only my past self could see me now. I wonder if she'd realize how much she underestimated herself.

***

It was the last week in the quarter and Mrs. Johnson's English class were all crammed into the obnoxiously small room in groups, waiting to see who would go first and present. I sat next to Talin, not bothering to hide my triumphant grin, which by the looks of it was thoroughly unnerving to the lot of them. Mirth bubbled up in my chest. If this was their reaction to seeing me genuinely smile without fear of them, then they would absolutely *love* what was going to happen when our group was called. Just for the record, these idiots had it coming.

“Alright,” Mrs. Johnson said, “Tyler, let's start with your group.” The group sitting in front of us got up and began presenting. I yawned, making sure my fangs were away as I did so. Roman was on his phone, reading a text and Talin was pretending to take notes. But, he was really drawing, taking turns with Selene to see who could make the most obnoxious drawing of the other. No one at this table had the slightest inclination of what was on the presentation. Instead of looking over the slideshow that had taken me hours to painstakingly put together, they were too busy drawing stick figures and texting boyfriends. Huh. So Roman’s into guys, that's news. I looked over at his phone again, making sure that I wasn't seeing things wrong. Yep. That said BF with a heart emoji all right. I wonder which realization came first for him, the fact that he was gay or the fact that his entire friend group was full of homophobes.

I turned my attention back to the presentation and listened absentmindedly to an explanation of why Willy Loman was redeemable as a character. I wasn't sure I agreed with the take; some people just don't get second chances. Some don't deserve it.

My ears pricked up when someone across the room — Eleanor — mentioned my name. I glanced over, eyes pinpointing her by the ribbon bow she always wore in her hair. She was leaning over in her seat to whisper in her groupmates ear. I didn’t know that one by name but I had seen her around Selene enough to know she probably wasn't friendly.

“I heard that she got her hair dyed over the three day weekend a couple weeks back, and did you see those piercings in her ears? My parents would have a heart attack if I ever got my helix done.” I rolled my eyes, not bothering to quiet the snort of amusement that found its way past my lips. Eleanor clearly loved her gossip. And as for my new piercings, they’d been my early birthday present. The hair did give mom and dad a partial heart attack though. I’d been able to play off the eyes as colored contacts, but there wasn't much to be done about my hair other than begging for forgiveness over an elaborate story I concocted about how I’d gone to a hair salon in secret when it had begun to shift. I was still tempted to walk over to Eleanor and give her a piece of my mind; she really didn't know when to keep her mouth shut. But, in the interest of keeping the fact I could hear in a solid half mile radius if I really tried as a secret, I would not be telling Eleanor to stick it somewhere else just yet. Maybe later though. It was definitely on my to do list for sometime this year.

“Right well, thank you for your well thought out presentation,” Mrs. Johnson said, cutting through my line of thought. “Any questions from the class?” No one raised their hands. I was more than sure that at least a few others had a question or two, but this was first period, and unless you wanted to piss off the entire class, you kept your mouth shut.

“No? Alright then, Selene’s group, how about you go next?” Mrs. Johnson said cheerfully, flashing Selene a bright smile. Anticipation coiled in my stomach as I walked up to the front of the classroom and Mrs. Johnson pulled up the presentation. There were several poorly disguised giggles from around the room as the presentation's cover page was projected

onto the whiteboard. I smirked, watching the faces of Selene, Talin, and Roman as their expressions morphed from that of shock to pure rage. They *really* should've looked over it before we got up here. Ignoring the looks of confusion on my classmates faces, I turned to Mrs. Johnson and with the most fake jokes-on-you-suckers smile I could muster, I read the cover aloud.

"*Death of a Salesman*: Why Not Participating In Group Projects Is A Bad Idea, by Guinevere Monstrasanguine." And, keeping myself from collapsing into a fit of laughter, I presented my months worth of work, a slideshow's worth of reasons why actually doing the project the way it was supposed to be done would have benefited everyone equally. When I was done, I gave my infuriated bullies a saccharine smile and sat down. The entire room sat in silence, eyes on Mrs. Johnson, who was surveying me with a mixture of surprise and annoyance.

"Selene, Talin, Roman. I would like to see you after class," Mrs. Johnson said, disapproval rolling off of each syllable as she spoke. They wouldn't be getting out of this one.

"Gwen," Mrs. Johnson seemed to struggle between being angry and sympathetic for a moment. "Next time this occurs, just email me please. Normally I wouldn't accept a presentation so clearly off topic, but it was surprisingly well done, so I'll allow it."

If I'd ever said that English class sucked, I take it back. Mrs. Johnson was officially my favorite teacher and English class is the best class I've ever taken.

"Of course, Mrs. Johnson," I said brightly, "and by the way, it's Guinevere, not Gwen."

***

I stared at the mirror in my bathroom, braiding my hair into a french braid that I would have under my graduation cap. I'd finished my makeup an hour ago, and had spent the free time writing in my diary. Using a hairband to tie off my braid, I looked in the mirror, eyeing my graduation robe, which was the colors of Amity Regional High School — black, gold, and yellow. I shook my head as I reached over to grab the graduation cap; the year had flown by so quickly. It was hard to think that there was ever a time where I wasn't the resident, green eyed freak of Amity. After this year I supposed that I'd be NYU's green-eyed freak instead of Amity's. It really did feel so surreal.

"Guinevere, it's time to go! You'll be late to graduation if we wait any longer," my mother yelled from somewhere in the house, undoubtedly grabbing her keys as she did so.

Looking in the mirror one last time, I turned on my heel and walked out of my bedroom.

And to think, there was ever a time where I thought of myself as normal. I huffed a laugh and said to the woman I knew was watching, "you know, if you'd told me your name it would've

been much easier to figure myself out. But then again I guess that was the whole point of keeping it a secret. Well played, Morgaine Le Fay."

I could have sworn I heard her laugh. There was no denying her words from seven months ago. When you were the descendent of Morgaine Le Fay, the sorceress of Camelot, your bloodline was as strong as they came.

October 5th, 2031

Dear Diary,

I announced a tour today for my new album, and in a few hours I have an interview scheduled to explain the title tracks in depth. I can't say all of the truth, obviously, but I'll make due with half truths. I seriously can't believe it's almost been seven years since I last wrote in you. I guess college kept me distracted and my demo got accepted right after I graduated, so there was never much down time. Sometimes I wonder what happened to my old bullies. But, every time the thought crosses my mind, I find I don't really care. This is my life, and I can't be bothered with the mortals and their petty lives. Morgaine tells me that planning my first fake death is going to be a pain thanks to technology now, but not impossible. Where there's a will there's a way, if my music career is anything to judge by. Who knows, maybe I can get my dear grandmother (times thirty seven) to help me out and cast some sort of memory alter spell on those who've seen my face or something. My mother sent this news cutout to me in a letter recently. I'm surprised my fans put two and two together so quickly.

24 Year Old Popstar Drops Another Hit Album, Her Fourth In The Last Two Years

Popstar singer Guinevere Montrasanguine, who goes by the stage name Guinevere Le Fay, has released a new album called VENOM, and a world tour to go with it. In an appearance at the 2030 Met Gala, Guinevere Monstrasanguine explained she's always wanted to write an album about her high school experience; fans say that VENOM might just be that album. However, the popstar has made no comment on the matter, only stating in her tour announcement that VENOM holds a place close to her heart.

Well, my manager's calling. Guess it's time to get ready for that interview.

I'd say wish me luck but who needs luck when you've got a sorceress's bloodline?

Guinevere

A World Away
Ruthie Morris
C.H. Booth Library

My eyes blinked open. They quickly darted back and forth before closing tightly once more as I groaned in pain. I felt like a madman. For days I hadn't eaten or even left my bed, and the only "sleep" I got felt more like a sick hallucination. After a long session of deep reasoning with myself, I worked up the strength to go for a walk. Before I knew it, I was up and going to visit the very thing that had led me to misery: My family.

The morning air tasted of sorrow as I drearily sauntered through the cemetery, searching for them. Surely they would be here. Breathing in the crisp fall air, I looked around. A pale mist shrouded the earth, perfectly contrasted with the thorny shadows of the trees. The tombstones rose above it like shark fins in a vast white sea. My eyes scanned each grave, looking for someone. Anyone.

Everything was eerily peaceful for a moment, but I couldn't help but think back to that tragic day. It had been only a few months since that car crash, and the memories haunted me still. The refreshing summer breeze flowing in and out of the window. My wife and daughter singing along to the radio. Everything had seemed so peaceful, and then… I winced at the memory. Nothing would ever be the same. Not after that.

I began to feel a pulling sensation in my heart. There was a hillside we used to visit together. It had been a peaceful place. Our trips there were a time of leisure, and I still felt drawn to it, even if "together" was no longer an option. But I was partially overcome by fear, afraid of what memories might be pulled to the surface. It was like my very soul was being stretched and molded out of shape. To me, nostalgia was like an old friend with sinister intentions. My thoughts ran circles around themselves just trying to explain how I felt. It was like I was afraid that happiness would hurt me. A silly thing to fear, but it was all too real.

After what seemed like hours of procrastination, I finally decided to leave the graveyard and visit that hill. Even if we weren't truly together, it might still be comforting. Cool dew brushed against my legs as my head began to fill with those painfully wonderful thoughts.

I pictured my wife, Jenny, her long red hair flowing like a wild ocean in the wind, and green eyes full of love and passion. She had always said she was so happy to have a husband like me, but I sometimes felt I didn't deserve her. She was always so aspiring, helping Newtown's community in any way she could, and pursuing what I said were too many hobbies at once. But lately, the town has been missing her. It seems that all good things must sooner or later come to an end. Though, I suppose if they didn't then we would take them for granted.

Time passed, and soon the sun was high overhead. Three crows taunted me from branches above. But their cawing was silenced as I, so suddenly, skidded to a stop. There were some young children, no older than my own daughter, at the playground. Their laughter resonated in my ears, lingering like a poison. Soon my pace slowed as thoughts of Pria swirled into my head. She was rarely seen without her signature pigtails bouncing up and down as she giggled, teeming with joy. Her melodious laughter could be heard for miles around, and would always manage to put a smile on my face.

But now my family was out of reach, so far away that I could barely comprehend it. *I might never see them again. Have they already moved on and forgotten me?* Darkness began taking over my mind as I stumbled into a gloomy forest. Branches reached out to me with their ancient thorny fingers. The light was dusted up like a cobweb, unraveling and decaying as it met its demise. Its silver strands were then consumed by the same whirlpool of anxiety that was slowly devouring me. Around I spiraled, further and further into the abyss, with no one alive who could save me. Thunder struck in my head from the chaos that brewed in the invisible clouds above.

I could have collapsed right then and there, but something was pulling me onward. It felt like ribbons of light were slithering out of me, flying up towards the inky sky. Following them, I stepped through the spiny and thick shrubs. And just like that the darkness shattered, pieces falling to the ground like dead flies. The world exploded in golden orange light, overflowing with life. Tears welled in my eyes as I suddenly realized where I was. After everything, I had made it. It was all there: The brilliant view of the sunset, a few daring trees that went past the forest border, and most astonishingly, my family.

At first, they were just a smudge of shade against the blinding light of the evening. But as I ran closer, it was clear. Jenny resided on a simple grey blanket, wearing her most vibrant yellow dress. I can imagine it was merely a mask of how she truly felt. Glancing down the hill, I noticed Pria. She was running about, trying to get a kite in the air. I inched closer to Jenny, tears now flowing freely down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Jen,” I sobbed, “I tried so hard…” Finally giving in to the wobbling of my legs, I sat down next to her. The last golden rays of light began to filter through the trees, lighting up their leaves like millions of golden lanterns. The beams were like rays dancing on the edge of night itself. It was all so beautiful, and I knew I wasn’t ready to leave it yet. We sat in silence for a moment, but it was broken as Jenny spoke.

“Look at those trees,” she said softly. It was no more than a whisper, and I could tell by her voice that she was broken. “Look at the way the light shines through the leaves. Everything about them is so strong and perfect.” I began to wonder who she was talking to. *Maybe me. Or perhaps, the memory of me.* Jenny continued, “But you know what? I bet they didn’t always look

that way. They've probably been through storms, lost branches. Some of them might have *died*." I felt a pinch in my heart as her voice crackled like static. But she took a deep breath and finished strong. "Even so, here they are, sharing their beauty with the world." She closed her eyes and smiled.

I had missed Jenny's poetry. It would somehow always inspire me to do something big. She knew this of course, and occasionally wrote poems just for me. I truly did love her, and was then beginning to understand that that's an unbreakable thing. Jenny and Pria came here because they missed me just as much as I missed them. Earlier, I was nearly convinced they had forgotten me, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. It's almost like magic. We were a world away from each other, and yet our love lived on.

A thin breeze sliced through the air, rustling a few leaves. But it wasn't strong enough to elevate a certain girl's kite. The large blue diamond dragged along the grass as Pria bounded ahead of it. She let out a small shriek of frustration as it clung to the dirt.

"Mommy! My kite won't fly!" She called out to her mother. Jenny let out a short sigh and shook her head before responding.

"It's okay, Cupcake," she said in her parent voice, "I'm sure you'll get it eventually." But Pria's anger only grew from there, as her lazy kite once more refused to take off.

After thinking for a moment, I reluctantly left Jenny's side and ambled towards my daughter. She sat on the ground, tears welling under her furrowed brows. *If only she knew that these little problems don't matter much*, I thought as I seated myself beside her.

It was true that the wind had significantly quieted itself since I arrived, but that didn't mean I wouldn't try. Pria was the one thing in my life that I had felt I could influence. Being a quiet person, no one (except of course Jenny) ever really cared about how I saw the world. But with Pria, I could raise her on exactly that. She could have shared my perspectives on things. And right now I wanted to share some of my thoughts with her. Sure, it was impossible to communicate with her. But Jenny found a way to talk to me, and I heard her. Slowly, I waddled over to Pria on my knees, and bent down a little more to whisper into her ear.

"You can do this!" I encouraged her. My hollow breath became a weak wind as the universe saw my love, and answered the call. Soon, it grew stronger, and the curly tendrils around Pria's ear began to drift along with it. Her kite started to stir on the ground, as if it were coming to life. Seeing this, her face lit up, and she ran in the opposite direction. The kite skipped along the ground at first, before taking off into full flight. Pria laughed, a laughter that rang like bells of joy. Her pigtails were bobbing up and down with excitement. I clung to the moment, cherishing every second of it, for I knew it would soon be over.

When Pria was all tuckered out, and even the sharp silhouettes of the trees began to blend in with the night, Jenny decided it was time to go home. Together, they got into the new, shiny car, and began driving away. With the moon's beam guiding me, I spiritedly sprinted after them. I ran until my legs beckoned me to stop. The car became nothing more than a small dot on the night's horizon, speeding away from me. There was nothing in my power I could do to stop it, and I was okay with that.

"Goodbye…" I silently whispered, though I knew they couldn't hear me.

* * *

So there I was, right back where I started. As I walked among the headstones, I thought of everything I was leaving behind. My soft glow was the only visible light in the somber graveyard. Even the moon now refused to show its pale and dusty face. But I knew that the endlessly starry sky lay just above these clouds, and it would soon wrap me in light and darkness all at once. I might have been scared of the unknown that awaited me, but I knew I was ready for it.

My feet planted themselves firmly on the hollow ground as I came to a stop. Before me laid what I had once thought impossible to face: my grave. It was nothing more than a simple stone in the low ground— a disruption in a pattern. But it meant everything to me. Soon I would be gone from this brilliant world forever. My weary soul would finally be able to peacefully rest for the remainder of eternity.

Facing away from my grave, I crossed my arms and leaned back. But there was no one to catch me. No one could save me from this. I had done the right thing and let go of the past. Now it was time for me to move on from the rest of the world.

Closing my eyes now, I continued to fall backwards. Except I never hit the earth. I just kept spiraling down into an endless void of night. But there were no stars in this void, and so no light. All I could see was darkness that stretched out for miles. As I fell, memories washed over me like a warm tide, and as they passed I was cleansed of them. More and more waves came toppling over me, until I was left feeling… nothing. But it was a good nothing. There was no longer any stress, or sorrow. Nostalgia had decided to make amends, and happy things were finally just *happy*.

I drifted through the abyss, filled with true peace at last, as a soft voice whispered in my mind. *You're free, you're free…*

I'm free.

Haunted

Sophia Prouse
Oliver Wolcott Library

On a Friday Halloween night, 1998. On a full moon night. There were 4 kids: Kinsley, Amber, Bryan, and Jack. Kinsley was in a bee costume, Amber was in a zombie cheerleader costume, Bryan was in a knight costume, and Jack was in a ghost costume.

They were walking on Meadow Street until they came across two paths. One path had Halloween decorations for the night and the other was very dark with thorn bushes on the sides.

“What path should we go on?” Amber asked.

“Well, the spookier the decorations, have more candy, my dad said to me.” Bryan said the wise words from his dad.

“I don’t think it is a great idea, guys. Let’s go on the more appropriate path and we can watch movies for a sleepover.” Kinsley shakingly said.

“I go on Kinsley’s side.” Jack agrees.

Amber and Bryan looked at each other then looked back at them.

“Kinsley, are you scared of a creepy path that might go into a huge house?” Bryan asked in a bullish tone.

“A little.” Kinsley replied.

“Well, do you just want to be the normal kid while you can or you can be brave and just go on that path with the thorns?” Amber questioned.

Kinsley thought for a minute “Fine! But if you do that same joke from last year then I am coming straight back!” Kinsley confirmed.

“Bu..but Kinsley, wh..what about staying on the appropriate p..path.” Jack stammered.

“It’s going to be okay, Jack. I will protect you.” Kinsley swears.

Jack nodded and the four kids went on the path with the thorns. On the way they saw a sign that said, “Go back or it’s too late!” Jack and Kinsley gulped and looked at each other.

“Are we sure that it’s safe because the sign says we have to go back or it is too late?” Kinsley asks.

“I think it’s just a prank to have kids sacred.” Bryan said encouragingly.

Jack looked back to the entrance and saw a kid wearing a dinosaur costume that pointed to the path but the parent grabbed the kid's hand and moved on. Jack gulped once again but kept going with Kinsley and the others.

When they got to the end of the path, they saw a huge house with vines and cobwebs everywhere. Glass was missing from windows and signs were posted on the front of the house saying to get out and other more sayings.

“I don’t know guys, maybe we should head back and go next year or when we get a little older.” Jack said as he pointed to the path.

“Uh, what are you pointing at?” Bryan asked.

When Jack turned, he saw nothing but fog and trees blocking the path, his mouth widened.

"Come on, I am supposed to be home by 1 or my parents are going to call the police." Amber groaned as they stepped onto the porch of the broken house. The floor creaked in many places and some of the tiles were even broken.

"Is this floor stable?" Kinsley asked as she took a step forward then a step backwards.

"Uh, duh! The sounds that you are hearing are on the floor, there is nothing that is spooky around here. It's just a house." Bryan said as they heard a growling sound behind them.
They all turned around and saw nothing. But they heard a howling sound. "We should probably head back." Kinsley said as she and Jack were walking away from the house.

"No! You cannot just come here and get nothing. We are already here, there is no turning back!" Bryan said. Amber nodded her head in agreement. Then the door magically appeared.

"Whoa!" Amber said as she fell down to the floor. Air flew out from the house and gave everyone a little breeze.

"That was amazing!" Bryan said as he helped Amber get up. "Let's see what this house has for candy."

They all walked in the house and the door closed itself without anyone pushing it. They all turned around.

"Was that door open?" Jack said as he went to hug Kinsley for protection.

"Let's just find the candy bowl and get out of this house." Kinsley said bravely. "We can separate into two groups. I will stay with Jack, and Amber, you take Bryan. Is that fair?" They all nodded in agreement.

So they separated and took the opposite sides of the house. Kinsley's group took left and Amber's group took right.

"Are we sure there is candy in this house, Kinsley?" Jack worried.

"Well if we can't find some then I will share my candy with you." Kinsley said as she gave him a hug. Jack smiled.

"Ahhhh." Amber screamed. Kinsley and Jack rushed to their location.

"What's wrong, Amber?" Kinsley asked.

"Bryan is gone!" Amber wailed in shock. Kinsley and Jack both patted Amber on the shoulder.

"We must find him." KInsley said as she grabbed a torch and lit it up. "Let's go."
They walked around the whole building and every hiding spot they found but didn't find Bryan.

"What are we supposed to do?" Amber freaked out.

"We are going to find him, I swear." Kinsley said. Then a slam on the door came and blocked the way in.

"Wait," Amber said, "Where's Jack?"

Kinsley turned around and didn't see Jack. "Oh no."

"I don't want to be taken by the house. I want to go home." Amber wailed.

“It’s going to be okay, Amber.” Kinsley said as she hugged Amber. Then the lights darkened till there was no light at all. The torch's light was gone, then a scream let out. Then the lights turned back on.

Kinsley looked around then Amber was not there. Kinsley turned on the torch again and looked for clues.

When she was heading towards the door, she heard a thudding sound. She was going there but a floating figure was in her way. “Boo!” The figure said.

“Ahh!” Kinsley screamed, then she ran to the door and tried to open it but it was locked. Then she realized that she was brave. She grabbed the torch and turned around to the floating figure. “I am not afraid of you, ghost.” Kinsley said as she ran towards the ghost and hit it with the torch. The fire burned the little ghost up a little bit. The ghost wailed and screamed and left Kinsley in the room.

Kinsley broke down the door and heard the thudding noise again and followed it to a closet. Kinsley opened it and saw Amber, Bryan and Jack tied up with ropes.

“Kinsley!” Bryan, Amber, and Jack said as they hugged Kinsley.

