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A Quick Note from Your Editor

Let me start by saying that it was my absolute honor to edit the third edition of Spooky Southington. The fear of running a writing contest restricted to one genre year after year, is that eventually, people will run out of ideas for spooky stories. This, however, is far from the case. Each year Southington residents come up with spectacular horror stories and each year I am blown away by the number and quality of the stories that we receive. Some feature ghosts and monsters, some highlight the complex lives of witches and some even question what we call reality! But above all, these stories show what a wonderful sense of community Southington has and what a varied and extraordinary bunch they are.

A note about the organization of the book. First, the anthology begins with the child entries, followed by the teen and adult entries respectively. Second, rather than put the stories in alphabetical order by title, I decided to do it by the author's last name. Lastly, I did not put our winners in any obvious place in the anthology. The winners in each category have their titles in red font versus black font. There were so many amazing entries that I want the anthology to be appreciated as a whole product.

I hope that everyone who submitted and consequently reads this anthology enjoyed this journey as much as I did. I can't wait to see what next year brings.

Without further ado, please enjoy Spooky Southington Vol. 3.

Jasmine Cedeno/ Teen Librarian
Southington Public Library, October 2025

A Happy Nightmare by Gianna Carusone

It's been a couple days since the incident happened. A couple days since we were sitting in math class, bored, until we realized no one was moving or raising their hand. It made it super awkward for both us and the teacher.

My name is Cameron, and this is the story of how Halloween became my least favorite holiday.

Chapter 1: Off.

It was a nice, sunny day—until we realized it was MONDAY. The day all of our homework was due. The day our five days of suffering started. It felt as if it was a prison. Each day, I walk my younger brother, Charlie, to his school, and then walk myself to my school.

"Today seems a little off..." Charlie pointed out.

He was right. Everything seemed so…still. People stood up straight and didn't speak to each other—even best friends.

"You're right..." I said, "Even the Varley twins are silent."

Donald and Darwin Varley. The MOST ANNOYING kids ever. More annoying than Spongebob's disturbing, loud laugh. These kids would make anything into a meme.

We ignored it and went to our schools. I have math class as my second period. That was when everything started.

The teacher was silent and so were the kids. The only sound was the creaking from the closet. No one dared to look at it. But the creepiest thing...were the blank faces.

My bestie, Marie, sat there with her hand raised and her eyes narrowed. But the teacher only called on me. Just me. It was as if no one else existed. I guess I was right. The bell rang and we went to the third period. The smell of sneakers and sweat hung in the air like clothes on a drying rack.

Gym class.

The same routine–push-up practice, PACER test practice, and then our activity of the day. But where was Marie? Where was Todd? Where was Miss Francis? At least there was no running.

Bzzz…bzzz…

The sound of the lights slowly dying. It echoed. Suddenly there was an urgent announcement for us to leave our classes and go outside. But we had to remember to "keep our faces normal", whatever that meant.

Chapter 2: Safe.

Both me and Marie ran outside, slipping on mud multiple times. Us and about 20 other kids were there. Strange, since we always have at least 250 kids walking outside.

Where is everyone...?

That's what I was thinking before a sudden ear-piercing screech echoed nearby. It didn't sound like any sort of animal.

"WHAT IS THAT SOUND?!" I yelled, covering my ears.

"I've watched a lot of analog horror..." Marie whispered, "I've heard that sound in one of the videos..."

"We aren't safe here..."

I shivered.

"Then where do we go?" I whispered.

She slowly turned to the forest and pointed to a mushroom that slowly grew.

"Nowhere near that..."

It looked like a normal mushroom, yes, but the thing is, it wasn't growing out of a tree or anything. It just sat there.

"You need to smile," she whispered, smiling unnaturally, "or we won't survive."

Is this even her anymore?

Chapter 3: Reality.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked quietly.

She nodded.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded once more, except faster this time.

She was not okay.

We were suddenly told to walk inside again. The teachers had more blank faces, staring at children who were unaware that we were in danger. What is going on? Why isn't anyone scared? Is this even real anymore?

"It is real. You aren't supposed to feel anything, because you're the only one that knows this is unnatural," the TV said once I was at home. "You're the only one who knows this isn't home. Even your best friends feel unsafe. Your family. We are still trying to find out who is real and who isn't. Anyway, back to the weather..."