“How did you guys get in here?” Kinsley asked as she was untying the ropes.

“It’s a long story but I want to go and get some candy.” Bryan said and they all agreed.

“Let’s go back to the more fun Halloween.” Kinsley said as all four of them got out of the house and started to walk back.

“But there is no path to this house anymore. What are we going to do?” Jack said as he clung to Kinsley.

“It’s just so foggy today, but here,” Kinsley grabbed something, “A flashlight.” When she turned it on it went to Meadow Street where a lot of costumes were there walking from side to side.

“Oh, okay.” Jack said as he followed Kinsley and the others to Meadow Street and enjoyed the rest of the Halloween night.

While they were leaving, the ghost was looking at the group with a smile.
“I will see you next Halloween. Hahahaha!” The ghost said then it disappeared with the whole house until next Halloween night.

The Tale of Asa Wormley

Aviva Reisner
Farmington Libraries

A warm autumnal sunshine enveloped me as I sat in my living room, enjoying a good book and a cup of English Breakfast tea. The sun was streaming through golden leaves and casting a cheery glow across everything it caressed. The terracotta soldier and horse statues outside my house were holding their resolute guard, and even the tall, ancient tree seemed to be smiling its old crinkled face. It was, in truth, a perfect October day. No mind that tomorrow would bring trick or treaters to my door, where I would put on that pointy black hat and scare the Kit Kats out of those children's youthful faces. Truly everything seemed calm, with no mind to when the ghouls and goblins would frolic in their sinister, mischievous ways. As the sun dipped below the horizon, I brought my withered bones up the stairs and enjoyed one last night of tranquility before all the festivities began.

A loud beeping noise aroused me out of my slumber. Startled out of my dreams, I glared angrily at the alarm clock. The clock read 0:00 and was emitting the noise in question. I banged the top to shut it off with all the energy I could muster (which wasn't very much at all, because I had gotten much too little sleep to do much). I was just about to drift back into my serene dreamland when a sharp rattling noise appeared at my window. I dragged my sleepy body out of my soft pink covers and willed my trembling, arthritic fingers to open the shades.

I really wasn't scared of course, for what had I to be scared of? After all, I ruled this village, and I was probably the oldest resident here! I could walk to the library or my neighbor's house with my eyes closed, and I certainly had nothing to fear from some evil-doing teens pulling a prank, or an escaped housecat.

After taking a deep breath and making sure I could turn around and run if a scene outside prompted me to do so, I opened the curtain. Holding my breath, I peered outside, and there was nothing but the trees brushing their fingertips against the shutters. I most certainly did not let out a brief sigh of relief that it wasn't anything worse, and climbed back into bed. Alas! My refuge of the covers would not push that calm mindset back into me, and I couldn't get an inch of rest for the whole long night.

At daybreak, I ran (well, I did whatever the equivalent of running is to me) to my window and pushed back the curtains with unnatural speed. I saw nothing, nothing at all, just the view of my neighbor's house, just as it always has been. Then my eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets as I remembered the trees of last night. Surely that was a nightmare, or I had remembered wrong in my sleepy deliriousness, it couldn't possibly be… Forgive my thoughts for trailing off. Yes, something was indeed wrong, although I couldn't place what. I made my cup of tea, and went to sit in the living room, when I noticed something else was wrong. My statues had moved. The terracotta man was now sitting on the terracotta horse. I muttered a curse under my breath, and put on my slippers to walk outside.

As I stepped onto the porch, the man turned his head to stare at me. I froze and glared down at him. To my horror, his eyes started glowing a deep and malignant crimson, and the horse gave a whinny, and a puff of smoke came out of his nostrils. A deep and gravelly voice came from the two of them, yet neither moved their mouths, saying, “Your time is up, Madame Wormley. You have survived on this earth for far too long, indeed about 200 years too long. You should have rotted with all the others, buried deep under Memento Mori. How you have escaped your fate, I don’t know. However, I do see the effects of age. Oh, Asa, your nose could be put in a pickle jar and sold, with that long, bulbous, bumpy, and all around awful shape. Your eyes look unsightly, all tinged with red. Your hair is tangled and knotty, your knees are like horrifying lumps, and let’s not forget your surprisingly small shriveled ears. Asa Wormley, I have come to deliver you to where you belong: underground.”

I stared at the devil in its eyes. I coughed thrice and proclaimed to the beast, “While it is true that I have survived for three hundred years, and while in my past I have done some extremely bad things to achieve that age, I mean nothing wrong. My nose has always been long, and it’s wrong of you to insult it. If you do have the power and means to end my life, please do so kindly. My eyes are red because your omens woke me up and I got far too little sleep. Of course my hair is tangled, I recently woke up! You wouldn’t know, you have no hair on that bald clay head. You also have no knees, so you don’t know that everybody’s knees are like lumps. Well, mine are a bit more protruding than others, but in a skirt you can’t tell the difference! My ears are shriveled because many of the fashions of the past couple hundred years have involved lots of hats, and centuries of hat-wearing has shriveled up my ears. See, blame those tall, lacy bonnets, not my age! I have stopped my old ways and have paid for them many times over by the guilt that has haunted me for two hundred years. I don’t need to be punished any more! All I want out of life is the beauty of nature, and I have been enjoying it without hurting anybody. I am reformed! Let me be! Begone, vile demon!”

With the end of that speech, I hunched over, gasping for water. I had not spoken so much in fifty years! The demon’s eyes were still glowing red, and to my horror, I watched the trees move to surround me. They had a much higher speed than I could ever hope to go, and soon I found myself entangled in a thick. leafy jungle. My poor, old brain could not take it anymore, and I began to cry. My brain started to recall all my old evils, and I savored each one of them, choking myself on the salty taste of my tears. I was so overcome in my emotions, that I didn’t notice the trees recede.

The demon spoke again in its thick, scratchy voice, saying, “I have decided there is no better punishment for you than to stay here and drown in your memories. You will stay on earth until it gets swallowed up by the sun itself.” With that, it vanished in a puff of disgusting-smelling smoke.

My tears turned to laughter as I realized how I had once again thwarted death. Realizing how silly I looked sitting on my front lawn in my old nightgown and bunny slippers, I went back inside to recall the morning’s events. The demon had made a crucial mistake: It is good to look back on past mistakes and to see how you’ve improved.

As I sat in my comfy leopard-print chair, smiling at my thoughts, I watched the sun dip below the horizon. Grinning, I put on my long black dress and matching conical hat, and watched the children run up the driveway for treats and a story. I always tell the best Halloween stories, that's for sure, and this year's would not disappoint. "Gather up," I said as they sat in front of my blazing fire, shining eyes eagerly awaiting what was to come, "listen as I tell you about the terracotta demon…"

Dead Man's Secret

Abigail Sutter
Southington Public Library

My shoes scuff against the wet concrete as I walk a few blocks to Mia's house. I step on every dead leaf I see, making satisfying crunches. I hear crows chirping from the half-leaved trees as I step over a puddle of dirty water. I walk on the concrete path to her house to avoid the wet grass. I'm not really dressed for Halloween, but I don't want to get myself wet for the whole trip. I knock on the door, and her mother opens it.

"Ally! Hello! Mia's still getting ready upstairs, but you can come in if you'd like!" her mom greets me.

"Thank you, Ms. James," I answer, and step in, taking great care to wipe my shoes on the mat before stepping onto the hardwood floor to take them off.

My hands are working carefully on the laces. I step inside with my socks and head up the stairs, leading into a carpet-floored hallway with pictures and Halloween decorations up. Fake spiderwebs in the corner, covering the light, yellow paint. I walk over to Mia's door, which has her little sign with her name hanging on it, decorated with Halloween stickers for the holiday. Ms. James never disappoints when decorating.

I knock on the door, her sign swaying slightly with each thud. Mia walks over, her heels thudding dully against the carpet floor. She opens the door and greets me. She's dressed in a black hooded coat with medieval flared sleeves, a small witch hat on her head, and a wand. Her face changes from bored to excited in a millisecond when she sees me.

"Ally! Hi!" She hugs me and gives me a peck on the cheek before pulling away.

"Took you long enough!" She continues.

"It's not my fault my mom gets all overprotective, she basically interrogated me for 10 minutes after I was supposed to leave," I laugh.

"Yada, yada, let's go!" She grabs my hand and pulls me to the front door. I barely get to say goodbye to Ms. James before she ushers me out.

"You look pretty in a witch costume," I say.

"Aw! Thanks! These heels will be hard to walk in all night, but that's fine." She still holds my hand as she continues, and we both have Target bags to fill with candy. Why buy a bucket when you could just use a bag?

"I hear this house offers king-sized candy!" She says, while pulling me to it. She's so cute when she's excited. We walk up to the house, say trick or treat, and as promised, a king-sized Twix! Mia pulls me to other houses to get king-sized candy. Rich houses always have a lot of candy. After almost an hour of trick or treating, we stop under a tree near this old shack-looking

thing.

"Do you have any nerds?" I ask.

"I do, I'll trade for a Kit Kat," she replies.

"Fineee," we trade, and I happily start eating the small box of Nerds. She laughs,

"Why do you eat them one by one?"

"To savor it," I answer in the most dramatic voice I can.

She laughs more, and I can't help but let out a few chuckles myself. Our laughing session is cut short when we hear angry shouts from an old man. I glance over, still pinching a tiny Nerd between my fingers. An old, burly man with wrinkly skin and a white, messy beard approaches, screaming about us being on his property.

Mia springs up to walk away, apologizing profusely and stepping back from the old man.

"Get off my damn property! Now!" I finally hear it clearly; his voice sounds rough and hoarse, creepy even. Mia and I quickly walk away—well, Mia basically sprints—and we make it back outside her house.

She looks at me and asks, "Who was that man? What property was he mad about?" Holy crap, she's right, that was an abandoned shack, no one owns that place, it's been abandoned for years.

"That was weird... maybe we were close to his property? Was that house next to it his?" I ask.

"No," she replies, "that's the Johnsons' house."

"Then who even was that? He thinks he can boss us around on a property that isn't even his?" I cross my arms.

"Who was the last owner of that place?" She says.

"I don't know, why does that matter?"

I still have my arms crossed, leaning against a tree near her swing set in the front yard. She pulls out her phone and types something, probably searching it up. Her eyes widen when she sees the results.

"What is it?" I ask. She turns and shows me a picture; it looks like the man from earlier, just a bit younger. I read the text on his info. "Bill Fisher"

"Weird," I say. I don't see what the big deal is until I look at the side, seeing dates.

"September 6th, 1976-April 27th, 2025"

"What the hell?" I take the phone.

"Uh, maybe it's just how long he owned it?" I try to reason.

"We just saw him, he can't be dead, right?" I look up at Mia, and she's already pacing.

"It was probably just a man who looked like him." I try to reason.

“He looks just like him, Ally, that was him!” She paces back and forth.

“It said he had a wife that went missing, and wasn’t found, and then she was deemed legally dead and the search stopped,” I tell her. She stops pacing and looks at me.

“Then we should go back,” she says.

“What?! Go back? To the dead ghost guy? Are you crazy? This is how people die in horror movies,” I reply.

“This isn’t a horror movie, we might’ve just found a girl who went missing! Or a dead guy!” She says.

“But-” I try to object, but she interrupts.

“Please, just a quick peek in and then we leave, okay?” She pleads.

“Fine,” I sigh. “But if I die in there, I’m blaming you.”

“Thanks!” She says, before grabbing my hand and leading me back to the shack. Our shoes crunch against the dead leaves, and a wave of unease floods over me as we walk closer.

“Okay, he’s not here anymore...” she says to herself.

She walks up to the door of the shack, slowly opening the broken door. Another wave of unease flows through me, and I clutch her hand tighter. Despite my best efforts, she slowly separates from my hand and walks around.

“Mia, you said just a peek in...”

“There are bullet holes.” She says.

“Bullet holes?” I repeat. She nods and touches one of them. I walk closer and notice scratch marks on the wall.

“Um... Mia?”

“Hold on.” She says while searching one of the drawers.

“If there are clear signs of struggle and bullets, why would the police just stop?” She asks.

“Maybe they just couldn’t figure it out,” I reason.

“Or maybe they saw something they don’t want to show,” she says. Meanwhile, I follow the scratch marks on the floor to a room and gasp. A spiral of scratch marks that all lead to the floorboard.

“What?” She asks.

“Look at all these,” I say. She walks over, looking at the marks.

“These are recent,” she says.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“It means someone wants us to find this.” She looks at me.

“I also found this in the drawers,” she hands me a picture, it’s the man, much younger, with a woman, who I assume is his wife. Then she hands me some divorce papers she found, signed by the wife, but not by him.

“You don’t think...” I trail off.

“I don’t know,” she says. She glances at the floor and pulls up the wooden boards, revealing a small box. A note.

I can’t confess to any of this; I just wish she hadn’t tried to leave. Guilt holds weight, even after death.

“What? This makes no sense,” I say.

“What if that man was trying to take us away from there in fear, we’d find this. What if he actually killed her? He was good friends with a cop, too, maybe that has to do with why the cops ended the search.” She says.

“Hm...” she starts digging under the floorboards, pulling out dirt and going back in with her hands.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Trying to see if he hid more, maybe another note, a clue, maybe som-.” Her hand hits something. She moves her hand, and we both look down.

“Oh my god!” I get up and step back. It is a small tip, a skull peeking from the ground. Mia springs away and covers her mouth. Then we hear footsteps. I think fast, and adrenaline kicks in. That could be a random person, but my gut tells me it’s that old man. I grab her hand and open the window. We both squeeze out and sprint back to my house. We make it in, and we both talk about it for hours; I’ve never seen human bones. We both agree to move on, not talk about it.

We both go to school the next morning like nothing happened, but I still fear that old man. We never covered that skull we found, we never saw if there were more, we will never know if the old man saw. Although his rough, wrinkly face from earlier is still engraved into my mind. His face all contorted into rage, his rough, unforgiving voice. It’s hard not to wonder what would’ve happened if I didn’t get us out.

Snapdragons
Madeleine F. Trusilo
East Lyme Public Library

The screen door clattered against its frame. “Rosie, is that you?” I called. I could hear the heavy main door beginning to scrape open. Imagining her throwing her entire frame against it to get inside, as she always had to, I moved to help her. Wrapping the warm, wool blanket that covered me around my body, I struggled with the soft bean bag that almost seemed to come to life, wrapping its tentacles around my limbs. I almost gave up and decided to not help her. However, when I had risen, I knew I had made the moral decision.

My footsteps echoed in the empty hallways. The creaky floorboards caved in slightly beneath my feet. Rain and wind battered against the large windows; any landscape blotted out by the dark of night. The heat didn’t reach this part of the house, and my fingers grew raw from the chill. Finally, I walked through the oak arch leading to the kitchen.

The front door was halfway open. The carpet underneath was scrunched up. I kept meaning to move that carpet as it was always a bother to deal with when entering the house. Instead of deciding to deal with it then, regardless of the small satisfaction it may have given me, I simply closed and locked the door and kicked the edge back into its previous position. “Rosie?”

My eyes followed the trail of wet boot marks that travelled across the somewhat threadbare center of the carpet, to the linoleum floor, and over to the closed-over pantry door. I could see a shaft of light emitting from inside and heard the clinking of bottles within. I stumbled to the pantry, tripping over the edge of my blanket. “Rosie, is that you?” I asked once more as I slowly opened the door.

“Who else would it be?” she retorted snappily, while pulling bottles of alcohol out of a plastic shopping bag. Her hair was stuck to the back of her neck, dribbling droplets on the floor. “Hey, do we still have that vanilla ice cream…the stuff from Costco?”

“I dunno, let me check the freezer,” I replied. “You wanna make sundaes for our movie marathon? I’ll see if we have fudge, too.”

“We could make floats if you want,” she said. “First, I gotta take a shower. I’m soaked through.” She rubbed her hands over her bare arms, her fingernails still patchy with black nail polish I applied for her last month. “This came outta nowhere. Didn’t even have a coat…” she trailed off. Her eyebrows were scrunched with annoyance.

I turned away from her and strode swiftly over to the refrigerator, opening the top door that led to the freezer. My arms nearly froze as I dug through the various expired meals that my mother used to swear were edible if you left them in the cold regardless of duration. My fingers hit the top of an ice cream carton. I gripped the edges of the top and attempted to yank the carton out without causing a collapse in the carefully constructed mound of boxes. I succeeded in the endeavor with around two extra minutes of work. I turned to look at Rosie, but she was nowhere to be found. Then, like clockwork, I heard the showerhead upstairs come to life. During her shower I gathered all the items we would need that night… a couple bottles of beer, ice cream,

sundae trimmings, and far too much candy for two girls to eat alone. I set up the living room and flipped through the onscreen tiles of the finest horror movies Netflix and Hulu had to offer.

The rain had finally slowed and the wind no longer blew the small branches of the craggy trees in front of the house against it. Not a bird sang and not a frog croaked. It seemed like outside of the house everything had been muted by some colossal hand pressing down into the earth. The buttons on the TV remote made a little noise as I clicked through movies and that was the only sound to be heard. I began to feel as if every one of my hairs were standing on end; every noise caused my skin to crawl. My body thrummed in anticipation of something…

"Boo!" Hands slapped down on my shoulders as my body jumped straight out of my skin. I lunged off the bean bag and whipped my body around to see my assailant was none other than Rosie. Immediately, my heartbeat began to slow with the familiar sight of her face, but just as quickly I felt my face heat up in anger.

"God, you're such a –" I complained as she cackled with joy that her trick worked. "Really? Was that necessary?" My eyes rolled as I fought the tears that rose to them because of the shock. Rosie could be so annoying sometimes.

"You're such a scaredy cat," she laughed. "I was less afraid of things at five than you are now." Seemingly contented with her prank and teasing, she flopped down on the beanbag beside me. "Come on, it really wasn't that bad. Don't be a wimp."

I swallowed my emotions and rejoined her in the warmth of the fuzzy bag. I handed her a drink and we settled in to watch movies for the rest of that unfortunate night.

A couple of days after Halloween night, the night we had chosen to use every year for our movie extravaganza, I drove to Rosie's house to return the sweatshirt I had borrowed from her the week prior. I had memorized where she kept her spare key – under the second rock to the left of her front door.

Walking through the foyer and living room of her house, I realized how much it had changed since her fiancée, George, had moved in with her. His things were scattered about and everything just had a greater atmosphere of disarray and clutter. George was the owner of the company Rosie and I worked for. Though I did find him somewhat annoying and messy, I could see why she would want to marry him. There was just something about him.

My phone buzzed with a text I couldn't be bothered to read. I just needed to return the sweatshirt and I could go home. Trying to keep everything in its place, I tiptoed through the house to Rosie's bedroom where I threw the sweatshirt in her closet like it was made of fire ants. As quickly and quietly as I could, I exited the house and drove home.

On the drive home my phone buzzed again with another text. I glanced down to see who was contacting me. George's face suddenly lit up the screen as it began to vibrate with the ringing of a phone call. What? Did he want me to pick up another shift again? I had a suspicion, however, that it would be something much more sinister. While attempting to avoid driving into a tree, I held the phone between my shoulder and ear, accepting the call.

“What’s up, George? Need help at the office?” My voice must have sounded weary, because he quickly assured me that that was not the case.

“No, no, nothing of that sort,” he replied, voice crackling through the iffy signal. “I just figured you should know – I mean, I guess it does kinda affect you, after all, you’re her best friend –“

“This is about Rosie?” I bit my lip.

“Yeah, it is. She’s just been arrested.”

“What for?”

“Murder.”

Finally, with enough wheedling, I was able to get the full story out of him. Apparently, Rosie was the prime suspect for a murder that occurred on Halloween night. Some guy named Keith was stabbed and the police seemed to have some evidence that Rosie was in the area during the murder. They said they had caught her on several cameras and that they found her DNA at the scene. I mean, she did have a motive. Keith worked in the same sector as her in George’s company, and he was such a weirdo with the women working there. He was once accused of stalking, but I guess he wouldn’t be able to do anything like that anymore. Eventually, when I had been parked in my driveway for around ten minutes listening to George talk, he got to the point.

“I want you to testify for Rosie,” he said. “After all, you guys were together that night, right? You can totally give her an alibi!”

“I’ll do my best,” I replied. This was going to be such a pain. Serving on a jury was annoying enough, but testifying for someone? That seemed like it would be ten times more aggravating with all the questions and people trying to make you crack as if you’re working against them, when you’re just doing your best to get out of there, and get back home. I didn’t even care about Rosie that much to be defending her. She was incredibly insecure and would constantly push other people down to look “cool.” Come on. You’re an adult. You shouldn’t be acting like a child. Therefore, I decided that though I was testifying technically for Rosie, I would do my best to help them reach a truthful verdict. Rosie could take a stay in prison for a while.

Three weeks later the trial began. When I entered the courtroom on the first day I could already see the toll imprisonment was taking on Rosie. Her hair was disheveled, her skin was paler than usual, but her eyes were just as bright. She seemed certain that she would win this case.

On the first day the evidence was presented against Rosie. They had found bits of her hair at the scene and her fingerprints on the murder weapon that was left behind. It was identified as one of her kitchen knives, the one George said she used most often. Finally, they showed security camera footage that showed a person in the red limited-edition hoodie she bought from her favorite singer’s concert. With each piece of evidence Rosie grew paler. The only evidence for

her would be my testimony, which I would give tomorrow. Today, however, Rosie still had time to make a case for herself.

"That evidence could have been planted!" she cried. "Someone could have pulled some of my hair out, and someone could have taken my knife from my kitchen! Besides, that's not even my hoodie," she lied.

In response, they called George up to the stand. Being forced to tell the truth he admitted that it was, in fact, Rosie's hoodie. The other lawyer also stated that it was one of only 300 in existence. The others were not distributed in our area. George looked down with anxiety and I could see the thoughts forming behind his eyes, "Did Rosie actually kill this guy?" he asked himself.

"He's lying!" Rosie yelled in frustration. She banged her fists against the table.

"No, I'm not," George responded quietly. "Don't you remember? Three weeks ago, on October 26th, you were speeding on the highway, and you stuffed the ticket you got in your hoodie's pocket. I remember it vividly; you said something like, 'The police always target me,' I swear."

After court had adjourned for the day, George and I walked to Gorton Pond to clear our heads. When I looked over at him I could see he was fighting back tears.

Sitting with our legs dangling above the water, we watched the surface of the pond. Suddenly he said, "Do you think – do you think that Rosie actually…" his voice trailed off, but I knew what he was trying to say.

"I don't know," I replied. Clearly this was not the answer he wanted to hear. He leaned back in frustration and looked up at the sky.

"But you were with her that night! You must have known, you two were right next to each other!" He grabbed a rock and threw it at the pond. It made an odd noise as it hit, like a 'thwoop', and was immediately sucked to the bottom.

"Do you think I remember anything? I blacked out. You know I don't have high alcohol tolerance, George." His hands flew up in frustration as if he was asking God for the answer and we went silent once more.

"What will I do if she's convicted? We were supposed to get married in April," he said, breaking the silence again.

"I guess you'll have to find another person to marry. It shouldn't be hard when you're… you. Maybe the right person is right in front of you." His eyes flicked to me as I spoke, then down at the pond. He stood up quickly and excused himself.

"I've gotta get home. Sorry. I'm busy, you know?" He ran his hand through his hair, once, twice, and then he speed-walked away.

I stayed looking at the pond for a while.

The next day, it came time to testify. I answered all the questions as truthfully as I could including how I could barely remember the night and how I couldn't be sure if Rosie really stayed with me the whole night or not.

Later that day the jury made their decision.

They found Rosie guilty of all the charges.

Walking out of that courtroom felt like a weight being lifted off my shoulders. Finally, Rosie was permanently behind bars and I could stop being overshadowed by her loudness, beauty, and bragging. I could be me, and maybe I could build a nice relationship with George.

Fumbling in my bag for my phone, my fingers brushed against a crumpled piece of paper. I pulled it out so that I could dispose of it. I uncrumpled it so that its faded ink could see the world for one final time before it disappeared.

It was a speeding ticket dated October 26th. I guess I had never taken care of it after that night. Instead of throwing it in the trash I decided to keep it as a souvenir.

That way, I would never forget how masterfully I had framed Rosie.

Adult Entries

Nowhere Man
Katie Bloomstrom
Guilford Free Library

In the valley of whispers, where daylight is banned – where shadows creep down and sink into the land – there lies a place long scrubbed from the maps, with echoing ruins like lightning in glass.

No bird ever sings there, no breezes dare play. The forest holds secrets of souls led astray. They say every stone has a sorrowful name. It started, they said, when the Nowhere Man came.

He blew in like a storm when the heavens turned red, and lightning danced wild causing chaos and dread. He knocked at a door, yet no sound was heard. No footstep, no greeting, no breath. Not a word.

And when the door opened, he stepped right on in. He offered no reason, just a strange, shallow grin. A cloak red as blood and a shadow at heel, his presence alone forced them to kneel. His face was a void looking vacant and thin. He came searching for souls to feed the hunger within.

Door by door, soul by soul, he devoured them all. Every eye that he met caused that person to fall. And when he had drunk every drop of them down, he left them to wander their crumbling town. Empty and hollow those people became, and they tortured themselves with the sound of his name. Some fled to the trees and never were found, some whispered of faces that stared from the ground.

The wells soon ran dry, the homes became tombs. The wind howled through the night with the echo of doom. The town disappeared yet whispers endured, of children left screaming, their minds never cured.

Now every October, when fog drowns the hills, when the weeping moon swells and the dark forest chills, the Nowhere Man reaches for souls that he craves. He calls the young children, the healthy and brave. He calls without sound while he hums without breath, a lullaby older than sorrow or death.

This year, I admit, I heard Nowhere Man's call. We spoke while I slept and said nothing at all. He faded like mist, yet I felt him remain. A hunger that lingered. A dark, silent chain.

I decided to walk in the moonlight that night and followed the path he decided to write. To get there I took the old Dark Entry Road and followed the path to the crumbling abode, once owned by a Dudley but quickly abandoned, where silence now walks where the living were stranded.

I then wandered paths through the dark and the rain, seeking footprints that vanish and start once again. Soon reaching the clearing, the heart of the dread, where chimneys stand lonely and dreams lay long dead, I listened for humming, both tender and grim. That song that feels wrong when it comes out of him.

Then curved a grin that burned in the night, while shadows took form in the dark's quiet fright. A figure appeared with neither feet nor a face, and I knew then I'd found the Nowhere

Man's place. He stood right before me and searched for my eyes, painting ash in my bones under colorless skies. But I didn't meet his gaze and I didn't speak his name. I didn't answer the wind when it whispered my shame. For once our eyes met, I knew I'd be lost. A soul claimed by shadows, forever the cost.

And so I decided to run for the trees, but the forest bent backward, bringing me to my knees. Each path looped a circle and the night spun around, and every escape led me back to that ground.

For the Nowhere Man follows the blood through the years. He drinks from your silence, he feeds on your fears. And though I remember the tales I was told, my courage, like candles, grew weary and cold. So when I at last lifted my eyes to him, I said in a voice that was painfully thin: "I know what you crave, but I can't let you in. If you follow me closely, then we shall both win."

Some call it folklore, a campfire scam, but I have now seen the Village of the Damned. I walked through the streets where no birds made a sound and felt the cold breath from deep underground. And I'm sorry to tell you that on my way down, on that fateful night in old Dudleytown, I met Nowhere Man and he tried to trap me. But instead, on that night, I set Nowhere Man free.

And there, in that moment, the shadows bowed to me.

So hush, gentle dreamer – don't wander too deep. These are the secrets the dark forest must keep. Now Nowhere Man lingers where shadows meet light. He's the breath on your neck. He's the whisper at night. He's the scream in your throat. He's the fear you can't fight.

And if ever you wake with strange marks on your skin, know that is the Nowhere Man trying to get in. He steps into your body and escapes with your soul, leaving you listless and faded and cold.

He'll wait there in silence, as long as it takes, for you to remember that Nowhere Man place. And then when the shadows take hold deep within, you'll at last close your eyes and wake wearing his grin.

He won't ever give up. You will let him in.

And I, since that night, hear the shadows speak true.

I carry his whisper in all that I do.

Untitled

Pari Forood
Scoville Memorial Library

It is a dark and stormy night. Out of the depths of the inky sea, a ship steals slowly into the harbor. There is no one there to witness its arrival and when it lodges onto the rocks, no one is on board to drop anchor.

The ship is completely dark -- not a soul on board.

Months ago, the ship left Liverpool for the colonies. 1775 saw its share of pirates and brigands to fear, but since the ship was headed to the Caribbean for its human cargo, the holds were empty. She was christened Rising Dawn by her shipmasters, and the figurehead crowning her bow was half angel and half mermaid, with a halo, and a fin for legs, and wild, unruly hair streaming behind her. She was designed like all bow statues to bring luck to the captain and crew, but from the first anyone saw her, a feeling of unease and distress, even fright, struck the onlooker.

The ship sailed without incident to the West Indies. The crew was made up of seasoned sailors, cabin boys, a first mate, and a captain. Their official duty was to haul coal from Scotland to Boston, and on the return trip, bring tobacco and cotton from the New World to the Old. But on this fateful voyage, they had another purpose.

The crew had been sailing together for a decade. Many were ready to retire to a quiet seaside life and steady their sea legs for good. They had stories of storms, bar fights in far off places, tropical islands and white sandy beaches. And as they were sworn to secrecy and paid well to remain mute, they shared the secret of the detour they would make to pick up the illegal cargo which would one day cause a deadly reckoning.

On this fateful day in April, the ship lands on St. John Island at dusk. The dinghies are quietly lowered to the sea and the ship's captain and crew row silently to shore. They tether the small boat to a floating buoy and jump out into the waist high water to meet their contact and retrieve their cargo.

Deep in the interior of the island, a tall man in a straw hat sits outside a makeshift jail. It is quiet inside the small building as its inhabitants have been warned. Every few seconds, the foreman slaps a mosquito on his bare skin. If he is successful, he feeds it to his pet lizard sitting next to him. When he hears a noise from the bushes, he picks up his machete and peers into the darkness. When the captain and crew arrive, he puts his weapon down and grunts.

The captain nods and motions to his crew to bring the small chest of gold coins. They place it on the ground by the foreman's feet, and he lifts the lid, inspects the contents and nods his head. As he turns to unlock the door of the jailhouse, a small stiletto slips silently into the center of his back directly behind his heart. With one startled gasp, the foreman drops to the ground and stares with unseeing eyes up at the full moon. The lizard scuttles into the bushes.

As the cargo is loaded onto the waiting ship, the captain instructs his first mate to seal the area below deck where they will be lodged. It is a dank and fetid space with little air and the smell of animal defecation. The frightened inhabitants cling to each other for comfort but feel none.

In the dead of night, the ship leaves St. John Island harbor headed for the colonies to sell their precious shipment more valuable than any commodity they have previously hauled.

After two days at sea, the crew starts to get sick. At first, it is one or two cabin boys who can no longer perform their duties cleaning cabins and helping in the kitchen. It is thought that they ate something that had gone bad or overindulged in the dark rum brought on board after their recent landing. But when they both die, the captain becomes concerned. He orders all water boiled and all food carefully prepared and thoroughly cooked. One day later, four crew members suddenly succumb to gut wrenching pain, double over and die. As their bodies are tossed overboard, apprehension grows, and sailors refuse to eat or drink, convinced it is some pestilence they had brought on board from St. John.

When the captain succumbs, he is found on the floor of his cabin, pen in hand, slumped over his desk, a twisted grimace of pain on his face. They toss his body overboard and a mere twelve hours later, the last crew member to survive jumps into the sea preferring to die drowning or in the belly of a shark, rather than suffer the pain of the illness.

When the ship arrives at the Charleston harbor, empty of all crew, and with one dinghy mysteriously missing, the assumption is that a pirate ship has killed the crew and left the boat to float until it sinks by weather or dissolution.

No one can explain the missing dinghy or the smile on the face of the figurehead whose halo glows brightly in the sun.

“Spirit” of Halloween

Emily Gaynier
Henry Carter Hull Library

The McCrawley’s Halloween Store had only been up for a few weeks, but people were already saying it was haunted. Whole sections of costumes had been ransacked, the full sized skeletons had been found hanging from the ceiling, threats were being graffitied on bathroom and fitting room walls, and one little girl found a real axe with the props. Management did their best to keep it quiet, but rumor was that it wasn’t fake blood on the axe’s blade.

The store was located in what used to be a department store. The whole business had closed earlier this year and a maze of Halloween decor filled the space. Black curtains were strung up behind displays to keep people in the areas with merchandise. Lights in the shapes of purple bats, white ghosts, and orange pumpkin zigzagged across the ceiling and down the walls. Fog machines and motion activated mummies and zombies were scattered throughout the Halloween maze. And in the center of the whole store was a haunted house display; complete with cobwebs, rats with glowing eyes, and spooky sound effects.

Tabitha and her friends were having a blast trying on costumes and playing with props. Fred and Jack were trying on the rubber masks while Kat looked for her size in a princess ball gown. The frilly pink dress looked like something a toddler would wear to DisneyLand. Vicky and Allen were pulling the lamest costumes they could find off the racks to show everyone. As twins, they typically grabbed the male and female versions of the same outfit.

Tabitha was a little ways off from her friends in the plus size section. The size range for the shop was very impressive. She found the exact same dress Kat was looking at, along with several possible options that Tabitha really liked. She turned around to show off the sexy apple costume when one of the boys approached her wearing a dragon mask. It was obvious by the white sweater that the dragon was Fred. Tab blushed as red at the dress in her hands when Fred gently poked her lips with the dragon mask’s snout.

“Knock it off, dork!” she said laughing as she pushed him away. Even though she found Freddy cute, Tabitha was sure that he was just teasing her. She turned around to hide her red face to discover one of the store’s employees standing there, watching them.

Tabitha took an involuntary step back, bumping into Freddy. His hands grabbed her to steady her.

The man unsettled her. His unbrushed and greasy red hair was all over the place. It contrasted with his too neat and tidy work shirt and apron. His name tag said Steve. Steve stared at Tabitha in a way that made her feel exposed, like he could see through her clothes. She held the sexy apple costume to her chest, as if the polyester fabric could stop him from looking at her.

After a very long silence, Steve spoke. “Are you… finding… everything?”

“Yes, thank you.” Tabitha spoke quickly. “We’re all set!”

She then grabbed Fred's arm and pulled him with her as she ran away. Back in the safety of the group, Tabitha breathed a sigh of relief, catching Kat’s attention.

“Tabby? Are you okay?” asked Kat. She wrapped her arm around Tabitha’s shoulders and her heart gave a little flutter. Tabitha assured her that she was fine, when Steve appeared at the end of the aisle, catching their attention, before slowly moving along. Kat’s face blanched. “He’s creepy.”

At her comment, Vicky and Allen looked around the display they were shifting through.

“Very creepy,” Allen agreed.

“We’ve seen him walking around town,” Vicky stated. “He always stares at the girls.”

“I think you guys are being paranoid,” Fred said. But his voice was wary and he had pulled off the dragon mask as he started at the spot where Creepy Steve vanished. Freddy patted Tabitha on the shoulder before going back to the masks with Jack. Kat led Tabitha back to the plus size costumes and started helping her to find some fun ones.

“Did you guys hear about the homeless guy that might be living in the walls?” Vicky asked as she browsed the wigs.

“Of this place?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s no way there’s a homeless guy living here,” Jack scoffed. He was digging through a pile of prop weapons. “McCrawley would’ve kicked him out ASAP.”

“There totally is one!” insisted Vicky.

“Yeah,” agreed her twin. “He’s the reason for all the weird things happening around the store.”

“I thought that was a ghost!” Tabitha exclaimed.

“You believed that bull?” Allen asked.

“Of course! It’s Halloween! You have to believe in ghosts on Halloween!” Tabitha was so sincere she almost convinced her friends to believe in ghosts too. None of them even bothered to correct her on the date, Halloween is over a month away.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts,” Jack stated as he inspected a plastic butcher knife.

“Jack, You love ghost stories! How can you not believe in ghosts?” Tabitha asked.

“Easy,” he stated, holding up the prop butcher’s knife. “Ghost stories are fake.”

A few hours later the gang decided to head home. Jack and Fred spent the better part of the last hour chasing each other while wearing various costumes. They even found a sheet ghost costume for sale.

Everyone had something to buy except for Jack and Kat. Kat always made her own costumes and Jack usually threw something together at the last minute; usually a horror movie character. Tabitha was very excited that she found a great fitting costume that made her feel good about herself. The fitting room was less intimidating when sizes were realistic for larger bodies.

Fred led the way towards the exit. The path was super twisted and didn’t follow anything like a straight line. After what felt like another hour, the teens finally reached the open area with the registers.

“Finally!” Jack exclaimed. He started marching towards the door to the parking lot. Tabitha looked around as she walked towards the registers, but paused when she noticed something.

“There’s no one here,” she voiced.

“What?”

“The employees are gone.”

Jack reached the door and tried to open it. The door raddled in its frame as it refused to open.

“Hey, gang.”

Through the glass door, everyone could see that the sky was black and the parking lot was empty. The only car in sight was theirs. Kat’s dark green hatchback looked lonely under the light in the lot. It was lit up like was a goal to reach in a video game.

“We’re locked in.”

Fred went to try the door himself, as if it would unlock for him. Kat, Tabitha, and Vicky reached for their cell phones. None of them had service or Wi-Fi. After a few tries, Jack was able to get Wi-Fi, but the mall’s popup page wouldn’t let him access the internet.

“Damn it!” Jack kicked a rubber rat across the floor. It hit the nearest wall of wigs before bouncing away. Just then the overhead lights went out. They all jumped. The strings of Halloween themed lights were still lit, causing a more eerie mood to fall over them.

“Are we stuck here?” Kat asked, panic obvious in her voice.

“No way!” Allen stated. He moved towards the registers. “Let’s try the land line.”

He picked up the nearest land line and tried to dial. He put the phone down and tried the other two at the counter. Allen looked at his friends and shook his head.

No one said anything for a few minutes. Vicky pressed her face against the glass to the outside world. She almost looked like she was trying to pass through it like a ghost. Tabitha held onto Kat’s hand; they were both feeling pretty worried. She was lightly rubbing the back of Kat’s hand with her thumb, finding comfort and warmth in the act.

Fred took a loud, deep breath and faced his friends. “Looks like we’re stuck here until cell service

comes back or the store opens," he stated. "Let's make the best of it! I saw some board games and we can camp out for the night."

Tabitha and Vicky looked at each other. Tab shrugged and Vicky nodded.

"We can make beds with pillows and blankets from the decor section," She suggested.

"I saw a bunch of flashlights we can use," Tabitha said.

"Okay gang! Let's do this!" Fred exclaimed. Then he turned and ran like a monster was after him towards the board games.

They all split up, leaving their chosen costumes at the counter, and gathered supplies for the night. Kat and Vicky grabbed pillows and blankets, while Tabitha grabbed an armful of flashlights and battery operated novelty lights.

The boys picked a spot on the floor next to the two story haunted house. Tabitha wasn't happy about it, but she picked a spot next to the cardboard tree so it was between her and the creepy scarecrow. Fred was already breaking open a Ouija board; Kat and Jack were already sitting there, ready to play. They arranged the glowing pumpkin lights into a pile, creating a campfire effect. Setting up their slumber party seemed to take some of the tension out of the situation.

"You playing, Tabitha?" Fred asked her. He looked at her with such excitement in his eyes that Tabitha couldn't help but smile. After debating for a second, she scooted over to sit next to him as Vicky and Allen sat down across from her.

The spirit board was very gimmicky. It was shaped like a black coffin with neon green details that glowed in the dim light. The alphabet filled the middle with a skeleton's bones framing the edges. In any other situation, Tabitha would've loved it and possibly used it for Halloween decor, but being locked in the store made it less fun. As a group, the friends put one finger each on the planchette.

"Hello?" Jack spoke aloud to the room. "Calling all spooks!"

Kat elbowed him.

"Hey!" called Allen. "Any ghosts good with AP Calculus? I have a test tomorrow!" The group giggled nervously. Tabitha was starting to feel the tension returning, but she was trying her best to ignore it. She felt like something ominous was looming over them.

"Any spirits out there?" Vicky asked. "Does anyone have anything to say?"

Everyone's smile vanished as the planchette moved across the board and stopped right next to the skull.

YES

Tabitha's stomach dropped. A drip, like from a leaky faucet, sounded in the silence.

"You're moving it, Fred!" Kat accused.

"No, I'm not!"

But the planchette didn't stop. It continued to move to the letters and started to spell.

W-A-R-N-I-N-G

"You-you're warning us?" Tabitha asked. The board didn't respond to her question. Then the planchette moved again.

T-H-E-Y-A-R-E-C-O-M-I-N-G-Y-O-U-H-A-V-E-T-O-R-U-N-Y-O-U-H-A-V-E-T-O-R-U-N-T-H-E-Y-A-R-E-C-O-M-I-N-G

Kat pulled Tabitha to her feet and away from the Haunted House display. Fred shouted and Vicky grabbed her twin. Surrounding them were tall, black figures wearing what looked like rotting Jack o'lanterns on their heads. No one noticed that the planchette was still moving without them.

R-U-N-R-U-N-R-U-N-R-U-N-R-U-N-T-H-E-Y-A-R-E-H-E-R-E-R-U-N-R-U-N

Kat, still holding onto Tabitha's hand, ran. Tabitha grabbed Fred's and the three of them ran into the maze of Halloween merchandise. They turned at the plastic pitchforks and were face to face with another grotesque figure.

"Spook!" Tabitha shouted as she pulled her friends back. Kat ducked as its long claw-like hand tried to grab her. Tab led them down the next aisle and around three more Spooks. One was wearing a melted Richard Nixon mask instead of the rotting pumpkin one. Kat screamed at the sight of them, but Tabitha picked up speed. They crashed into something soft. The oof they heard was very familiar.

“Jack?”

“Gerroff me!” Tabitha rolled off him, blushing furiously. Jack could be mean, but he hadn’t made fun of her for being fat yet. Tabitha didn’t want that to change today.

“Jack, man, where are the twins?” Fred asked, looking around. More Spooks were approaching from the distance. Tabitha saw them and started to usher her friends away.

“I don’t know, dude. Those Freaks popped up and I just booked it,” Jack answered, the panic in his voice very noticeable. They were jogging between displays when a scream filled the air. “Vicky!” Jack raced off in the direction of Vicky’s scream.

“Jack!” Tabitha jumped to stop him, but Jack was too fast and his hoodie slipped from her fingers. “Stop! We need to stick together!”

But Jack was gone. Tabitha got a very bad feeling about all of this. She looked at Kat and Fred. Fred looked like he wanted to run off after his best friend.

“Fred, Tabitha said we have to stick together,” Kat told him She could see his need to race off, too. He looked at Tabitha and nodded, he was going to stay with them. Relief filled her for the briefest of moments. Tabby might have been scared out of her mind, but at least she had her friends.

“We have to keep moving. Let’s find the others,” Tabitha said. Taking the lead she started them off towards where Vicky screamed. More of those Spooks kept appearing. Most had those rotting pumpkin masks, but more and more were appearing in different masks. The clown masked Spook caused Kat to start crying, but Tabitha quickly hurried her on.