We are still trying to find out who is real…

Those words looped through my head. What do you mean you don't know who's real? Am I real?

"The only thing that's real is your mindset. What you think is real isn't. What you do not think is real is real," I overheard a random person say.

"That's confusing," another person said, "So then you're not real?"

Then that person disappeared…

Chapter 4: Rooms.

Where are my toys? Where is my mom? Where's Dad gone? WHERE'S CHARLIE?! I'm panicking. Everything and everyone I know and love is gone. The address of our house feels weird and unrecognizable. The numbers don't feel correct. No, the WORLD doesn't feel correct. I don't feel correct. Nothing is the same. I can't process all this…

Am I imagining this?

The only thing that's real is your mindset…

That's it! I've figured it out! I'm in my head! This is MY analog horror I made! So, it's a dream!

A huge weight lifted off my shoulders. Everything was okay.

CAHTPER ? GTHIEVRYEN SI NTO KOYA…

I DNOT EES ANTHYGN NROLMA NYAMROE. RAE YM RAPENTS KOYA? SI RCHLAIE KOYA..?

Chapter 6: School

The next day of school felt unreal. Most of the students were gone. Even more than yesterday. Only five of us. The principal made an announcement–but it sounded gibberish.

Cmareon Tzawukai (supposed to be Tzawuki) please report to the ffocie.

What did they need me for this time? I slowly but surely walked to the office where the principal sat there tapping his fingers on the table.

"So, Cameron, we've noticed that you're getting suspicio–I mean, you're getting bad grades."

Not true. I've been getting A's and B's.

"...So we wanted to put you somewhere special."

I don't like the sound of that.

WHAM.

One sharp pain and then I collapsed out of my seat and then the dark office went dark. I woke up in a small room. A bright small room with enough food to at least survive a day.

"Where...am I?" I mumbled.

"You're safe here." a voice said back.

I jumped. Who is this person?

"I'm Edward" the person began, "and I'm here to help you."

"Help me with what exactly?" I said.

"Hehe...you're a stubborn one." he whispered.

"What do you mean...?" I asked.

“Enough with the questions! I want answers. Who are you and why were you speaking with the boss?” he shouted.

The boss? The principal is his BOSS? Well, he’s probably a teacher, since the principal is the boss of the teachers.

Edward stepped out of the shadows, and I could see what he looked like. Black hair, a long jacket, a mask covering his whole face, gloves...and a syringe.

“This is just an antidote.,” he said, “If you didn't notice already, your leg is…yeah.”

My leg? Oh.

MY LEG!

It’s covered in this sticky black stuff.

“We’re gonna get you cleaned up,” he said in a reassuring way.

It didn’t sound reassuring. Who are these people, the SCP foundation?

“I work for CAMERA, Capture All Monsters Entering Random Areas,” Edward said.

Wow, such a creative name.

Nearby, a radio playing a vocaloid playlist quietly started.

“Wait no wrong playlist–” Edward muttered.

As he tried fixing the playlist, I looked around. There was a table with books and science stuff, and there were big tubes with black liquid inside, probably used to study.

A rat running on a hamster wheel, which was the weirdest thing ever, was being used to keep an invention going. The invention sucked up the black liquid and scanned to see how dangerous it was. Poor mouse.

“Oh, yeah, that’s Nibbles. He’s my pet rat who helps with my experiments.” Edward said after fixing the radio.

“Nibbles? A name like that for a place like this?” I tried not to laugh.

“Hey, that’s not funny!” Edward said, now completely flustered.

“Whatever.” I said.

“Are we the only ones here?”

And he stayed silent.

Chapter 7: ALON3

“Not really...” he said, “…there are others.”

“What OTHERS?!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, my new best friend, Charlie.”

Charlie? Like, my brother? Charlie peered out of the door.

“Hi!” he said happily, “Did ya miss me, Cameron?”

“I did,” I whispered.

But he didn’t know how much. How long I waited for that bell to ring until I was called to the office. How I’d panicked because they wouldn’t let me leave the school.

What is going ON?!

“Okay, whatever, how are we going to fix everything?” I exclaimed.

“With this.” Edward said, pulling out a…

Rubber duck?