The lack of light caused the Spooks to jump out at them. Their elongated and grotesque bodies blended in with the dark store. Fred was almost grabbed by one in a Ronald Reagan mask. They ended up back at the display for the flashlights and trick or treat bags.

“These should help us,” Tabitha said as she grabbed some. The light they gave off was dim, but better than the dark around them.

“We need weapons,” Fred stated as he took the ghost-topped light.

“Everything here is made of plastic,” Kat pointed out. She was holding her cat themed flashlight close to her chest. “Also, how do we know the ghosts can be attacked?”

“Still, I’d feel better if I had something to protect us.”

Fred lightly touched Tabitha’s hand and she felt a little flutter of her heart. Then she told herself to get a grip. Survival was all that matters right now.

“Maybe we can find a maintenance room,” she suggested. “There could be tools in there for us to use.”

“Which way do we go?” Kat asked, her voice was very small. Tabitha felt the urge to scoop Kat up into a hug; she wanted to protect her from all of this. But now wasn’t the time for that. As a group, they swung their flashlights around and illuminated a small crowd of Spooks stalking their way.

“Not that way!” Fred grabbed the girls’ hands and hurried them off in the other direction. More and more Spooks manifested as they ran through the aisles and past the displays. The black curtain walls that made up the layout of the store added to the confusion. Spooks appeared through them without moving the fabric. They kept landmarks and key locations hidden, and every wall looked the same. The only help they found were signs pointing towards the bathrooms.

As they neared the restrooms, the temperature dropped and a fog machine kicked on, sending out a small stream of mist. Fred froze as he scanned the area. Slowly the women's room door creaked open. Tabitha squinted at the bright light emitting from the bathroom.

Two dark figures stood in the door.

One of them raised their arms. It was holding something that looked like a bat.

“Fred? Kat? Tabitha? Where’s Jack?”

The voice that spoke was Vicky! Tabitha almost collapsed in relief. Allen was there too.

“Jack ran off to find you,” Fred told them. He was looking at Vicky and she was looking terrified. She lowered the wiffle ball. Allen was still holding a hammer. “We heard you scream and he took off by himself.”

“We haven’t seen him,” Vicky said quietly. She was looking out into the dark of the store. The

light from the bathroom stretched out across the floor. Standing a foot past the edge of the light was a dozen Spooks. All of their rotting masks were staring at them, but none of them moved any closer.

"The light is stopping them," Tabitha pointed out. Vicky nodded.

"It's why we stayed here," she stated. "They wouldn't follow us in"

"Yeah, we were hoping you guys would find us," said Allen. "And you did. Mostly."

"Maybe Jack is okay and he'll find us," Vicky said hopefully. As she said that, a sound came from above them. It was like an old house creaking in the night. But before any of them could look to see what that sound was;

BOOM!!

They all screamed and jumped back. The bathroom light perfectly lit up the dead and broken body of Jack. The look on Jack's face was one of pure terror and pain. His face was frozen in a silent scream with blood shot eyes and teeth missing. His torso was covered in blood and his hoodie was ripped to shreds, revealing long black gashes in his stomach. His arms and legs were broken and his neck was bent at an awful angle. Dark bruises were visible on his neck and his exposed chest in the glow of the bathroom light.

Vicky collapsed and started sobbing. Allen grabbed his sister's shoulders and tried to turn her away from the sight of their dead friend. He was trying to shield her with his body. Kat gently took the bat from her hands and placed it on the ground before helping Allen get her to her feet. Tabitha hid her face in Fred's chest as they both cried.

As Tabitha reached down to close his staring eyes, the bright bathroom light flickered.

The gang froze as they watched the light coming from the open bathroom door.

It flickered again.

And again.

The Spooks that were waiting at the edge of the light had multiplied. Now among the pumpkin mask majority were pigs, more US presidents, zombies, several clowns, and a creepy china doll head. The doll headed spook had his talon like hand pointed at the open bathroom door.

"We have to go," Tabitha stated. She couldn't break eye contact with the cold, unblinking eyes of the doll head. It stared through her as if it could see into her soul. The light flickered again and a chicken Spook appeared.

"What about Jack?" Vicky sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Vic," Allen said softly. "We can't help him."

Tabitha shined her pumpkin flashlight into the Spooks' masks and they all shied away. Kat did the same and they were able to use this opportunity to get away. Allen led his sister away from Jack, just as the bathroom light went out.

The only lights around them are their flashlights and the light up decorations around them. Freddy led leading the group of them in the gloom. Tabitha could barely see, but the tall shadowy spooks were still visible in the dark. Just as they turned a corner in the Halloween maze, three Spooks appeared.

The teens screamed and split off into different directions. Vicky ran straight into a pumpkin display. It almost happened in slow motion. Vicky screamed as she fell and a Spook materialized in a puff of fog. It's razor sharp claws buried into her back so deep that Vicky's fall was momentarily interrupted. She hung there for what seemed like hours before gravity pulled her now lifeless body off the claws and into the pile of plastic pumpkins.

Allen roared in anger and agony. He charged with his hammer raised at the Spook that killed his twin sister, but before he could reach it Kat tackled him. Allen kept screaming and trying to reach the monster, but Freddy and Tabitha joined Kat and the three of them were able to keep him in place. Allen's screams seemed to have an effect on the Spook though. It paused and looked at them for a bit. More fog filled the air; even more machines were kicking on. And in the fog more Spooks were appearing.

"We have to go!" Tabitha yelled.

"Let me go! I'm going to kill it! I'm going to kill them all!" roared Allen. But his three friends dragged him down another aisle, away from the Spooks.

Allen fought them the whole time as they ran and Fred had to take the hammer out of his hands.

Tabitha was losing energy fast when she saw a door behind a black curtain. It looked like some kind of employee only space. She knocked aside a plastic Dracula lawn decoration and tried the door.

It swung open to reveal the darkest room they had ever seen. It looked like a cave, miles under the earth. Freddy aimed his ghost flashlight into the room and millions of reflective pinpricks appeared on the floor.

Tabitha screamed as giant black rats raced towards them. Kat slammed the door shut and they turned to leave, but the rats were also outside of the room, surrounding them. Allen grabbed the Dracula decoration and threw it at them. The rats scattered as a fog machine turned on by itself. The teens took the chance to escape through the gap in the rats.

Tabitha grabbed Kat's hand as they exited the circle of rats. She was starting to really feel out of breath with all the running. They finally paused in the center of the store, at the haunted house they had camped out at originally. Tabitha fell to her knees as she tripped over one of the pillows left out from before.

"Are you okay, Tabby?" Kat asked. She knelt down with her and put her arms around her shoulders.

"No," Tabitha answered, as she leaned into Kat's embrace. "I don't think any of us will be."

They all look at Allen who was sitting on the floor, quietly crying. Freddy walked over to him and patted him on the shoulder. Allen nodded and started to stand up.

"How long have we been here?" Tabitha asked. Just then her stomach rumbled loudly and she blushed fiercely. Thankfully, none of her friends commented.

"Has to be past midnight by now," Kat stated. They all patted their pockets, looking for their phones. None of their phones wanted to work. Tabitha's wouldn't even turn on correctly. All the screen showed was a weird image that looked kind of like a creepy inkblot.

"Let's not worry about the time right now," Fred said as he put his own away. He walked over to Tabitha and Kat and took their hands to help them up. "There were some snacks at the front counter. We all should keep our energy up."

Tabitha smiled gratefully up at Freddy and the four of them started to move to the front of the store. But before they could, everyone saw the horror had been next to them in the dark. On the second floor exterior wall of the haunted house, above the rickety porch, was the crucified body of the McCrawley's Halloween store employee, Steve.

Tabitha threw up. What was done to him was horrifying. Not only was he crucified, but his torso was ripped open. Blood and guts are splattered all over the side of the fake building.

"Was he there before the ghosts showed up?" Kat whispered, horrified. "Was he there when we were going to camp here?"

Then everything around them started freaking out.

The air instantly got cold, the fog machines turned on full blast, and the string lights started flickering like mad. More Spooks appeared, more than they'd seen so far. Allen grabbed a fake tombstone from next to the haunted house and threw it into the crowd of monsters. The Spooks swarmed, but before they could touch the friends everyone shined their cutesy Halloween flashlights in their faces. Then they ran, but not in the same direction.

Freddy pulled Tabitha along in their escape. They got a bit of a lead and Fred checked behind them. He quickly pulled Tabitha down a new aisle and behind a shelving unit of battery powered candles. They were between the shelves and the curtain wall.

"You hide here," Freddy told her. "I'll lead them away from you."

"Don't leave me," Tabitha practically begged. The thought of being alone in this nightmare was almost too much to bear. "We have to stick together."

Freddy took Tabitha's face in his hands.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he vowed. "I promise we'll get out of this."

Then Freddy kissed her. Tabitha kissed him back and she felt a little bit of hope bloom in her. She felt like a heroine in a romance novel. Freddy pulled back and Tab sunk back down onto the flats of her feet. She hadn't noticed she had gone up on her tiptoes.

“Oh,” she whispered.

“I really like you Tabitha,” Freddy admitted. “And when we get out of this, I’ll ask you out properly.”

Tabitha smiled at that. She was about to respond when Fred made a strange face. Tabitha stepped back just at the perfect moment because right then a giant black blade burst out of Freddy’s chest.

He looked at Tabitha in shock and tried to reach for her. But Freddy collapsed on the ground and behind him stood a Spook with scythes for hands. Tabitha was frozen. Suddenly, someone reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her away. Kat and Allen were there and they were about to continue their escape when that same Spook reappeared. Tabitha could barely see through the tears in her eyes and so she didn't see it at first. The Spook raised its scythe hand up to strike, but before it could hit Tabitha, someone knocked her out of the way. She landed against a table full of Styrofoam ghosts and haunted houses. Where Tabitha had been standing was now Kat, her body impaled by the monster’s hand.

Tabitha screamed and it was Allen’s turn to drag his friend away from the area. By the time Tabitha could see without tears blocking her vision, they had ended up on the other side of the store. She noticed the Dracula decoration that Allen had thrown at the rats. She looked around and saw no rats. But the door from before was still there. Tabitha decided to try it again.

She opened the door and shined her pumpkin flashlight into the room and this time, there were no rats. Allen followed her into the room as Tabitha found the lights. The overhead lights turned on like normal.

“It’s a maintenance room,” Allen stated. Tabitha shut the door behind them and locked it.

“Maybe we’ll be safe here.”

“Hopefully.” Allen looked around. There was a breaker box on one wall, a card table and folding chairs set up, a toolbox, and lots of storage boxes. “Let’s block that door with these boxes.”

Allen stationed himself at the corner where the door and the breaker box were. He sat down on the barricade they had built against the door with a large wrench he got from the toolbox. Tabitha sat at the table with the flashlights and lanterns they found in a few of the storage boxes. Even with the overhead lights on they had three flashlights and a lantern they had found switched on. The other emergency lights were at the ready, just in case.

In the bright light, everything seemed surreal. They were both covered in blood, tears, and Halloween colored glitter. A few of the decor items they both crashed into had been covered in the stuff. Tabitha found some paper towels and tried to clean the blood off her sneakers, but she quickly gave up. There’s no saving anything from this night. Everything would get thrown out. Or burned. They just sit there, both silently crying, for hours. They could still hear the Spooks outside, scratching at the door and poking their long, sharp fingers into the cracks around the door.

Eventually, Allen broke the silence. “We can’t tell anyone who did this.” Tabitha looked up at him, kind of confused. Allen didn’t look at her as he continued, “No one will believe us.”

She nodded. “W-we should get our story straight.” Her voice cracked and a headache was starting to form. “Something less insane.”

They were quiet for a bit longer. This time Tabitha broke the silence. “Something like this can’t happen again.” Allen looked over at her, looking her in the eyes for the first time in hours. Tabitha could see how heartbroken he was. “I can’t. I won’t.”

He nodded.

With the rising sun came the police. Mr. McCrawley had arrived at his shop early to find the aftermath of a horror movie. They found five brutally murdered bodies, blood and claw marks on the walls and floors, destroyed displays, and two survivors.

Tabitha was being checked over by an E.M.T. at the back of an ambulance. She had one of those space blankets that trap heat around her shoulders and a wrap around her sprained ankle. She wasn’t even sure when she sprained it, but now it hurt so much. But it was still not the worst hurt.

“Okay, honey,” the E.M.T. said softly. “You’re looking pretty good for what you’ve been through. But when you’re ready, you should find someone to talk to about this.”

Tabitha nodded. She started to stand but the E.M.T. stopped her. “Just keep sitting there. I’ll get you a coffee and something to eat.”

With that the E.M.T. walked away. Allen joined her at the ambulance.

“They seem to buy the story about some random guy who locked us in,” he informed her. “They didn’t tell me anything new, but I heard a few talking and I think the ghosts did... stuff to them.”

Allen’s voice cracked and Tabitha did her best not to imagine what happened to Jack. She didn’t want to remember him or anyone else that way.

“How do we go back to a normal life after all this?” Tabitha asked. “The E.M.T. told me to get a therapist, but we can’t talk to anyone about this. We’d get locked up in a loony bin.”

“We’ll get through this, Tabby,” Allen stated. It didn’t sound like a reassurance, but a fact. They sat there for a while. The E.M.T. brought them both some granola bars and coffee with lots of sugar and milk. A while later they saw their parents’ cars enter the parking lot.

Big Bad Wolf

E. J. H.
Farmington Libraries

Standing in the middle of the room, looking up at the rafters, I wish with all my heart I had the courage to take my own life. Instead, I take up my musket, open the door to the cold dawn, and lie to my entire village.

The mountains are heavy with mist, the ground soft with last night's snow. Around me, the once-cheerful faces of my hometown hurry for the safety of the indoors. The past month has been agonizing, but far worse is this very morning, when we all have awoken knowing that one of us will soon die. Everything, from the endless horizon of stretching pines, to the squat cottages, to the people within, has shrunk in fear of an enemy that cannot be seen or outrun.

The air is sharp with the sound of a creature on the hunt.

* * *

I knock on the door of Friedrich Hoffmann. He is disheveled and unshaven. His hair has turned a premature gray, and his face is haggard with want of sleep; a far cry from the boy I grew up with. Worst of all is the hunted, resigned look in his eyes.

"Hans? What a surprise."

"Good morning, Friedrich. Or, as good as it can get. I realize this may be asking a bit much, but I need some ammunition."

"Mein Gott, Hans, you're not going out again, are you?"

"Where else can I go?"

"Haven't you heard what everyone has been saying? They say it's come up from Hell itself! They say nothing can kill it!"

My hand tightens around my musket. "Trust me. If there is a way, I will find it."

"Grandma says it's one of the Old Kind," says a voice behind Friedrich. A little girl appears in the door. Blonde hair falls over her shoulders, and her rosy cheeks show her mother's dimples. Her hand clutches a stuffed lamb.

"Rosalind," Friedrich says sternly, falling to a knee, "Mr. Wolfheim doesn't want to hear Grandma's silly stories."

"It's not a story. She says it's as old as the mountains. Our ancestors banished it years ago."

"Now Rosalind, I'll have none of this superstitious nonsense. This is a Christian household, and we don't put any faith in the false gods of heathens."

"She also says Father Kohler is more full of straw than a scarecrow."

I break Friedrich's temper with a false laugh.

“The things children say! I tell you Rosalind, you sound more like my Johanna every—”

I choke as I say this. Rosalind vanishes while Friedrich puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Hans, for goodness’ sake, see reason. Don’t go looking for the Beast. Not on your own.”

“I’ll find it, Friedrich. And I’ll kill it. After what it did to Isolde and Johan—”

“Hans!”

His voice cuts through the quiet morning air. Passersby glance at us for a moment, and I can feel their eyes lingering on me. They’ve been doing that for months now. Friedrich drops his tone.

“I respect your grief, I really do. Your family was the first to fall victim to this monster. But you haven’t found anything, and every time you go into those woods alone—”

“I know the risk, Friedrich, and I’m prepared to take it.”

The man before me sighs and shakes his head. He knows what he would be doing if he were in my place. And I think he also knows that, deep down, I wouldn’t mind joining my wife and child.

“You said ammunition?”

“And a bit of powder. I haven’t sold many furs lately, so…”

“All right. But please be careful.”

“I promise.”

He comes back with what I asked for. He also carries a bag over one shoulder, and his gun over the other. His daughter follows at his feet.

“Are you going somewhere?” I ask.

“We’re going to visit Grandma.” Rosalind pulls a hood over her head.

“We may stay for some time,” Friedrich tells me. “This village is too dangerous now.”

He closes the door, and as I watch him walk away, his daughter in tow, the bite mark on my arm begins to itch.

* * *

I enter the woods behind my house. This path was blazed when my grandfather was young. He taught my father and I to know our prey – to know their objectives, their drives, and their land. I know the forest like I know my own name, but in all the time that the Beast has terrorized our village, I have never been able to find where it sleeps. Only where it feeds.

As I tread my way through the frigid morning, my breath rising before me, I place my feet to avoid the patches of snow on the ground. I’ve come to hate tracks. It is one thing to follow them, but another to be followed.

It’s nearly midday when I finally catch the trail.

In the shadow of a cliff, the ground has been disturbed by something massive and hungry, and a young tree has been knocked off its roots. From one of the brambles I pull a tuft of wiry black fur.

I set off at a run in the direction of the main road. The tracks, though massive, are difficult to follow. They are very far apart.

"Papa, look at this!"

I crouch when I hear her voice. It's as though the Beast wanted to lead me to them, singling them out before I could.

Up ahead on the road, I see Rosalind standing in the middle of a great paw print. It comes up to her ankles.

"Rosalind, get out of there!" Friedrich practically shouts.

He pulls her out by the wrist and continues down the road at a brisk pace. I step out to meet them.

"Friedrich!"

"Hans! Bless you, you've come just in time. Look at this!"

"I've seen it," I say as he shows me. "It's the first time I've found its trail."

"I've never seen anything so big. Hans, it's…it's massive!"

"It's just as Grandma said."

"Stay away from it, Rosalind! Don't touch it. The sooner we get on our way, the better."

"Hold on there, Friedrich. Look at this print. See the way it points? It follows the road."

"Oh please, no!"

"Look, here's another." I show him the next print, just beyond the edge of the trees, walking alongside the road.

"What should we do, Hans? We can't turn back, but if the Beast waits up ahead…"

"If the Beast is nearby, then I won't leave you."

"And if we meet it?"

"Two guns are better than one, don't you agree?"

"Are you coming with us, Mr. Wolfheim?"

I pat her on the head, as I did for my daughter.

"That I am, Rosalind. But just for a little while."

Friedrich smiles and welcomes me along.

* * *

We follow the road for an hour or so.

I linger behind slightly, stepping where Friedrich steps. Every now and then I look behind me at the road, where the snow is beginning to melt. I think of the day and night that awaits the village. My heart breaks, but I ignore it. This is no time for second thoughts. My future is as inescapable as my past.

"Look, Papa! The tree!"

Rosalind runs ahead of us to a clearing where the road circles an enormous oak. To me it's only a tree, but to Friedrich this is a sacred place. It was here that he met his wife, Hilda.

After her illness, all that was left of her was this tree, older than anyone can remember, and the girl running beneath its branches.

"I appreciate you escorting us," Friedrich says, "but I think I can take it from here. The town is only a few kilometers more."

"Just as well. The trail broke off from the road a while ago. I'd better recover it before all the snow melts."

"I don't think I'll ever understand it, Hans, what your fixation is with this Beast. Why do you feel you must hunt it?"

"I don't know if I can explain it. I wish I could abandon the hunt, but some things are beyond our reasoning. Some things we simply must do. And I must do this, whether I want to or not."

Rosalind circles behind the tree.

I look off into the woods and raise my gun.

"What's that!?"

Friedrich wheels around in horror, his own gun raised against the invisible enemy. As soon as his back is turned, I drive the butt of my gun into the back of his head, and he falls to the ground. I crouch beside him.

"Papa?"

"Rosalind, come quickly!"

She runs to my side.

"Papa? What's happened to him?"

I stand up.

"Nothing at all."

With one more drive the girl falls to the ground beside her father. I drop my gun. My hands are trembling, and I hunch over, ready to be sick. My vision blurs, my head spins, and the dragging weight of my conscience pulls me down to my knees.

I steady myself. One step at a time, I drag my best friend up to the base of the tree. He mumbles as his senses return. Tears run down my cheeks as I lean him against the trunk. His eyes flutter.

"Hans?" he says meekly.

"I'm so sorry, Friedrich."

I position his gun between his knees. I place his hands just right, and put the barrel in his mouth.

His eyes finally open when I place his finger on the trigger.

* * *

With wrists tied and a rag in her mouth, Rosalind's delicate frame hangs limp over my shoulder as I traverse the ancient, pathless woods. I've wrapped her in a woolen blanket. I tell

myself it's to keep her warm, or to keep her from dying too soon, but I can't fool myself. I can't bear to see her.

For hours I walk through the snow, through places long since forgotten by the world. I retread the steps I took when I followed that stag through the deep valleyed forest, my gun in hand, my head full of ambition and arrogance. I enter the chasm my grandfather warned me about as a child, where stones hang precipitously overhead. I climb the craggy path that overlooks the horizon as it winds upward, the sheer drop beside me a tempting offer. The stone beneath me smooths and evens, until I find myself climbing stairs in the mist. I shudder to think of who else trod this way, in some remote epoch of history.