“Wait, no…THIS!” he said, pulling out yet another rubber duck.

“No, wait...this,” he said, pulling out a smoke bomb.

“The smoke bomb had the antidote inside of it. So, if you throw it, you explode the antidote everywhere.”

“YES!” I shrieked, “I can get my family back!”

So, we headed outside with a couple of the smoke bombs.

POW!

POOMSH!

POOM!

And, to make a long story short, everything was back to normal once we cured everyone who was real.

Finally, peace.

NO CHATGPT OR ANY OTHER AI BOT WAS USED TO CREATE THIS PROMPT. ONLY IMAGINATION AND TONS OF ENERGY FUELED BY CANDY. PINKY PROMISE!! | ฅ^•ﻌ•^ฅ

Thank u so much for reading!! ಠ_ಠ ⊂(◉^◉)つ ┻━━┻ミ＼(≧ロ≦＼)

Shadows of the Dead by Alyssa Chrzanowski

October 30, 1954

Maybe it's been five hours since I've taken a nap, or maybe it's been five minutes. I remember going into my bed, but when I woke up, something was off. It could have been the lightning roaring, or something like that. I knew something about the bedroom was different, but I just couldn't figure out what. That's when it happened; the lights flickered as I heard an eerie voice in my ear.

Don't go to school, you'll thank me later.

The voice sounded familiar, as if I knew who said that.

I guess the voice was right because there was a shooting at the school. I hoped everyone survived, especially my favorite teacher, Mr. Peter. I feel like my world would be full of sorrow without him there.

Most people think I'm an outcast at my school. But Mr. Peter, he calls me unique, different. His words fill me with hope every day. He is the only reason I would actually want to go to school.

"Cally, what day is it?" I asked. "October 30th." She replied. That filled me up with joy, Halloween is my favorite holiday.

"Katlyn, let's go find a costume for you."

Soon night came and I gleaned a look at the night stars. I felt something blowing on me, it gave me goosebumps. I wish I had parents, real parents, real parents that didn't abandon me when I was only three. I still remember it, crisp and clear.

It was a windy night. I saw my parents putting luggage in the car, and as I went outside I saw my dad, cigar in his hand. My Pa had always called me an obedient kid, as if I didn't know what that meant. I went outside to ask Ma what was going on and she said that she would be back from the war soon. Right after that, they never came back. Everybody has been saying that my parents died in the war, but I really don't know.

If you fast forward to now, I live with foster parents who I barely know and go to social services every Wednesday. I don't talk that much, I don't have any friends, my foster parents have been fighting ever since I came. Life isn't that good. I wish my soul could be free.
I used to live with my grandma, but she passed away two years ago. Sometimes at night, I feel something wrapped around me like a cold hug.

I saw my grandmother, she was the one who was giving me that cold hug. I heard the same eerie voice I had heard earlier who told me not to go to school:

Hello, my darling! I have missed you very much over the years.

"Grandmother, is it really you?" I questioned.

She didn't respond. I looked out the window, and a crack of dawn came out the window. As I pivoted forward to see my grandmother, she was gone.

October 31st, 1954

I should've known it was my grandmother! She used to be a witch back in 1883. She had always told me she would always be by my side, even after her entombment. During her funeral was the only time I've probably cried in my whole 11 years of life.

Now I'm back to reality instead of in my mind. Cally, my foster mom, bought me a costume. It was a detective costume. I would've wanted to be a witch, in honor of my grandmother.

I wish I spent more time with my grandmother, Grayson. I still miss her very much, even though I saw her yesterday. I was going to school when I saw Mr. Peter walking by me, not a smile, not a hello, nothing. I tried to give him a hug; I didn't hug him, I went straight through him. Then I looked back, he wasn't there…

I gasped. When I looked forward, I saw someone approaching me. I watched in fear, I turned around and he was right in front of me.

I can't remember very much after that. The mysterious figure blindfolded me and brought me somewhere dark, very dark. When the mysterious person finally took the blindfold off of me, it took me a couple of seconds to actually see straight. But when I finally could, I wish the blindfold was still on. There were dead bodies with dried skin everywhere. Their clothes were still on. I saw so many dead people in the air. One quietly whispered to me, "Oh finally! Someone I can actually talk to."

I was confused at first, but then I realized that I was tied to the wall, with rope. My arms were stretched out which made it very uncomfortable. I had forgotten that I have the power to see dead people. Then the lady spoke again, "You are probably gonna turn into one of us, eventually."

"How do I get out of here?" I asked.

"You can't, this is like a prison but for torture and grief."

That's when I lost it. I cried, like sobbing. It felt like I couldn't even breathe, my chest felt like it was compressed. I thought about everyone in my world that I've ever seen or met. I realized I would never see them again. This would probably be the last place I would ever live in. Then, a soul was pointing to a cabinet. He took out some scissors and cut the rope off my hands and my ankles.

I could finally move my body again; it had been six hours since I was first tied up. My arms were bruised from the ropes. I wanted to cry for help but I knew that wouldn't work. I wish Cally was here, even though she wasn't my real Ma, I wish she was here.

Your whole life will end. Die, Die, DIE!

I pulled the hatchway with all of my force, using my last bits of energy. It opened and the light shined on my face for the first time in what felt like eternity. I ran, ran for my life, ran like I haven't seen a single person in my life, because I haven't.

I went to the first person I could find, "What state am I in?" I asked. "Danbury, Connecticut," he responded.

Oh, thank goodness! That's the town I live in. Maybe the shadows of the dead have been helping me.

I wondered why the mysterious figure tried to seize me. It was weird, very weird. I miss home. I heard someone saying my name

"Embriegh, Embriegh!" I turned to see my Cally, all teared up. I ran towards here, nobody could stop me anymore. I hugged her, so tight she could barely breathe. I watched in the corner of my eye, the same figure who kidnapped me, the same darkness, the same stare, the same fate.

I went back home and into my bedroom to see a piece of paper on my windowsill.

DEAR EMBRIEGH DAVIDSON,

You really thought you could escape me, very funny. This won't be the last time you'll see me, I will come back for you and bring you to the place you belong. But next time, I will be stronger. You won't be capable of escaping this time. A bunch of surprises await you, not the goods kinds though, the kind where you wish you didn't even exist in this world. I won't just be coming for you, I will also be coming for your foster parents too. You might as well say "Goodbye world." So, you don't have to wait till later. Just in case, you might wanna keep one eye open while you sleep.

From,
???

What Is On 36 Mary Street? by Vanessa Ferrara

“Come, it will be fun!” Chloe said. We were at a Halloween festival in Southington, Connecticut. I (Mia Jones) had just moved here two years ago and made a friend. Her name is Chloe Marie and she is the same age as me, 13. In case you are wondering, Chloe was trying to make me go into the haunted house.

“No, no, no!” I yelled.

“Come on, It's not that scary.”

Chloe had been trying this for 15 minutes. And it wasn’t working. But I tried to remember what my teacher said, “don't be afraid.” So, I finally gave up and we headed for the haunted house.

“OK, let’s go,” I groaned. I really didn't want to do this, but if it was going to make Chloe happy then I guess I should. We made our way to the haunted house.

“OK, let’s go in!” We handed our tickets to the woman who was at the front of the creepy ride.

“Have fun!” the lady said in a shrill voice.

Then we made our way in.

Chapter 1

“Aaaaaaahhhhhhhh!” I screamed my head off as soon as we got out.

“That was crazy!” I said.

“Yeah… Crazy awesome!” Chloe said. She always loved scary stuff.

“I am never going on that again!” I told myself.

After that we went on some other rides that were less scary. Then we went to get dinner and got cotton candy for a treat.

“OK, we have to go home now!” my mom called.

“OK!” We called back. We didn't need to drive back because the fair was just around the corner.

As we made our way back to my house, we passed Mary Street. I had never been on Mary Street before. It almost seemed abandoned.

“Hey Mom!” I asked. “Can me and Chloe go for a walk down Mary Street?”

Mom replied pretty quickly. “Sure! Just be back by 10!” Mom yelled.

As me and Chloe walked down the sidewalk, it got colder and colder. A shiver went down my spine. We took a look at all the houses. It was really creepy. All the windows were boarded up. There were holes in the windows. Then we arrived at the last house on the street.

36 Mary Street.

Chapter 2

I couldn't believe it. 36 Mary Street. The wind blew past us.