By the time I reach the top of the path, the sun has set. I stand at the summit of the mountain, the entire world laid out around me. The mountaintop has been hollowed into a gaping cave. In the center of the cave is an altar – a block never carved away. All around it, the ground is etched with sigils and signs. A small idol lies broken at the back of the cave, an eternal reminder of my failure.

The mark on my arm is burning now, and I set about my work. I light torches in their niches, casting shadows in all directions. From far away, I'm sure someone could see the lights, and I wonder if they will ever be as curious as I was. I drag a set of chains up to the altar, and there I bind Rosalind. I look down at her tiny figure. I think of the day she was born, and how happy Friedrich had been. I can still hear him hammering on my door, eager to tell me before anyone else.

At last I can control myself no longer. I cry over the little girl.

"Please forgive me, Rosalind! I don't want to…but it only takes children!"

Her lifeless form will not stir. I stand up and pace before the altar, the torches throwing my shape against the walls like a chorus of tribal dancers.

"Don't you see? I can't stop it! Nothing can! I would if I knew how, but… The ones who sealed it, died years ago. All the knowledge is gone. And this thing, it hasn't eaten for thousands of years. All I can do is serve it. If I don't, then I'll be…"

I look back at her. Her eyes are open, watching me.

A sharp howl breaks the night air, and I look out at the sky. The full moon has risen.

The sound of a heavy tread reaches my ears. I race to the proper place and fall to my knees. I keep my eyes firmly fixed upon the ground.

Down below I hear it getting closer. Trees bend aside as it passes. The stones of the mountain crumble and crunch beneath its feet. The tread becomes as deafening as thunder, until finally it reaches the stony cliff where servants and sacrifice are waiting. I can hear Rosalind's fear, but more than that, I can feel the presence of the Beast. Its very spirit drags a cloud of oppression over the mountains, a monster of both mind and flesh. With every step, it shakes the torches. It comes close to me, but I dare not look at it. Instead, I listen to the twitching of its massive snout about my head, and feel the warm, rattling breath on my face.

The chains behind me clatter, and the Beast leaves me with my shame. Her screams are muffled, but to me they are deafening.

The creature takes its time with her. Moment by moment I listen to the claws against the stone, the chains against the altar, and the teeth against the bones. Every moist shred, every crunch, every split, and every agonizing vocal sound rings in my ears, until I can take no more, and darkness overtakes me.

* * *

When I finally awaken, I am alone on the mountain. Somewhere out in the distance, a low howl rises to the moon. The cold of winter pierces my flesh. I return to the cave, sidestepping the bloody paw prints. I think of the long night walk ahead of me, and of returning to the empty house where my wife hung herself. I think of Friedrich lying dead out there, and what the villagers will say when he's found. I think of the search they will conduct when Rosalind doesn't turn up, as pointless as all the others. But most of all, I think of what will happen when the village runs out of children.

The torches are nearly burnt down. Before I snuff them, I approach the altar. All that's left of Rosalind is her dripping red riding cape. I gingerly pick it up and take it to the back of the cave. There I place it beside the remains of Jack the shepherd boy, young Peter, and my poor little Johanna.

To Grandmother's House We Go
Liz Healy
Case Memorial Library

Casey was down on her luck. Her college advisor had called her into his office yesterday and said her academic scholarship was in jeopardy. Casey's grades had slipped after her grandmother's death last year. The scholarship—her late grandmother had proudly boasted about it to her friends in the Tuesday night knitting club—was now at risk.

Later that day, at her on-campus job at the school library, she had been sent home after her boss caught her dozing. It had been a late night of cramming the evening before, desperately trying to bring up her grades. Her boss had implied she needn't come back.

And of course, how could Casey forget last week, when her boyfriend gave her the "it's not you, it's me" over text. That was fine—she'd been indifferent about him anyway.

"My advisor said I need a break. He even suggested spending time with my parents back in Ohio," Casey vented to her roommate, Emily, while forcefully throwing clothes into her bag. Emily stared at Casey while sitting cross-legged on her raised twin bed. She offered no suggestions—just shrugged her shoulders.

"Okay," she said. Emily slipped her headphones back on her ears. The conversation was over. The two had never really bonded.

"You know, the idea of spending time with my parents sounds more like a chore than a break, but the idea of some time away from all of this—" motioning with her hands, "seems like a reasonable idea. Even a good idea, actually."

Casey zipped up her bag and slung the strap over her shoulder. "Well, I guess I'll see you when I get back," she said, heading for the dorm room door.

"I'm pretty sure that's my phone charger you packed," Emily said, loudly over her music.

Damn, Casey thought. Of course, Emily caught that. Casey's charger had mysteriously disappeared, and Emily had extras that Casey figured she wouldn't miss. Clearly, she was wrong. Casey unzipped her pack, retrieved the charger, and handed it back to Emily. Then she headed again for the door.

“Good luck out there with all your things,” Emily said.

Such an odd goodbye.

Casey put the key in the ignition of her 2007 Corolla. Immediately, the check engine light raged its angry red warning.

“Not today, car!” Casey said to herself. She turned on the headlights and reversed out of her parking spot as a murder of crows scattered away. She pressed play on her stereo and blasted *Folklore* on repeat for five hours.

Two hours into the drive, Casey’s phone died, and she swore silently at Emily. No GPS. No way to call for help if the car decided to break down. Bad luck was something Casey was used to. She kept driving, the miles rolling on. At least she still had Taylor Swift.

Casey was in a daze when she saw the green sign: “Now Entering Orange, CT.” She had no intention of driving to Orange. This wasn’t her home—but it was familiar all the same.

Casey blinked in disbelief. It was as if the car had driven itself; she had no recollection of even entering Connecticut.

To Grandmother’s house we go, she thought.

Casey proceeded down Route 34, turned right onto Orange Center Road, and followed the familiar route, passing the cemetery where they had buried her grandmother.

I should stop here, Casey thought. But the sky was darkening, and the road was lonely.

“There’s a reason I drove here,” she muttered to herself, battling internally. Obviously, her subconscious was trying to tell her something. But what?

She turned right into the empty graveyard. She pulled over on the side of the road, put the car in park, and sighed deeply, trying to summon some courage. She hadn’t been to the cemetery since the burial.

“I can do this.”

She took off her seatbelt, opened the door, and stepped out of the car and started walking towards her grandmother’s tombstone.

Mary Simms — Beloved Mother, Grandmother, and Friend, the tombstone read.

A great sadness overcame Casey. All the stress of school, work, risking her scholarship, her inability to make any friends—she just needed her grandmother to listen. How badly she wanted to sit at her grandmother's oak dining room table, sip tea, and unload her problems.

Overwhelmed with grief, Casey fell to her knees on the cold grass, the weight of her sorrow softening the earth beneath her. Softly sobbing at her grandmother's grave, she became aware of the dark sky. Not a single star to light the night. How much time had passed? Things have been feeling fuzzy lately; her life felt like a blur. Looking around the graveyard, she noticed the silence. No birds chirped. No cars sped down the road. An eerie feeling settled in—the hair on her arms began to rise.

The cemetery appeared empty, but Casey didn't feel alone.

That was when her eyes spotted the tall figure leaning against a tree. A plume of smoke loomed in the dark.

Gathering her keys, rushing to her feet, Casey headed toward her car—not quite running, but faster than a jog. The figure started approaching as she fumbled with her keys.

Just my luck, she thought, stumbling to the ground, desperately trying to pick up the keys, get in the car, and get out of there.

The figure was still approaching.

She clutched her keys between her knuckles. If this guy was going to come closer, he would get a key in the eyeball.

Quickly unlocking the car, she jumped into the driver's seat, slammed the door shut, locked it, and shoved the key into the ignition. She held her breath, silently praying the engine would start.

Just as the ignition caught—a knock on the window made her jump.

She screamed.

The figure was knocking on her window.

It was dark. She was alone. In a cemetery.

It doesn't get much worse than this, she thought.

Bracing herself for what was coming next, Casey slowly turned her head toward the window, her body tense with fear. The figure motioned for her to roll it down. Reluctantly, Casey lowered the glass. The figure leaned closer until his face was level with hers.

Was it… could it be?

"Mr. Wilson?" Casey wasn't certain it was him; she hadn't seen him since her childhood.

"She said you would come," he said. His face was devoid of any emotion, his eyes black and unblinking. It had been years since Casey had seen Mr. Wilson—her grandmother's neighbor. He looked just as old as she remembered, papery, thin skin, a tall, gaunt man. "She's waiting for you".

"Who said I would come? Come where?" she asked.

Mr. Wilson didn't answer. He simply turned and began to shuffle away, his feet barely touching the ground.

That was weird, she thought, as she put the car in drive and pulled out toward the road.

It wasn't until Casey exited the parking lot that she remembered—Mr. Wilson had died.

Could this really be happening?

Casey had had a rough couple of months filled with bad luck, but this was unexplainable. Bad grades and losing her job were one thing—but driving for five hours in the *wrong* direction from home and not even realizing it until she entered the town of Orange? This was next-level strange. Nothing was adding up.

And now, she was speaking with someone she was ninety-nine percent sure had died when she was a child.

What was she supposed to do? The gas light was on, along with the check engine light. Her parents' house was hours away and she had no phone. There was nowhere else to go—except her grandmother's house, which had been empty since her death while her parents and aunts decided what to do with the old farmhouse.

Casey drove down the winding driveway. The white farmhouse was in desperate need of a paint job. It looked lonely. Abandoned.

At least I can stay here for the night, she thought. *I am safe, I am safe, I am safe.* She repeated the mantra over and over in her head.

Something was seriously wrong with her, maybe she just needed a good night's sleep to sort it all out.

She exited the car and made her way up the uneven porch steps. The screen door squeaked a *hello* as she pulled it open. She jammed her old key into the lock and pushed the front door open with a little muscle.

The house moaned welcoming her in.

It was musty, dark, and damp, but it was the home she remembered — the place where she had always felt safe as a child. But now, the emptiness left behind carried a presence she couldn't quite explain. The house swallowed her in. It had been waiting for her.

She walked through the foyer, the floorboards no longer creaking beneath her feet. It was the same — but different. She flicked on the lights which cast shadows across the walls.

Casey wandered through the house, overcome by the unsettling feeling that she wasn't alone. She glanced over her shoulder as she moved from room to room.

The home was mostly as her grandmother had left it, as if she had just stepped out; except for the white fabric draped over the couches - furniture ghosts.

She passed the oak dining room table she had loved so much as a child — the table that held so many memories, that had hosted joyous holidays, delicious meals, and countless homemade pies.

Laughter from her childhood faintly echoed through the walls.

Where was that sound coming from?

A whistle. A high-pitched whistle, like a distant train barreling down the tracks.

What is that sound?

Casey followed the noise to its source — the tea kettle on the stove. Steam curled into the darkness spiraling from the spout. She tried to warm her hands on the stove, but it was cold.

Her heart began to pound — faster, faster.
She could feel the blood rushing in her ears:

bom-bom, bom-bom, bom-bom.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up on end. Casey was not alone.

"Casey, I've been waiting for you." It was the voice she hadn't heard in so long, the voice she missed so much.

“Grandma?” Casey turned to face her grandmother.
Her *dead* grandmother.

“This isn’t real. This can’t be real,” she whispered, tears filling her eyes, her heartbeat quickening. Something was wrong. *Very* wrong.

She backed away from the table, her feet stumbling over themselves.

This wasn’t right. She shouldn’t be here.
She had to get out.

“Have a seat, Casey,” her grandmother said, as a chair dragged itself across the hardwood floor — as if pulled by invisible hands.

Casey backed away slowly, her fingers fumbling through her pockets in search of her keys.

She needed to leave. This wasn’t real. She was clearly having some kind of breakdown.

“Casey, sit!” Her grandmother yelled, pounding her fists on the table. Her voice had taken on a deepening tone, authoritative and angry. The lights flickered. Reluctantly, Casey took her seat at the table across from her dead grandmother.

“It’s time for you to go Casey,” her grandmother’s tone softened.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do. I was driving, and I must have blacked out or something, because I drove in the wrong direction and I ended up here—and now I’m talking to dead people.”

“It’s time for you to go, Casey,” she repeated.

“Okay, I get the point. I’ll head out.” She stood up, started to push her chair in. None of this made sense; she would sort it all out with her parents when she made it home. They would find her a doctor, she would take a leave of absence from school. Everything would be alright.

She walked to the door, put her hand on the cold brass doorknob, and turned. It didn’t move. Checking to make sure the door wasn’t locked, she tried again—just as the lights suddenly went out.

“It’s time, Casey,” her grandmother called from the table.

“I’m trying!” she yelled in frustration. This wasn’t the grandmother she knew and needed. She had to get out of here.

Her grandmother rose from the table and made her way toward Casey, her feet not touching the ground. Once she reached her, she put both arms on Casey's shoulders, and a bright white light flashed in front of Casey's eyes.

Flooded with memories - snapshots of family holidays, her old dog Rusty, Casey accepting her high school diploma. Then the images turned dark: her advisor, her check engine light, the windy road, the tree, the ditch, the phone that wasn't charged, and no way to call for help.

Her grandmother's wrinkled hands held on to her tightly as the images flooded her mind, and Casey realized what had happened.

"It's time to go home, Casey," she said at last.

Blinking back tears, Casey held her grandmother's hand and together they walked out the door and into the dark night.

The Nursing Home

Erin Hoffman
East Hampton Public Library

Kathleen's eyes opened, adjusting to the soft light. She wiggled her toes, not wanting to move. Tucked into bed, the weight of the blankets provided a familiar comfort. She used just her eyes to look slowly around the room. These days, she has the luxury of moving slowly. In fact, she didn't need to move at all—retirement had granted her that. She'd done her time, and now whatever was left of it was hers.

Kathleen's eyes landed on the standing lamp in the corner, black metal and stained glass. It was her lamp—the one she'd been allowed to bring from home. It cast the soft light that had awoken her so gently. She observed its warm orange glow reflecting off the sterile white walls and ceiling.

Kathleen knew she was in a nursing home. She had agreed to move here over a year ago after a conversation with her daughter. Kathleen had been living alone in her house with the steep lawn and the stairs that weren't "up to code," or whatever that man had said. She'd raised her daughter there. Her husband had died there just a few years ago. It was lonely. She was lonely. And Kathleen remembered how her daughter's dark brown eyes filled with relief after she'd said "Yes, sweetheart. Yes, I'll go."

A gentle knocking brought her attention back to the present. A woman in dark blue scrubs holding a clipboard appeared at her bedside. "Good morning, Kathleen. Still in bed?" she asked, kindly.

"Caught me," Kathleen said, smiling. She sat up to introduce herself. She didn't think she'd met this nurse yet.

"Oh, please," the nurse began, laying a hand on Kathleen's shoulder, "no need to get out of bed. It's early. You can keep resting."

Kathleen settled into a seated position on the mattress, back against the wall, blankets covering her legs. She studied the nurse. "Your eyes are lovely," she said. "Like my daughter's."

The nurse smiled. "Thank you, that's so kind."

"What's your name?"

"Alma—I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself."

"Alma," Kathleen repeated. "That's a beautiful name. I haven't heard it in a while."

"It's a family name," Alma said, rolling a blood pressure monitor close.

"Are you new to nursing?" Kathleen asked.

"Sort of. I started two years ago but moved to this job a few months ago because I wanted to make more of an impact."

"Oh, that's nice. I'm sure your work is appreciated."

They were quiet for a moment.

"You know," Kathleen began, "I've accepted a lot about aging. But I miss being... appreciated. Making an impact. My work—I was a journalist. I started at a local paper, the *Rivereast News Bulletin*. Maybe you've heard of it? I got to tell people's stories, report on problems, crime, government. All sorts of things. Then I spent the last eight years at the New Haven Register until I retired."

"Really?" Alma said, and Kathleen thought maybe she was impressed.

"That was my career—my meaning in this world. Well... " she amended, glancing quickly at Alma, "of course I'm a mother and I was a wife. But... that work was mine. That work made me feel like a productive member of society, you know?"

Alma nodded and said she understood. Then she asked questions like what was the most interesting story she ever covered? And what did she think about the effect of social media on journalism? And, by the way, why were crosswords always so hard?

The conversation had only lasted a few minutes, but Kathleen felt amused. Stimulated. Like she had some meaning again, some purpose. "I think," Kathleen began, "as a society, we can do better to make sure older adults feel productive—are productive, if they want to be. If they can be."

"Well, you're all giving back here," Alma said. "That's what makes this place so special." Kathleen thought that was a nice thing to say, if odd. She didn't remember giving back anything since she'd arrived. Still, it felt good to be acknowledged.

"Oh, it's warm," Alma said, eyeing the thermostat on the wall.

“I’m alright.”

“We try to keep the heat low,” Alma said, taking a remote from her pocket and pressing a button. “As a journalist, you might be interested to know it’s better for the body’s micronutrient balance,” Alma added.

“Is it?” Kathleen asked, shivering and pulling the blankets more tightly.

“Mhm, helpful for neurological functioning.”

“Oh, well, I appreciate your attentiveness to my neurological functioning,” Kathleen repeated, lightly.

Alma, busy opening a syringe, said—offhandedly, “Oh, it’s not for your neurological functioning.”

“No? Whose then?” she asked, amused.

Alma said nothing, her attention now on an upside-down glass bottle of medication. Slowly, she pulled the syringe plunger down, filling the barrel with liquid. As Kathleen watched, a faint hum came through the wall, maybe from the room next door. It reverberated lightly against her back—a subtle pulse that made her shift in bed.

Finally, Alma looked up. “The baby’s.”

Kathleen froze, certain she had missed something. “The... baby’s?”

“Of course,” Alma confirmed, gently pulling the fabric of Kathleen’s nightgown aside to reach under her arm. “Slight pinch,” she said, and Kathleen felt the poke near her armpit.

Kathleen, confused and about to say so, became aware of a curious sensation: pressure on her lungs and weight on her ribs. This time, her eyes moved fast, not slow. She looked down at her chest. It was there. Of course it was there—but it was... wrong. These weren’t hers. They were swollen and heavy. Engorged, like when she’d been pregnant and breastfeeding.

Fifty-five years ago.

She tried to look sharply at the nurse, but her head wouldn’t move.

“What—?”

“Don’t worry. We like to make sure things are stable during harvest—it’s better for supply. You’ll barely feel a thing.”

Harvest? Supply?

“What do you mean?” Kathleen asked quickly, trying to catch up.

“You’re all so *productive*. You women give so much—it’s such a sacrifice. The hormones, the harvest... everything. It’s why I wanted to work here. For the impact. For the children.” Alma’s voice was calm, almost tender, as she attached a plastic device with a tube to Kathleen’s chest. Kathleen felt a faint vibration as a motor whirred and a rhythmic suctioning began.

“What—I don’t—where am I?” Kathleen asked with rising panic.

The nurse smiled and rested her hand on Kathleen’s shoulder. “You’re at The Nursing Home.”

Notes from Sunday Night
Danica L.
C.H. Booth Library

Dear A---,

Hey, sorry for sending this to your personal email but I didn't want anything on the record. I am actually considering writing a memo and you know how much I hate writing memos. Still, I'm in the FCI parking lot typing this out on my phone so I don't inadvertently change baffling facts into sensible fiction. Maybe you can help me figure out what to put in the memo eventually, or if the whole thing can be swept under the rug.

Anyway, I came to the institution last night for the PM pill line. When I got here, it was still light out. Crazy, the sky's getting bright again now. I was planning to be in and out. Shouldn't have taken more than two hours to do gen pop and special housing. I saw the usual flock of wild turkeys as I came up the hill, their brown feathers blending nicely with the foliage.

Everything went smoothly with the first pill line. The guys were pretty tickled to see the pharmacist coming in on the weekend. "Miss L--, must be short staffed if they're calling you in." "Are they paying you extra?" As if they pay anyone during a shutdown! Anyway, I finished the main line and sent the guys back to their units. Pulled the doses for SHU and headed over, got lucky and timed it right when the officers weren't doing their counts, so I didn't have to wait to get let in. SHU went smoothly too: only seven patients on evening meds, and no one gave me attitude, which in retrospect was a sign that things were too good to be true.

I was waiting at the sallyport to leave the unit when Officer K---- came down from his rounds and asked me if I could take some forms. I looked through them as I walked back to health services. Typical copouts: requests for refills and medical records, a detailed complaint about constipation. And then, I perked up for something pharmacy related: a request to discontinue a psych med. The brisk autumn breeze, the New England forests, a distant red and orange tapestry, and the fact that I finished early made me foolishly generous. I thought it would be a quick thing to run back to the pharmacy, print a refusal and get a signature. Less work for future us, right?

The name and reg number can go in the memo later, but for now I'll call him B. When I get to his cell he's sitting on the bottom bunk, alone. Cell is immaculate, just clothes folded neatly in the corner and a single notebook and pen by his pillow. He sees me and stands, limping slightly over to the grate. I verify his name and reg and offer him a pen for signing. He doesn't take it.

B: I want to talk.

Me: About what? Your copout said you wanted to refuse risperidone.

B: Yeah, but first I want to talk. Privately.

Me: To me? I'm a pharmacist. I can send an email to the psychology staff if you want, they can come see you next week.

B: You could, but I think you want to hear this.

Weird, right? Who am I to hear anything? It was increasingly feeling unrelated to medication. But maybe it was the perfect amount of chilly and the last bit of sun streaming past the window bars felt just right. My curiosity got the better of me. I asked Officer K--- if we could speak in the medical evaluation room. After several minutes of unlocking and locking doors, applying cuffs, etc., we were in the room, Officer K--- kindly waiting outside the cracked door, pretending not to eavesdrop.

B is kind of nondescript for a guy in SHU, the prison of prisons. Unremarkable body habitus, pungent body odor, minimal tattoos, none on his hands or face. Like someone you'd see at the bank without wondering if he was there to rob it. Soft spoken, slightly flat affect but growing more urgent as he spoke.

B: I know you must be busy, but like I said I think you should hear the whole thing. It's going to sound crazy but it's about another inmate here. I don't know if you can do anything about it but at least it'll be off my chest. Maybe you can, maybe you can't.

Look, just a little background about me so you know I'm not nuts. I had an okay childhood, grew up poor in Kansas, wasn't set up for success or anything but it wasn't rough. Mom was always there to meet me at the bus stop. I got in with a bad crowd to earn extra cash. I've been in federal prison for six years, two to go. Transferred to Danbury last August from FCI Leavenworth. Yeah, if you look me up you'll see I was trouble before, but I straightened up. Went on meds. Prozac, Remeron. Started Risperdal and took it every day for the last five years. You're probably thinking I'm a nutjob but I've never had hallucinations or heard voices. It just worked for the depression.

Me: But now you want to refuse it?

B: Yeah, but that's not the point. This isn't about the meds. When I got to Danbury it was real different coming from a medium. Low security, guys just want to do their time and get out. No one's picking fights on the yard, or if they are, there's other guys who'll set them straight. Guys are more down to talk too, which was a bit of a shock for me. Standing around at rec, lifting weights, telling stories. I learned to keep my head down at this point, but starting a couple months ago there was some stuff I was hearing that made my ears perk up.

Me: Is this something you need to talk to a lieutenant about?

B: It's not like that. People were saying there was a guy who could…make things happen. Like on the outside. Not in the usual ways, with hidden messages or connections or things like that. Stuff with no explanation. Like, this other guy's kid from Jersey wasn't really talking to him anymore, and suddenly his ex-wife gets a new job in Norwalk, and now the kid's here every other weekend. Another dude's wife was cheating and within a week, the other guy was in the ICU, with pancreatic cancer. Ask and ye shall receive. Sick moms got better. Ex-girlfriends start calling again. That's what everyone was whispering about.

Me: You're describing…a wizard?

B: Nothing is ever free, right? There was a cost. Whatever joy was gonna come out of a certain outcome, it was gonna cost an equivalent amount of suffering, at least. Not necessarily from the person asking for it, but from someone or something, somewhere. He'd ask you to agree to it. He'd want you to inflict it.

Me: Sorry, what?

B: So my buddy N---, in Delta unit. His son needs a car, this guy says he can make it happen. What's he want for it? Pain. My buddy finds a garter snake by the baseball dugout. Hammers it to death. That's good, but not enough. He finds another snake, this time he slices it up with a razor blade, taking a long time going through the scales, maybe an hour. That's better. His son gets a raise, almost enough to convince the bank to give him a loan. More pain, more gain. My buddy set up traps and caught this huge rat, the size of two fists. He stuffed cotton in its mouth to muffle the screams, and then moved a lighter under it, again and again, parts of it cooking, while other parts were alive.

(A---, you probably think I'm messing with you at this point, because that's what I was thinking when I was hearing this. I just want to say that your concerns are valid and will be addressed.)

B: The son won a car in some sweepstakes. He didn't even need the loan. Sure, it was just a Toyota Camry but it was proof of concept. Maybe you noticed that there aren't as many critters running around the institution as there used to be.

Me: I have not noticed.

B: The thing is, you didn't always have to pay up front. You could work out some sort of plan, do it over time. You could get what you want as long as the pain kept coming. But if you failed to make payments…My buddy N--- was trying to keep up, some new request. I forget what it was, but he was an idiot for asking. Whatever he paid wasn't enough, wasn't on time. Toyota got a flat on the highway. His son, changing the tire, gets hit by a semi and smeared all along I-95. N---, maybe you know him, he's a frequent flier in the suicide watch room these days.

Me: Why's this guy in prison if he's so powerful? And why are you telling me this?

B: People said he wanted to be here. There's so much suffering in prison. It fortified him somehow, strengthened him. For what, I don't know. I never asked for him. I couldn't think of anything I wanted enough to torture animals for it. Plus there was a part of me that was hoping N--- was pranking me, but going on suicide watch as a joke would be extreme. Anyway, stuff happens, I end up in SHU, and lucky me, who turns out to be my bunkmate?

Me: Seriously?

B: So I had to test it out, right? I had to see if it was real. I had to ask for something that, if it happened, couldn't have any other explanation.

Me: The risperidone.

B: I haven't taken it for a month. Or anything else. I feel really, really good. Better than I ever have, to be honest.

I didn't want to ask. He must have guessed what I was thinking because he smiled faintly, reached down to remove his shoe and roll down his sock. The pungent odor intensified. His leg - there's no nice way to put it - had been fully peeled, skin removed crudely, as if with a blunt scraper; the wound was so deep I thought I saw muscle. It wept pus and blood, a raging infection begging to be cultured. I did my best to discreetly swallow the acid rising in my throat.

Obviously I called the provider on call. Obviously he had them send B to the hospital. And in the chaos of that subsequent activity I asked him two more questions. The first was a location, which I headed straight to after EMS left. A flower bed between the law library and the commissary, neatly mulched, where a large rhododendron was dropping its blooms. I dug at its base with my bare hands, past wilted petals and damp woodchips. Then, something stiff, something long. Bits of what used to be a snake. A severed bird wing. A decaying rat with blackened skin.

The answer to the second question: A name. You'd recognize the name if I told you, A---. We prepared exit meds for him. He was released last week.

The Fine Print

Mike Lucia
Brookfield Library

Jennifer Clark hurries to the front door after hearing a shriek, thinking that a trick-or-treater was in trouble. Her husband, Tom, dismisses it as someone being in the spirit of the holiday. This was their first Halloween in their dream home in Windsor since moving over the summer. She opens the door, expecting to see a costumed child fallen in the driveway, but is met with a scene far more unexpected.

The nearly full moon is low enough to be seen from the doorway of the farmhouse's wraparound porch, through a loose network of swirling clouds. Where not overpowered by the white glow, otherworldly green seeps through breaks in the partly overcast sky, assisting to illuminate a figure standing before her. Jennifer first notices how crooked its head is, at an unnatural angle from the rest of the body. Then she is drawn to the eyes; sad and gray, with extremely dilated pupils under a furrowed brow. A grim, frowning mouth completes the visage of anguish. The sudden fury of a gust of wind striking the porch snaps Jennifer out of an open-mouthed stare, allowing her flight instinct to take over. She shuts the door with a sharp yelp, the grotesque image having been indelibly forced into her memory.

Tom wasn't in a position to see the entranceway while it was open, so his reaction is purely to his wife's screaming. "Whoa, what is it? A kid with a high quality mask?"

Jennifer now has her back pressed against the door, eyes closed. Voice quivering, she says "I…I don't know. It…"

Realizing how upset she is, Tom goes to look out the window next to their couch. He puts two fingers between the closed blinds and pushes upward. The opening reveals a woman dressed in a long gown, with a set of wide, pained eyes looking back into his own, though from a severe degree of tilt. "Holy-", is all he gets out, jumping back and letting go of the blinds, mercifully obscuring the horrible sight on the other side. Jennifer screams again in reaction to his fright, then hesitantly opens her eyes to see Tom hiding on the floor in front of the couch, facing away from the window. He sputters, "A lady! She was right at the window…waiting for me…and…something's not right with her."

A panicked ramble spills from her mouth, "Let's…just wait it out. She, it, whatever, will leave. Or…or it's probably just a really good costume! The kid will get impatient and go to the next house! I don't thin-"

"Jenny! It's not a trick-or-treater!"

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know, but the way it looked at me with those…cold eyes…there's no way it was just a costume. I mean…did you see its head? How could it be alive? What if it's, you know-"

"A zombie? Or a ghost? Some dead lady that magically came back to life? That's insane! Do you hear yourself?" she interrupts, trying to convince herself just as much as him.

He tries coming up with a response when a terrible, raspy cry passes through the house, ending their argument. Tom is still on the floor, with his arms now plastered against the couch to steady him, heart threatening to leap from his throat.

"That doesn't sound like a kid," she relents.

While they desperately try to think of what to do next, two sharp knocks vibrate the door. Jennifer screams and dives to the floor, crawling to Tom's position, where he wraps an arm around her.

An eternity of a minute passes, then two more knocks. They duck with each rap. During the silence, Tom whispers, "I'm going to call the police." She nods in agreement. He dials 911, but his phone displays a connection error. Tom tries several apps, alternating wifi and cell service, but nothing works. He crawls and gets his wife's phone, and it has the same problem.

Jennifer considers using a side door to run to her car parked in the driveway. As she nears the door, a green glow radiates through the sheer curtain and a disquieting moan is heard from the other side. Convinced that the unknown being followed her there, she abandons her plan. Tom opens the back door while he thinks the creature is distracted by Jennifer, but he is immediately met by the rasping noise and a blast of wind. It's clear that no exit is beyond the reach of the mysterious figure.

Trapped in their home, too petrified to try escaping again, and unable to contact anyone for help, they resign themselves to waiting it out. They have enough food for a week and since water and electricity are working, they can survive physically, though perhaps not mentally. The knocks continue throughout the night, preventing any form of rest. Nor do they stop during the next day and evening, steadily driving the couple beyond the brink of exhaustion.

Finally, at dawn on November 2nd, the weather calms and the knocking ends. Tom and Jennifer are completely drained from two sleepless nights while living in a state of fear. They wait an hour, then with great trepidation open the front door, behind which is nothing more than a crisp autumn morning.

They discuss it and agree that while they believe the ordeal happened, they will never tell anyone lest they be ridiculed. Individually, each wonders if it was some form of shared delusion.

Days pass, until it's been nearly two weeks since the event. They cannot relax inside their own home or enjoy a beautiful day on their porch, fearing that the torment may begin again. A moderate amount of wind serves as a reminder of their encounter and reduces them to huddling together to cope. A delivery person knocking on the door spikes their anxiety.

Their trauma has led Jennifer and Tom to separately decide that they want to move, but each is afraid they'd disappoint the other.

Four weeks after Halloween, the evening turns particularly windy. The moon that illuminated the frightful scene on their porch has made a full cycle and is now back at the same gibbous phase, casting shadows too reminiscent for Jennifer to keep her thoughts to herself any longer.

"Tom, I…this was supposed to be our house for life, but…"

"I know. It's okay. We need to move. Whatever that was, real or imagined…we can't keep living this way."

They embrace and plan to contact their realtor. The couple manages to scrape together enough money to find an apartment in neighboring Bloomfield, to get them away from the emotionally tainted house and give the agent more freedom for showings.

In mid-December, they receive an offer that is nearly what they originally paid, and accept it immediately. The closing date arrives quickly, and they gather with the buyers at the attorney's office. A paralegal is distributing the carefully organized paperwork, first to the lawyer who explains what it is, then to the appropriate party for signatures. The pile of unreviewed forms slowly but surely dwindles, until she hands the final document to the veteran real estate attorney who knows that everyone is antsy to finish. Diane Bennett, Esq. says with a small grin, "Here we are folks, the last one." Tom and Jennifer try to keep their giddiness inside, knowing they are moments away from ending this nightmarish period in their lives.

"This is colloquially known as the 'Superstition Rider'. Any property close to the Connecticut River inside Windsor requires this disclosure. Most attorneys just include it in the folder of paperwork, but I like to read it. No signature is needed, it's just mandated by the town charter to be provided to the purchaser."

This doesn't sound familiar to Jennifer or Tom, despite buying the same house only months ago.

Ms. Bennet continues, "It's an example of quaint colonial era superstition, that no one in the town government has wanted to change. It says, 'Be it known to settlers within the Town of Windsor at less than three miles from the banks of The Great River, in this year of our Lord 1747, that unearthly behaviors ascribed to Alse Young have occurred these one hundred years since her condemnation and hanging as a witch. Numerous are the tales of her appearances during Allhallowtide that frighten households and livestock. Common wisdom knows that an encounter with Alse Young may be peaceably ended by standing steadfast and apologizing for the injustice she bore in 1647. This modern government finds her unfair treatment regrettable and declares this warning be given in perpetuity or until her appearances cease.'"

She puts this final document into the folder with the rest and asks rhetorically, "Who says the fine print is boring?" stirring a chuckle from the buyers.

Tom and Jennifer are not amused, however. Their cautious excitement has sobered into an unspoken realization of what they experienced. Ashen-faced, they somberly shake hands with the new owners and attorney, then retreat to their car where they break down and weep.

The Noises

Emily Keifer
East Haddam Library System

A low growling thunder echoes, the sound bouncing off the thicket of trees around me. If I'm not mistaken, I think I feel the ground below me move. But that's impossible. I shake out my hands. My palms are sweaty. I'm probably overthinking this, but I've been on high alert the whole hike. I shouldn't have gone alone. Anyone in Moodus could tell you that. But I did anyway.

A branch snaps to my left and I whirl around. Probably just a squirrel. It's fine that I don't see one, I tell myself. They're quick. But my heart picks up a beat in protest. The sun is sinking lower towards the horizon, too heavy for the sky to hold it any longer. Its glow illuminates the already golden leaves, so bright it looks like they're on fire. I've been out here too long.

A second thunderous boom splits the air around me, stopping me in my tracks. I checked the radar before leaving. There weren't any storms expected. No black clouds pollute the sky. No drops of rain lick at my skin. And this doesn't exactly sound like thunder.

Leaves rustle behind me. They dance across the path. But there's no breeze. Just that cool, crisp, October air. Motionless. Another twig breaks and I spin again. My heart is crashing through my ribcage now. Not an animal in sight.

A third rumble sends shivers up my spine and vibrations through my feet. This isn't a storm. And whatever it is, I'm not interested in finding out. I need to get back. I turn around on the trail, but my first footstep back towards home ignites the fog. Suddenly, thick white clouds cling to my clothing. I stretch out my arm, but I can't even see my fingertips at the end. Within seconds, I can't tell left from right. I suddenly have no control over the quickness of my breath.

I grab my phone from my pocket, but the 'no service' signal at the top of the screen drops my heart to my stomach. I reach out in every direction, desperately trying to grasp at anything that can tell me which way is forward. But all I can grab is the heavy fog that slips through my fingertips. Like I'm in a smoke-filled hallway, I sink to the ground.

The noises grow louder. Rumbles boom and echo, all encompassing, deafening. My knees are damp as I crawl across the mist moistened dirt and leaves. I reach through the sounds until my fist finds a cold hard stone. Scrambling to my feet, I desperately grasp at the stone and feel it rise from the ground and arch sideways. The opening to a cave. I step inside. The fog doesn't follow, but the noises grow louder in protest. Like they're coming from deep within the cave. The darkness is absolute.

I juggle my phone in my hand once more to illuminate the flashlight and sweep it across the space I found for solace. A new rumble rolls in. Different than before. Louder. More insistent. Have I been out here for too long all alone? Because it almost seems to be growling my name. I have to stay here, in this cave. It's too dangerous on the trail with the fog so dense. There are too many ledges.

Rumble. There it is again. My name.

Rumble. It's louder this time. I frantically shine my light into the depths of the cave again. The earth below me shakes. A pile of soft dirt in the corner begins to move. Slowly, methodically, a hand emerges from the ground.

Rumble.

And then another.

And another.

The ground feels like it's splitting below me. Tiny cracks splintering to let the fingers through.

I desperately jam a message into my phone.

The Noises…

SEND.

(!) Not delivered.

I wheel backward until I slam into the side of the cave. The hands are everywhere now. Reaching towards me; my name reverberating against the walls of the cave.

They're calling for me…

SEND.

(!) Not delivered.

I grab a stone from the floor of the cave and try to etch a message into the walls instead, but the rocks are too hard.

I lunge out of the darkness, into the thick white clouds beyond the cave. From pitch black to stark white. My flashlight can't help me out here. But I race forward anyway, despite the ledges that lurk along the trail. A loud growl shouts at me from the earth. A hand grabs my ankle, pulling me back. I desperately try one more message as my skin scrapes across the dirt along the back of the cave.

They've got me…please help

SEND.

One final pull. My phone flies out of my hand. The earth claws at my skin until it swallows me whole.

Darkness.

Silence.

(!) Not delivered.

Untitled

Jane Kellner
Scoville Memorial Library

Silently, slowly, the heavy weathered oak front door swung open. Dark hooded eyes surveyed me from the bone-littered floor.

The Lantern at Bradley Mountain (A Southington October Tale)

Joseph Miller
Southington Public Library

The air on Bradley Mountain carried that October bite-not the kind that chilled bones, but the kind that whispered of endings. Fallen oak leaves rustled over the rocky path, dry and papery as if secrets had been written on them and lost to time. The moon, low and watchful, bled through the treetops, painting the world in silver and shadow.

Ryan Coleman adjusted the strap of his camera bag and kept walking. His flashlight cut a thin tunnel through the fog, illuminating patches of moss and the glint of mica in the stones. He was a local history teacher, not a thrill-seeker, but the story of The Lantern Keeper of Bradley Mountain had tempted him for years.

According to the old Southington folklore, a railway watchman from the 1800s - Thomas Hale - had disappeared one foggy night while signaling trains near the tunnel that once cut beneath the ridge. Locals swore his lantern still glowed through the mist each October, bobbing along the trail before vanishing into thin air.

Ryan wanted proof. Or at least, a good Halloween lecture for his students.

He reached the clearing near the old quarry pit and stopped to steady his breath. The smell of wet earth and leaf mold hung thick in the air. A faint metallic scent - like rust or blood - threaded through it. His boots scuffed a half-buried rail spike, blackened with age. He crouched and turned it over in his palm. Cold. Heavy. Too clean.

The trees around him hushed.

From somewhere deep in the fog came a single clink - the unmistakable sound of metal striking stone. Ryan straightened, his flashlight beam sweeping across trunks and shadowed rocks. Another clink. Then another. Measured. Rhythmic.

Like footsteps dragging a chain.

His throat tightened. “Probably a deer,” he muttered, though even his own voice sounded wrong; muffled, as if wrapped in wool.

Then he saw it.

A pinprick of yellow light, far off in the mist. Swaying. Approaching.

Ryan raised his camera, zoomed in. The lens caught a shape; a tall figure in a long coat, the outline of a cap, a lantern swinging from a gloved hand. The flame inside burned steady, but the light…it didn’t quite touch the ground.

His heart stuttered.

“Hello?” he called out. “Hey! You-”

The figure froze. Slowly, its head turned toward him.

No face, just the faint shimmer of wet air and the hollow suggestion of eyes that saw too much. The lantern rose higher.

And then, the sound - a low, guttural moan, like wind forced through an iron pipe.

Ryan stumbled backward. His flashlight flickered once, twice, and died. The night swallowed him whole.

He tried to run, but the trail twisted on itself, trees crowding closer as though the mountain didn't want him leaving. The sound of metal boots scraping stone followed, nearer, closer-until something brushed his shoulder. Cold. Damp. Human.

Ryan spun, snapping a blind photo, the flash erupting white against the fog.

When his eyes cleared, the clearing was empty.

Only the lantern remained, hanging in midair, swaying gently though there was no wind.

By morning, hikers found his camera bag near the quarry. The camera still worked. There was one photograph saved.

It showed a fog-smeared lantern burning bright in the dark, and beside it, faint but clear, the outline of a man's face staring straight at the lens.

Behind the face, half-hidden by the mist, was another, pale, wide-eyed, and unmistakably Ryan's.

They say on misty October nights, two lanterns now bob through the fog at Bradley Mountain. One old. One new.

And both are still searching for the way home.

Mud Puddle in the Woods
Steve Paschall
Killingworth Library

In my early 20s, I worked at a smallish, old fashioned institutional mental hospital as an orderly, and eventually, as a "case manager". The job involved encouraging patients to think productively and make workable post-discharge plans. It involved trying to introduce rationality into the wildly interesting stories the patients told me. I mustered as much rationality as I could but conversations would evolve strangely. The drama of it all was very affecting. I lived in a room on the grounds in an adjacent staff residence building that had 20 apartments. There were only two residents: myself and another person who lived in an apartment on the other side of the building. Otherwise, the building was all empty. Strangely, I lived there for a year but never met that other person.

The institution sat under a cliff in a forested area on the outskirts of town. It was a very emotionally charged place to work but I was young and eager for some exciting experiences. The forest surrounding the staff residence had one path but it didn't really seem to go anywhere in particular. It seemed to just go further and further into a never-ending forest. I often wandered on that path and into those woods deeper and deeper when I wasn't on the job.

I walked in the woods often after work and on days off. This may have been the first time I realized I had a significant feeling of "being at home" in the woods. This was in the days of the Viet Nam war and the military draft. There was a widespread feeling of being lost and alien in one's own culture. I considered living in the woods, but I was not going to go to Canada or to jail or shoot anyone so I was searching for a plausible third option. The woods were a consideration, but I had images of being tracked by hounds like in the movies. I found that while in the woods the chatter in my brain would seem to evaporate as though blown away in the forest breeze and the swaying trees.

Little by little I wandered deeper into the woods. One evening in particular, I walked deeper into the forest. I left the path to crash through foliage and branches. I imagined I was a wild, furry inhabitant of the forest. I reclined on a cushion of pine needles in a grove and gazed at the branches swaying with the dark clouds drifting above. I fantasized about living here in the woods and considered what I would eat. I searched for nature's bounty. I nibbled an acorn hoping acorns would be a source of my forest nutrition, but I spat it out; it was as inedible as a twig and there were tiny worms in it. In this nearly silent mystical forest, I heard a trickling sound and followed it through the brush, discovering a smallish stream flowing through the thick deeper woods. Squatting by the streamlet, I bent down to put my ear closer to listen better. It was enchanting to be an inhabitant in an ancient untouched forest on an undiscovered continent.

The evening stroll turned into a night walk, deeper and deeper into the woods. It was scary, but in a magnetic way. I wanted to see what my woods were like in the darkness of the

night during an electrifying rainstorm with its strobe-like lightning flashes and crashing booms. The woods became a wild jungle at night with strange noises. The storm had strobe-like lightning flashes. The branches were slapping at each and wailing screeches. The sky itself wailed from above and roared at everything below. Forces of nature seemed to be torturing and slashing at each other like enemies slashing with bayonets in a trench.

For some quirky impulsive irrational reason (what was I thinking?), I felt the call of the wild prehistoric jungle. The pre-neanderthal section in the back of my brain lit up like a pinball machine. I became a pre-biped and pre-civilized animal-like creature; I was only dimly aware of any concerns from the civilized part of my mind and its tedious social rules. Now it's tooth and claw time. This was great, my heart started to beat wildly with excitement. In the rain I crawled through the mud and dark brush feeling my way over to the stream. I screamed along with the thunder and flashes of lightning. I felt reborn and new while smearing mud and splashing the stream water. I was at home with my fellow forces of nature.

Crawling naked through the forest at night is to be recommended as a guaranteed mind-expanding experience. Why should it be considered unusual? Who cares? I am free in the forest. I am one with the forest. Boy howdy, it was great. I felt so fortunate to have this opportunity to crawl and run around naked in the woods in the rain and lie down in a mud puddle and smear mud all over me. I rinsed off in the streamlet.

It’s not often that people get an exciting opportunity like this and not get arrested. Luckily, I didn’t encounter “authorities” who would have tried to have me put in the hospital (not as a staff person). I might have had a hard time convincing them that I worked there.

The next day, I strolled through the woods during a lunch break and came upon an older couple with a blanket and a picnic basket having a peaceful lunch in the spot where I had been with raging nature the night before.

The Ghost of the Lighthouse

Pat Procko
East Lyme Public Library

"Baby, remember that strange man you were talking to in the Morton House parking lot, last Thursday night?"

I was reading the paper, half paying attention to LeeAnn, half wondering if Eisenhower would run for a second term in 1956. Well, Ike had two more years to decide. I said, "Yeah, I remember him."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"I think so. Yeah, it was Erick. He even spelled it. But that was as far as he'd go. Couldn't get a last name out of him."

I glanced up at her. When I saw the look on her face, she had my full attention.

She seemed to be deciding whether or not to tell me something. "Oh, why not," she said. "He talks to everybody. He's pretty well known. In certain circles." She giggled. She's cute when she does that, but she isn't the type to do it on purpose. To set the stage, you might say, for something difficult to tell someone like me.

"You had a conversation with a ghost, Tony."

When I said "someone like me", I meant I don't believe in ghosts. That's the party line. I'm a private detective. The name's Tony. Tony Maloney. In my business, if you start saying you believe in the supernatural, business starts going elsewhere. But in fact? When you hear about unsolved mysteries in places like the Bermuda Triangle? Some of the weird stories people tell at the Morton House bar when they've had one too many? Sometimes, I wonder.

"Okay, Lee," I said. "I'll bite. Tell me the rest."

And when she did, what she said made a bizarre kind of sense.

"Where'd you hear about Erick?" I asked.

"At work."

Most guys I know wouldn't want their wives working. Unless the wives wanted jobs as secretaries, teachers, or nurses. That's women's work, am I right? I got one more to add to the list - telephone operators.

The Phone Company has a telephone switchboard here in Niantic, on Main Street in a two-story frame building, upstairs from a five-and-dime. They've got a staff of local women working shifts of five or six hours, so the married ones can be home when the kids get out of school. The older ones and spinsters take the other shifts.

Niantic is the little Connecticut beach town where LeeAnn and I just bought a house. Lee already had a house, the one she shared with her late husband Jim before he went off to fight in World War II. She sold it so we could get our own place. No disrespect intended toward Jim. We just wanted a place where the memories would be all ours.

Anyway, there was (according to Lee) an open position at the Phone Company, after one of the girls decided to retire from switchboard operating and move to Florida. "I can't pass up the opportunity, Tony," Lee said. "It's got good benefits, and" (here's where she took the opportunity to bring it up gently) "it'll bring in some extra cash if your cases aren't going as well as you'd like."

But I'm getting off course here.

I asked her, "Who at work told you about Erick?"

"Eliza. You know, the tall brunette? Just got her hair cut short like that actress..." She said a name. I pretended to know who she was talking about. "She lives in Pine Grove. She's a Spiritualist."

Pine Grove is like a village within the village of Niantic. It started out in the early 1900s as a summer community. Families motored down from inland cities. They came back every year to their beach cottages, built shoulder-to-shoulder in between tall pine trees. During those days, Spiritualists came to the Grove and bought a group of cottages over by the salt pond. They kept to themselves, mostly. No one minded them.

No one does now either. They're friendly, and if someone not within their group has questions or wants to attend their meetings, most are welcomed.

This coworker of Lee's, Eliza, had been to a meeting the first time out of curiosity, and when signing the guest book, saw this, repeatedly:

"Who's Ernie?" she'd asked.

"Oh, that's not Ernie," answered her hostess. His name's Erick."

"Not the best penmanship I ever saw."

"That's because Erick is a spirit."

"Erick?" I said.

"Yeah, Tony. Erick. Like your mystery guy."

"Does - whatsername - Eliza. Does Eliza know what he looks like?"

"She not only knows, she's seen him. He looked to be in his thirties or forties. He was dressed in what looked like an old-fashioned navy uniform."

I remembered that he was wearing a navy pea coat at the Morton House.

"Eliza said he shows up for some of their meetings. He calls himself a Master Poltergeist; apparently that means he can not only be heard, but seen as well. And he can manipulate objects, like the pen he uses to sign the guest book. And," Lee said, "this is the strangest thing."

"Stranger than a dead guy writing in a guest book?"

"Guess what he says at the end of the meetings. When he leaves."

"Bye-bye?"

"No. 'Beware. Carol is coming."

***

The Spiritualists' temple in Pine Grove wasn't what I expected. It was long, high ceilinged and rustic, like the inside of an old, but well-preserved hunting lodge. Shaker-esque in its decoration - that is to say - if it had no function, it wasn't there.

The atmosphere was serious, but friendly and open. Lee's coworker Eliza came over to welcome us. There was nothing strange about the brown-eyed brunette who was shaking my hand. No reason you'd look twice at her, except she was pretty. She was wearing a simple blue dress with tiny white flowers all over it. No makeup at all, at least none that I could notice.

"We're very excited," she started off. "We've got a guest medium tonight who's very gifted. Her name's Muriel. Let me introduce you."

Muriel was chatting with a small group over to one side of the room. No one in the group looked the least bit out of the ordinary, until you got talking to them and picked up on an attitude of comfortable serenity and awareness. They all projected it. If the absence of the anxiety and stress that's universal in the middle of the twentieth century is weird, then they were weird. Otherwise, just a bunch of women in a club.

Muriel excused herself from the group, took Lee and me each by an arm and strolled us over to a table set with refreshments. She was about fifty, had salt-and-pepper hair in some sort of upsweep, and the bluest eyes I ever saw.

"Pleasure to meet you, LeeAnn, Mr. Maloney."

"Call me Tony." I smiled at her, couldn't help it. "Everyone does."

"Okay, Tony." She smiled back. "I'm really intrigued by your wife's request, but I can't promise anything. Erick's often here for our meetings but I haven't seen his signature in the guest book yet. I understand you've met him?"

"I think so. Once," I admitted.

"Well, we've got time before the meeting starts, so I can tell you a little bit about him, if you like."

The guy had an ordinary enough life, was in the Navy, then went into the Lighthouse Service, died around 1903. It was then that Erick discovered he was more talented dead than alive. "He's becoming a bit of a local legend," she said. "Mainly because of his efforts to communicate with the Coast Guard crews who man New London Ledge Lighthouse." She reached for a cookie and nibbled it absently. "The Coast Guardsmen call him 'Ernie' because that's what his signature - he likes to write on the lighthouse walls, you know - looks like to them. 'Ernie,' not 'Erick.' Erick finds that awfully frustrating." She looked up. Someone was waving at her, pointing at a wristwatch. "Time to start. Please sit anywhere you wish. We're going to run the meeting as usual. If Erick shows up, I'll ask him if he'd stay afterwards for a... private consultation. With you. I assume your case is confidential?"

I nodded and pretended I actually had a case.

"Don't worry. I'll be needed as a go-between; even Erick's incredible energy is limited in direct communication with the living. But I'll be in a trancelike state and won't remember much, if anything. Will that work?" I nodded again. She hurried off to join the others.

It was interesting, I guess, if you're not spooked by a bunch of ladies having a happy chat with dead people no one else can see or hear. There were seven or eight ladies. Lee and I sat in the back, away from the action. It wasn't that we were afraid, we just didn't want to lead anyone to believe we might be interested in becoming Spiritualists. Felt that would be disrespectful.

But absolutely nothing happened that had any connection to what Lee and I came for.

The meeting ended and everyone began cleaning up. Some of the ladies left. Lee and I stood up to go.

Then I felt a pressure on my shoulder, as if a hand was resting there. A voice, familiar from the Morton House parking lot, said, "Starlighter. Outside. Tomorrow night. Misty will dance."

***

My usual hangout is the bar at the Morton House in Niantic. I know everyone there, and like everyone else, have a soft spot for Tina, the bar's owner. But Erick said the Starlighter, so I couldn't exactly argue. The Starlighter is a bar on Bank Street in New London, the street that goes through the motions during the daylight hours and comes to life when the streetlights come on. The Starlighter, like all the joints on Bank Street, is no place for a lady. Most of the ladies around here know that, and stay away. I guess nobody told this one.

The place was crowded. The usual crowd - local guys I knew, some guys I didn't (there were a lotta sailors from the base across the Thames River), and a bunch of women who weren't ladies.

Anyway, that night I sat at the bar with some guys I know. They were having some beers, trying to stay out of fights, waiting for Misty May's act, when I heard this voice from behind me, low, throaty, sorta sounded like Lauren Bacall. "Pardon me, Mister. I need a favor."

I turned around. A knockout redhead in a cocktail dress. She added, "Just a small one."

The state of Connecticut has funny laws when it comes to bars. Blue laws, we call them. Like this one - a woman can come into a bar, by herself, and sit at a table if the joint serves food - even if she just wants to drink. But, by law, no unescorted females are allowed to sit at the bar itself.

Looking back, I'm sure she was going to ask if I'd volunteer to be her "escort" at the bar. And see where things went.

But she started out subtle, just asking me if I'd order her a cocktail. She wanted a Starlighter, a specialty of the house - actually a sloe gin fizz in a pink glass. I said, "Yeah, okay." She handed me money. I got her drink from Miles the bartender and handed it to her. She hesitated a moment, studied me one more time, eyes narrowed. She sipped. "Thanks."

She turned to go toward where the tables were set up, and the detective part of me kicked in all of a sudden and I said, "Wait." She turned and waited. "What's your name? It wouldn't be Carol, would it?"

"It can be any name you want, sugar."

It was then that I felt a swift kick in the shins, courtesy of the right brogan worn by the man I hadn't seen come in, being too intent on someone I thought might be Carol. My best friend, Lenny. He signaled with his head at two empty barstools, each place graced with a fresh, foamy Black Label. "She ain't Carol, Tony," Lenny murmured. He grabbed my arm, said "Goodnight, Irene" to the redhead, and steered me to one of the barstools. He took a long swig of his beer. I did the same. "Who's Carol, anyway? You're on a case, I hope."

Before I could answer, a bright spotlight lit up a small stage at the far end of the room. The house band - complete with a drummer more accustomed to a polka beat - put together something approximating a blues number, and the eyes of everyone were on Misty May Dawn, New London's own version of Gypsy Rose Lee.

Lenny and I, beers in hand, swiveled around on our stools for a good view of the stage. Misty had divested her hat and opera gloves, and was having an embarrassing moment with a stuck zipper when Miles the bartender passed me a note.

The penmanship was very shaky, almost unreadable. Familiar. "Back parking lot. Now. Erick."

I got up from the barstool and slipped out a side door, pretty much unnoticed, since Misty had solved the stuck zipper problem.

I walked through the parked Buicks, DeSotos, Plymouths, and Oldsmobiles. "Erick?" I said in a low voice.

"Don't turn around."

Ordinarily, I would've turned around pretty quickly, but for some reason I was sure I wasn't in any danger of being mugged, or worse.

"Carol is coming."

"I know," I said. "Is she here tonight?"

"No. She will be here in six days. She will leave destruction in her path. Your home will be safe, as will you, if you do not venture near the shoreline."

"Erick, I have no idea what you're talking about. Can you give me a clue?"

"Nineteen. Thirty. Eight."

"What is that? A safe combination?"

I sensed Erick was still nearby, but he said nothing.

Then it hit me. "Wait a minute. I get it."

The numbers weren't a safe combination. Or a telephone number for, like, Tahiti.

It was a date. A year. Nineteen thirty-eight. The year of the great New England hurricane. Carol wasn't a dame. Carol would be a hurricane.

***

I'll tell you what. Carol wasn't as bad as '38, but I don't ever want to go through another storm like Carol ever again. According to the New London newspaper, which somehow managed to get the papers out relatively soon afterwards, the storm hit the area with winds sustained at

100 mph. Power and telephones were out for days. If you had a boat moored or docked in the area - even those who managed to get their craft hauled onto dry land - well, you probably didn't have a boat anymore.

I'll never forget the morning Lee and I went outside and took a walk around Pine Grove to see how everyone made out. As you might expect, we have fewer pines in the grove than we once did, but damage was confined to things that can be rebuilt or replanted. No one we know was seriously injured. Most of the houses were okay. Not perfect by any means, but livable.

The Starlighter Bar was destroyed and the cars left in the parking lot got relocated by the storm surge. Even so, there were no injuries. None. Why?

I somehow talked the owner of the Starlighter (who happens to be my friend Lenny, but don't tell anyone, it's a secret) into closing the place up for a few days. Don't worry, even though the insurance won't cover it totally, Lenny had thousands stashed away in a safe place. In cash. He remembered the Great Depression and didn't trust banks. Thanks to Erick's warning, Lenny got the cash - and himself (both stayed with LeeAnn and me) - to high ground.

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Lee and I attended a few meetings at the Spiritualists' building after they got the place patched up (a broken window and a leaky roof), hoping to thank Erick in person, but he never showed. I guess the real heroes don't stick around afterwards, but are on to their next mission without fanfare. You know? Like Superman or Captain Midnight.

But Lee and I decided that one of these days, after the damage at the waterfront is repaired and boats are back in the water, we plan to hire one of the Niantic fishermen to take us into the Thames River. We're going to bring some flowers and scatter them on the tide heading past Ledge Lighthouse, yell out a "thank you" and blow Erick a kiss (LeeAnn, not me). Will Erick still be hanging around there? We don't know, but we intend to give it a try. You gotta make the effort to show appreciation, no matter what.

In my opinion.

That's all for now. Tony Maloney, here, signing off. Here's hoping for better weather from now on!

Skin Care
Anthony Sanches
Ferguson Library

The Investigation

Very little crime occurs in the affluent town of Greenwich, Connecticut. At least that's what is officially reported. The residents pay high property taxes to receive a certain level of service, including a very discreet police force. Cases involving domestic violence and teenage vandalism are handled as private matters and never reported in the press. Nevertheless, the police are very much attuned to anything from outside the community that impacts Greenwich citizens. So, it wasn't a surprise that Officer Murphy and Officer Jones arrived at the home of Marilyn Smyth to investigate an elderly fraud case.

As they drove into the 10-acre estate, Officer Murphy wondered how much money you had to make to live in this beautiful 7-bedroom, 8-bathroom tutor-style home with well-manicured lawns and amazing views of Long Island Sound. But he knew of course that's the wrong question to ask, as rich folks don't rely on a paycheck but rather their accumulated wealth.

The officers approached the front door and rang the bell. No answer. They rang a few more times and were about to leave when Marilyn answered the door herself.

"Hello officers, can I help you?"

Both officers showed their badges and introduced themselves.

Officer Murphy stated, "Ms. Smyth we are trying to track down a suspect in an elderly fraud case and we hoped you could help us."

Officer Jones pulled out a picture of a middle-aged woman with dark hair and glasses. "Do you know, or have you ever met this person? She is a suspect we are trying to locate. Her name is Miranda Clark."

Marilyn audibly gasped at the picture and replied. "Oh, my goodness, that's Donna! She worked as my aide for several months, but she left a few weeks ago."

Officer Jones continued. "May we come in and get a full account of your relationship with Ms. Clark to help in our investigation?"

Marilyn agreed and guided them through the beautifully decorated house to the informal dining room off the kitchen. She motioned for the officers to take a seat and asked if they wanted anything to drink. Both men declined.

Marilyn's voice quivered as she stated: "I can't tell you how upsetting it is to think I let a known criminal into my home. How did you know she was here?"

Officer Jones said, “Well Ms. Clark is accused of elderly abuse and financial fraud in a case in Darien. When she left the victim’s home, we found she had shipped a few boxes via UPS. We followed up with them and discovered that items were shipped to your address.”

Officer Murphy added “The Darien police asked us to follow up with you.”

Marilyn went on to explain that she had hired Donna, Ms. Clark, a few months ago as a live-in aide to assist with her health care needs and household chores. She explained that after a little while, she discovered some money missing from her bank account and charges she didn’t make on her credit cards. When she confronted Donna, she denied the accusations and quit. Officer Murphy inquired,“Ms. Smyth, why didn’t you report this to us? We could have helped.” Marilyn sheepishly said, “Well honestly, I was very embarrassed to admit that someone had taken advantage of me. I wanted to keep things private. ”

Officer Jones asked, “Do you have any idea where Ms. Clark went?”

Marilyn responded, “Once I confronted Donna, she packed up her belongings and left that same day. That was about four weeks ago.”

The officers followed up with a few more questions and then let Marilyn know that they would update her with any progress on the case. They gave her their business cards and told her she should call if she remembered any other details that could help in their investigation.

As the officers walked back to their car, Officer Murphy remarked that it was odd that Ms. Smyth would need a health care aide because she seemed fit and didn’t look much older than her early fifties. Officer Jones grunted. “Rich people don’t age like you and me.”

<u>The Interview</u>

It was hard for Marilyn to manage her home, well really an estate, by herself. She had a housekeeping service come once a week to clean the 7,000 square foot house, an army of landscapers to manage the property and a pool service to keep the water swim-ready—although she rarely enjoyed the pool. She needed an assistant to take her to doctor’s appointments, do the grocery shopping, cook meals and handle her laundry—perhaps the individual could also participate in some of Marilyn’s beauty care experiments, but that wasn’t a requirement.

Marilyn was a very successful scientist. She was a chemist by training and had revolutionized the beauty care industry by perfecting Rexcon, the active ingredients used in anti-aging beauty products. She worked for a small pharmaceutical company and had risen to become a successful senior executive, garnering the financial compensation and accolades commensurate with her position. Toward the end of her corporate career, she had a major clash with other executives on her next stage research and was pushed out of the company with her golden parachute fully inflated. Even now at age 75, her true love was experimenting with

chemicals and developing products —she converted her guest house on the estate into her private lab.

Having an assistant to manage the household would allow Marilyn to spend more time on experiments in her lab. Marilyn searched for a live-in aide using an employment service company to conduct the initial screening and provide a list of qualified candidates. It was entirely up to Marilyn to select the best person. Based upon her experience, candidates that had little to no family obligations and were not in a romantic relationship seemed to work out best. After a few initial phone interviews, Marilyn narrowed her choice down to three candidates. When Donna arrived for her in-person interview, the two women hit it off right away. Donna shared the same interests in ethnic cooking and had previous experience in handling client's medical needs. Since she said she had just arrived from the West Coast, she had no family obligation in the Connecticut area. After checking with some of Donna's references—really her friends back in California—Marilyn decided Donna was the perfect person for the position.

An interview is really a two-way process, allowing both the employer and the potential employee to find out more about each other and assess if there is a good fit. Donna discovered that Marilyn lived in the estate by herself, was never married, had no children, and that she had amassed an incredible amount of wealth due to her successful career. Donna assessed that Marilyn was the perfect mark.

Skin Treatment - Part 1

After a few weeks, Marilyn and Donna had settled into a comfortable routine. Donna identified Marilyn's favorite foods and established a repertoire of meals that delighted her. She shopped daily at local Greenwich stores to procure the freshest produce and meats. She kept track of Marilyn's medical schedule and medicines, making sure she arrived on time for doctor's appointments and that prescriptions were refilled before they ran out. Marilyn considered the best part of the relationship was that Donna mostly kept to herself and seemed to only be around when needed. This allowed Marilyn to read quietly in the library and, more importantly, spend uninterrupted hours working in her lab.

Donna settled into one of the bedrooms on the opposite side of the house from Marilyn's to insure her privacy. She enjoyed many of the house's features that Marilyn didn't use—the gym, the pool and the family room with a large screen TV. When required, Donna was intensely focused on meeting Marilyn's needs, but that still left a lot of free time for her to enjoy the house, and to pry into Marilyn's personal and financial affairs.

Having exploited many senior citizens before, Donna had a game plan to perpetrate her fraud. She asked to be paid by check so she could become familiar with Marilyn's signature. At times Marilyn would write checks in Donna's presence to pay for groceries and drug articles, so Donna learned where the checkbook was kept. For on-line purchases, Donna was allowed to use Marilyn's credit card. She hadn't yet found all the passwords for Marilyn's investment accounts, but she was getting close. She knew Marilyn regularly reviewed her bank, credit card and investment statements, but on a lagged basis, so there would be a small window of opportunity for Donna to execute her big grift. By the time Marilyn realized that the fraud had occurred, Donna would be long gone.

One night after enjoying a wonderful Indian meal of chicken tikki masala, jasmine rice, and garlic naan, Marilyn reminisced about her research work and how Rexcon-based products were now ubiquitous in the market. Although expensive, the products worked wonders for millions of women around the world. Then, Marilyn suddenly stood up from the table and came up close to Donna.

"I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I noticed that you have a few wrinkles in your forehead, and crow's feet at the corners of your eyes. If you want, I can provide a free skin treatment that will make you look years younger."

Marilyn explained the process to Donna—the treatments would be administered over a few days and performed in her home lab. Marilyn quietly knew that this would also give her an opportunity to work on some of her latest research.

Donna wasn't one to focus on beauty care—she rarely wore makeup, but assuming the treatments wouldn't cost her any money, she figured, "why not"?

"Sure Marilyn, I would be interested in trying the skin treatments."

The Scam

Recently Marilyn had been spending more time in her lab, which allowed Donna to move freely about the house. Donna decided it was time to execute her plan. While the fraud was being perpetrated, Donna kept everything very normal —being highly attentive to Marilyn's needs and delighting her employer.

The easiest part of the scam was buying things online, using Marilyn's credit card. Donna ordered small, high-value items like jewelry and high-end fashion accessories that she could later easily sell for cash. As soon as the packages arrived at the house, she would put them in the trunk of her car. She knew when the credit card statement came and had timed her purchases to start with the next payment cycle.

After finding Marilyn's password for her investment accounts on a post-it in the desk drawer, Donna started selling off investments and depositing the proceeds into Marilyn's bank account. Nothing suspicious that would alarm the folks at the investment firm or the bank. The investment 6 firm would send letters to confirm the trades but since Donna collected the mail, she made sure those letters never made it to Marilyn's desk. Then to access the money in the bank account, Donna started writing checks to herself. By this time, Donna had perfected Marilyn's signature. She took an unused check book from Marilyn's desk, starting with check #500. Donna knew from the recent checks Marilyn wrote that she was currently only using checks numbered in the 200's, so Marilyn wouldn't notice the missing checks for a while. Donna set up a small business account for herself called "Heritage Decorating and Design" and started to write checks to her business from Marilyn's account—large checks for interior decorating and design expenses that wouldn't raise eyebrows at the bank.

Finally, there were physical assets to steal as well. When Donna put away the laundry, she surveyed the jewelry in the bedroom. Marilyn had an extensive collection of necklaces, earnings, and rings containing diamonds and precious stones. All the pieces were high quality and from some of the world's most exclusive retailers. Since Marilyn now rarely wore jewelry, it might be some time before she noticed anything was missing. Donna wouldn't take anything until the final days of her scam, but for now she knew what was there for the taking.

All in all, Donna figured she could walk away with about $500,000 in cash, jewelry and goods. Not bad for a few months of paid service.

The Skin Treatment - Part 2

A few days after Marilyn initially offered Donna a free skin care treatment, she announced that she was finally ready to start. They would begin on Monday with a full facial treatment— cleaning and exfoliating the dead skin to provide a fresh base. On Tuesday, Marilyn would apply a special cream to address the crow's feet, and then on Wednesday, Donna would get injections for her forehead wrinkles. The beauty regiment schedule was set.

On Monday, when Donna entered Marilyn's lab, she was amazed at the breadth of the facility. In the corner was a desk surrounded by bookcases filled with binders and stacks of papers. There were three large countertops to support a variety of chemistry activities, and a white board with chemical equations that were both extensive and indecipherable to Donna. There was a separate 7 walk-in storage closet containing an extensive inventory of liquids and powders. Marilyn led Donna to a separate room that contained a cushioned reclining chair, like one found in a dentist's office, a large round overhead light, and a stainless-steel table to hold materials.

After the initial facial treatment, which lasted about two hours, Donna saw how much her skin had already improved with just intense cleansing. Her skin felt much fresher—she wondered why she had never done this before. She eagerly awaited the next treatment session. On Tuesday, Marlyn applied a partial face mask with a special cream to treat the area around the eyes. The process required Donna to remain still for about an hour with the mask on. The results were remarkable. When the mask was removed, the crow's feet were gone and replaced with smooth, healthy, and younger-looking skin.

The injection treatment on Wednesday was a bit more complicated and invasive. Marilyn gave Donna a mild sedative so that she wouldn't feel the needle injections to her forehead. Donna was excited to see the results. Marilyn administered a needle to Donna's arm, and she fell asleep quickly. Donna woke up in what seemed to only be a few seconds later, but right away, she realized that things were not normal. She couldn't speak, as there was a gag preventing her from talking. Then she realized her arms and legs were tied to the chair with a series of leather straps. She noticed an IV line in her arm attached to two hanging bags of fluids.

Marilyn came into the room. "Oh, you're awake, I guess I have some explaining to do." Donna made a sound like "What the hell?" muffled under the gag.

"You see, I have been doing some ground-breaking research into anti-aging treatments. My former colleagues thought my work was unethical, and they refused to support me, so we parted ways."

Donna tried to struggle out of her restraints but to no avail.

"I've developed a product that can make someone's entire body 20 years younger. I was able to successfully test it with lab animals but there was a major glitch when applying it to humans. The chemicals that I need can only be harvested from a living human being and there are well…..some unfortunate impacts to the donor."

Donna looked around the room to size up her situation—it was no use Marilyn was completely in control.

"Of course, I always thought you would be a good candidate for this experiment, and I finalized my decision to use you once I found out you were stealing from me." Marilyn continued. "My banker was kind enough to give me a call when he noticed that checks for large amounts were being written against my account, and the check numbers were out of sequence."

Donna shook her head "No" and tried to shout, "Let me go!"

"I figured no one would worry if a grifter like you went missing. Isn't that what you really want, not to be found?"

"Unfortunately, when we are done with my experiment, you won't be around to see your contributions to science, and I will make sure that no one finds whatever is left of you." Donna started screaming though the gag, but the sound of her muffled cries wouldn't get beyond the confines of the lab.

The Painting

Ellen Saunig
Welles-Turner Memorial Library

Barb was new to town. She lived alone, but she wasn't lonely. Her niece, Shelly, and her three boys lived just down the road. Their father was a deadbeat and Shelly was desperate for help, so Barb, newly-divorced and tired of city life, packed up her apartment, loaded up her pomeranian, Baxter, and moved to Glastonbury to lend a much-needed hand. She purchased an old house on Main Street that was in desperate need of updates, but she couldn't resist the charm of the place, so she spent months renovating and decorating the house to her exact specifications. The change of scenery seemed like a good idea.

One Sunday morning, the kids were off with Grandma and Grandpa and Shelly agreed to accompany Barb to a local estate sale. Shelly found the concept of estate sales depressing, but Aunt Barb never asked for anything, so Shelly figured she could do her this one favor.

The sale was at a house well-known to locals. It was surrounded by rolling hills and apple orchards and backed up to the Connecticut River. It was at once ostentatiously large and miserably kept, as it had withstood a century of neglect. Weeds grew from the gutters. Vines ran up and down the chimneys. The paint may have once been yellow, but it was now a mixture of sickly greens and browns. The numerous windows were cracked in many spots.

"Who lived here?" asked Barb, as they pulled into the circular driveway. Despite the rotting appearance of the home, the sale was packed and parking was scarce.

"No one, for a while. I guess the grandparents died and the kids didn't want the house but never got around to selling it until the town threatened to take legal action. Some neighbors complained. That kind of thing," said Shelly. She paused before adding, "there are a lot of stories about this house."

"That probably means it's full of good stuff," said Barb.

"I guess," said Shelly, studying the house from the car.

Once inside, they were greeted by a lanky, dour man in a suit who handed them a list of items as well as a map of the house. People milled around the first floor, examining lamps and clocks and a table of jewelry that was guarded by another staff member. There was also a wall of old photographs that were evidently for sale. Buying someone's gloomy family pictures seemed bizarre to Barb. She couldn't help but notice, though, that there was one boy in the picture that had striking, unnaturally blue eyes. Something about the photo was unsettling, though Barb couldn't quite figure why. She moved on.

"I'm hoping to find some planters or maybe some art," she said to Shelly, who was nervously examining an old vase. "There's a greenhouse toward the back." There was indeed a greenhouse, and a large one at that. It was humid and smelled of rotting vegetation but packed to the gills with potential. There were dozens of pots, plantstands, and old tools. There were shelves of garden gnomes with toothy grins. And, finally, there was an entire area filled with birdcages. Old, metal birdcages that were decidedly gothic.

"The little boy that lived here loved birds, apparently," said an older woman passing

through the area.

"Huh," said Barb, unsure of how else to respond.

Barb picked up a set of gold plantstands and they were about to leave when a small painting on a shelf caught her eye.

It was a framed picture of a black bird – a crow, maybe, though it was a bit hard to tell. Its beak was wide open as if mid-squawk and its black eyes bulged from its head like something was charging toward it. Barb picked it up.

"You can't be serious," said Shelly. "That's the ugliest painting I've ever seen."

"I don't know. I actually kind of like it. Like, it's so ugly that it's not. Ya know? It's got character. Besides, it's only $20," said Barb, holding the painting up for a better view.

"I can't imagine why," snorted Shelly. "Could we go now, though? This house is creeping me out."

And so, they left. Shelly dropped Barb back at home with her two plantstands and the bird painting and went on her way. Barb put the stands on the front porch and carried the painting under her arm inside the house. She set the painting down on the kitchen table and went to collect Baxter, who was waiting by the back door to go out.

On the way back from their walk, Barb spotted the neighbor, Mrs. Wexley, examining the porch from the street.

"Where did you get those plantstands? They are wonderful!" said Mrs. Wexley. Mrs. Wexley was in her sixties and cheerful, though something of a gossip.

"Oh, thank you! I got them this morning at an estate sale down at that big house on the river. Aren't they great? It felt like robbery taking them," said Barb.

"The old yellow house down in South Glastonbury? Oh boy, you're braver than me. I wouldn't set foot in that place, let alone take anything from there. Not without my priest at the ready!" said Mrs. Wexley.

"What do you mean?" said Barb.

"Well, these are just rumors, obviously, but they had a son, a sickly little boy, that they never let out of the house. They kept him trapped there like a caged animal. Until one day, he'd had enough and bludgeoned his caretaker with a birdcage," she said.

"Oh, my. Well, luckily these are just plantstands," said Barb. She decided not to mention the painting.

"Good thing! Well, enjoy your evening," said Mrs. Wexley.

Barb and Baxter made their way to the front door. Baxter, oddly, refused to step inside the house. He stood still as a statue, his ears straight up and his eyes locked ahead. He let out a low growl before jumping on Barb to be picked up.

"What's your problem, silly Baxty?" Barb said aloud. She scooped him up and carried him inside the house. Baxter immediately ran upstairs.

That evening, Barb pondered where to hang the painting. It looked garish in her cozy family room, scary in the dining room (silently squawking at her imaginary guests), and it was much too dark for the kitchen. So, she settled on a guest bedroom at the top of the stairs on a

large, blank wall above a dresser. The room was painted blue anyway – already dark – so it seemed to fit.

She had dinner, watched some TV and brushed her teeth before settling into bed with a book. After some time, she drifted off to sleep.

She woke in the night to the sound of dripping water. Half-asleep and confused, she figured it was just a leaky faucet and went back to sleep. But she woke again not more than a half-hour later, this time to the unmistakable sound of not just dripping water, but a steady, louder plop, plop, plop.

She threw on her bathrobe and went downstairs to find her kitchen floor covered, not with water, but with a black, viscous substance that was leaking from the ceiling. The smell was unmistakable, but did not make any sense. Baxter stood to the side and barked. He dipped a paw into the muck. He backed up in horror and tried to stamp his now-black paw on the floor. |

"What the hell?" said Barb. "Is this…paint?"

A door slammed in the hallway upstairs. The guest room. The hair on her neck stood up. She made for the staircase, turning on every light she could find in the process. She tiptoed down the hall. It was cold in that part of the house and Barb could feel a chill sinking into her skin. She couldn't get a deep breath. The air felt too thin.

She pushed open the guestroom door. The window was open and rain blew in through the screen. The painting still hung on the wall, in the same spot as before. There was a pool of black paint on the floor, though, strangely, the painting itself appeared untouched. Maybe the rain from the screen got on the paint and caused it to drip? None of it made any sense. Either way, the painting had to move, because she couldn't have black paint dripping into her kitchen.

She grabbed the painting on both sides. But as soon as she attempted to lift it from the wall, something poked out the front and pricked her in the chest. A sharp, pointy object. A beak. Barb startled and fell backwards. She landed on her butt on the wood floor, clutching her chest where the beak had punctured it. The painting fell from the ceiling.

"Help!" she screamed, hoping somebody, maybe Mrs. Wexley, would hear her. The noise seemed to startle the bird, for it withdrew its beak back into the painting like a tentacle.

Barb took a powerful leap toward the painting and put her foot through the middle of it, splitting the bird in two. She ran it downstairs, stuffed it in a garbage bag, knotted it twice, and jammed it into her trash barrel on the street. Then, she waited two hours by her front window for the garbage truck to come. She watched the painting get poured into the truck and watched the truck drive away. Satisfied, she went back to the kitchen for a pot of coffee and to clean up the mess.

When she returned to the kitchen though, she found that there was no mess to be cleaned at all. Rather, it seemed the paint had disappeared with the painting.

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The next afternoon, Shelly stopped by with two of the boys, who were home for the summer, and a spread of sandwiches for lunch. Barb was still feeling wary from events of the night before, but the coffee and food helped. She'd spent the early morning hours studying the kitchen floor for any signs of paint (there were none) and smoking cigarettes on her back deck (something she hadn't done for years). She also considered whether the paint incident even happened at all or if it was just some sort of bad dream. She further considered whether she was having a complete psychotic break and if she'd even know if she was having one in the first place. Either way, it was good to have some distraction, and rambunctious five and eight-year old boys were perfect for that.

At some point, the boys must have ventured upstairs because Barb and Shelly could hear them throwing a ball down the hallway. Shelly summoned the boys downstairs, afraid they would smash something valuable. A few minutes later, they returned with their ball.

"Auntie Barbara," said the elder of the two boys, Jacob. "Why do you have a scary bird painting in your bedroom?"

Barb's stomach dropped out of her body.

"You put that stupid thing from the estate sale in your bedroom?" asked Shelly, with an incredulous smirk.

"I, um, I wasn't sure where to hang it, so it's just a temporary solution. I may have to get rid of it after all," she said. She steadied herself on the kitchen counter.

"Are you okay? You look kinda pale all of a sudden?" asked Shelly.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I couldn't sleep last night and I totally just hit a wall."

"Okay, well, text me later, okay? Thanks for having us over," said Shelly. Barb figured she must have looked terrible, because Shelly rounded up the boys and got them out of the house. Barb locked the door behind them, grabbed a knife from the butcher block in the kitchen, and made for the bedroom.

The painting was back all right, this time hanging neatly above her bed. Barb could see the lines from where it seemingly repaired itself, like a torn book that had been reassembled with Scotch tape. She could have sworn that the bird was facing a different direction than yesterday, but she tried not to think about that and focused on the task at hand.

She climbed up on her bed and removed the painting from the wall, the bird's black eyes boring into her like needles. She tucked it under her arm, returned downstairs, and grabbed a pack of matches from her kitchen drawer.

Once in the backyard, she set the painting down on a lawn chair and threw some fresh logs into her firepit. She doused the logs in lighter fluid and tossed in a match. The logs instantly caught fire and soon quickly grew to a decent-sized blaze. She hoped none of her neighbors were wondering why she was starting a fire in the middle of the afternoon, but she didn't have time to hesitate. She dropped the painting into the flames.

The paint began to crackle and blister, a hideous picture made even uglier by the brown bubbles forming on its surface. Barb watched intently as the black bird peeled away from the paper and slowly burned to ash. Soon, there was nothing left but the frame, which had twisted

and contorted itself into an unsightly piece of scrap of metal. She hosed down the smoldering pile, locked the remains of the frame in the trunk of her car, and threw the soot into the forest behind her house.

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Barb felt much better by the evening and settled on the couch with a large glass of wine, Netflix, and a stack of magazines. She laughed thinking about the image of herself burning a painting of a bird in her backyard, one that she got at an estate sale no less. Lesson learned. She texted with her friends from the city and begged them to come visit her – a country getaway! She briefly searched for jobs on one of her many job apps. She leafed through a few magazines and became drowsy. She had fully intended to go back to her bedroom but was simply too tired, so she shut off the lights, pulled on a blanket, and lapsed into a deep sleep on the couch.

She woke up again in the middle of the night. She momentarily panicked, thinking she heard the dripping noise again, but it was only the sound of rain pattering on the roof. Good, she thought, more water to drown the ashes. She rolled onto her side and settled back down.

But then, she felt something tug at her blanket. It was ever so slight, such that if she had been fully asleep she likely would not have noticed.

The blanket tugged a little bit more and pulled from her neck to her shoulders, like it had snagged on something on the floor, or something was stepping on it. What if there was a mouse skittering on her blanket? A horrific thought.

A few moments later, Barb stared at her feet, still tucked cozily under the blanket, when the black beak and black eyes poked above the end of the couch.

She lurched backward, grabbing her knees to her chest, but the bird was faster than her, and before she could move any further, the thing was in her face, one of its sharp talons digging right into the side of her neck like little knives. The bird smelled like smoke and mud and it was dripping sludge onto the blanket. Its eyes – now glowing royal blue – were square with hers.

She tried to swat it away but it was strong – so strong – like a grown man. How could a bird be this strong? It pressed its talon harder into her neck and a droplet of blood dribbled down onto her t-shirt.

“What do you want?” she croaked.

“Drrriveeeee,” spoke the bird, in a low, raspy voice that was not quite human but close enough that Barb could understand.

“D..dd..dd…drive where?” asked Barb. Her entire body trembled.

“Driiiveeeee,” said the bird again.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll drive. But, bu, bu, but, you have to let me up,” she said. The bird withdrew from her neck, but hooked onto Barb’s shoulder, keeping one talon firmly on her neck and another on her arm. She could barely breath under its weight. Barb grabbed her keys from a cup by the front door and hesitated when she heard the sound of Baxter’s paws padding to the top of the stairs. She thought that maybe she could call to him…

“Drivveeee!!!” shrieked the bird.

She got in her car – bird on shoulder – and put the keys in the ignition. Her hands shook so badly that she could barely grip the steering wheel. She backed out of the driveway. It was pouring rain and so dark. Glastonbury, apparently, was not big on street lights.

She started driving down Main Street, heading south. She drove for about a mile in the rain until she came to a stoplight where another car was stopped just across the way. She waited for further instructions from the bird, but none came. She briefly considered flagging down the other driver, but wondered how she could possibly explain that she was being forced by a bird against her will to drive to some unknown location.

The light turned green and she didn’t move at first.

“Driveeee!!” said the bird.

“I don’t know where I’m going! You have to tell me where to go! I don’t know what I’m supposed to do!” said Barb. It was not lost on her that she was yelling at a (likely) possessed bird, but she was beyond caring.

“Home. Home home home home home,” said the bird.

“Home? What home? Like the forest?” said Barb. She looked for a car in her rearview mirror – anyone that could help her – but the streets were empty and dark.

“Home home home home, hoommeeee,” it screeched, its beak opened wide. Then the bird shifted, and this time put itself on Barb’s head, its talons now dangerously close to her eyes.

“Please. I don’t know what that means. Just tell me and I’ll take you wherever you want to go,” she pleaded.

Barb caught a glimpse of its blue eyes in the rearview mirror and she could swear, just for a moment, that the eyes she saw were human.

“Housseee,” it said.

And then Barb knew. The house. From the estate sale. That's where the bird wanted to go. Back to its home. Fine with her.

Barb hit the gas and sped the rest of the way down Main Street to the beautiful house on the river with the circular driveway. There were no lights on in the house save for a single lamp in an upstairs window – most likely a timer light – and the garage and driveway were empty. She got out of the car and, with the bird still attached to her head, ran to the front door, nearly slipping in the mud in the process. She knocked on the door, but as she suspected, no one answered. She took a step back, unsure of what to do. The bird flapped its wings in her hair in a gross display.

Then, it flew away. Up into the rainy sky, until it reached the highest point of the house. It perched momentarily and looked Barb in the eye. Then, it dove head first into a chimney. Barb ran back to her car. She sped all the way home in the downpour.

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The storm had passed by the next morning. The sky was sunny and bright and her hydrangeas were in full bloom. It was a beautiful morning in her little town. Barb sat on the front porch in a rocking chair with a mug of coffee and Baxter at her feet and watched the passersbys on Main Street.

Some time passed and Barb was about to go back inside when Mrs. Wexley approached her on the porch.

"Did you hear all the sirens last night?" said Mrs. Wexley.

"No, I didn't, actually! I was so tired I must have slept right through it. I hope everything is okay," said Barb, genuinely concerned.

"Well, you know that huge house that just had the estate sale? Down on the river? The thing burned to the ground last night. A huge, massive fire. Luckily, no one was in the house. But still, there's nothing left."

Barb choked on her coffee. "Nothing left?"

"Nothing except a bunch of old, metal birdcages."

"Wow. That's too bad. But glad no one was hurt," said Barb.

"Yeah, good thing. Anyway, enjoy your morning," said Mrs. Wexley.

"Thanks, you too," said Barb.

Barb went inside, feeling sick to her stomach. Her mouth was dry and her vision was blurry. She went out back for some air and privacy and a cigarette.

Up in a pine tree, high above her house, the bird waited.