“Maybe, let's go home,” I suggested. I could not stand another minute here. But of course, Chloe wanted to take a look.

“We should check it out!” Chloe beamed. (Of course).

“No way! It could be a dead house!” I shrieked. But Chloe was already half way up the steps. “Chloe!” I yelled, but she ignored me.

I followed her up the steps. It felt so wrong, but somehow right. As we approached the front door, we noticed a lot of paint on the door. Black paint. I thought it was just a figure of speech, but I noticed that it spelled something out. It spelled “GO AWAY”! Of course, Chloe did not care nor see the sign and frolicked in. I took a deep breath and walked in behind her.

I really did not want to be here. I was really only here because Chloe was here, but I was the one who asked to walk down here. I took a step into the house. I felt a cold shiver run down my spine.

“Ooh it's cold in here, why don't we go back?” I suggested.

“Why? Are you scared?” Chloe asked, rolling her eyes.

“NO!” I yelled. But after that, the real scare began.

Chapter 3

Chloe and I just stood in the middle of the room. Wind gushed past us. Why? I have no idea. There were no windows and the door was not open. And this was the only house on the whole block that had no windows. Something felt weird about this place… really weird. We heard creaking upstairs. But the thing is, no one was there. But then something weird happened. Something, or someone tapped me on the shoulder. I took a step backward. Another shiver went down my spine. Chloe looked at me weirdly. Like I had two heads or something.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“Something just tapped me on the shoulder!” I answered a little startled. Then Chloe stepped backward too.

“What happened?” I asked.

“S- something tapped me on the shoulder too!” she yelled. I knew she was telling the truth. It was obvious, this house was haunted.

Chapter 4

When we got home we tried to tell my mom what happened, but she thought we were trying to pull a trick on her. We kept telling her, but she would not listen. So, we just played along. Clearly, she was not going to believe us. No matter what we told her. We dropped Chloe

off to her house and her mom thanked us for the ride. When I got back, I went into my room. I closed the door and tried to figure out what happened at that freaky house. It was weird because I never noticed that the house was there. It was like it just popped up there. But I tried to forget about it and did my homework.

Chapter 5

At school the next day, I ran up to Chloe, out of breath.

"Chloe! Chloe!" I yelled in her ear.

"Ow!" she said in pain.

"Sorry! But it was important! I had a visitor last night!" I said in horror. But something was off. Chloe was not surprised. At. All. Then she pulled me aside.

Then she whispered, "I know, I had a visitor last night too!" I could not believe it. Not only did we have a visitor EACH but also it was a complete violation of both of our privacy.

"What did yours look like?" I asked Chloe. She said hers looked like a girl, a normal girl. But floating. And she was wearing a blue dress with a ribbon in her hair.

"What did yours look like?" Chloe asked me. I was in shock. I gasped and told her what mine looked like.

"The same. A girl that was floating in mid-air and was wearing a blue dress and a ribbon in her hair." We both had our mouths open wide. Jaws dropped. We got the same visit from the same ghost!

Chapter 6

After school that day, I asked my mom if Chloe could come over to "do homework" but really that was just a lie. I did not like to lie to my mom but it was for good reason. When Chloe came, my mom tried to talk with us but we were in a hurry, so we went to my room. We were not trying to be rude, but sorry Mom, you went straight to the third wheel. As soon as we got to my room, we talked about what happened last night at both of our houses.

"OK, so I was in my room and I was just about to go to bed when something tapped on my window! Nothing was there at first so I chose to ignore it, but when it happened again, I saw a girl with a blue dress floating outside of my window! I could not believe it at first but-"

Then we were rudely interrupted by a knock on the window. And nothing was there… which meant the girl in the blue dress was here, at my house! We stayed silent for a couple minutes, but something was weird… My window was unlocked and it was locked the whole day! This couldn't mean… no… The girl was trying to get into my bedroom!

Chapter 7

I was so scared I could not breathe. Chloe was grabbing on my arm. Both of us were quiet as a mouse. After a little bit, I walked over to the window and opened it. A gust of wind

blew past me and something made a noise on my carpet. Chloe jumped up from the ground. A minute later a girl appeared, standing on my rug. It was the girl from the house. I was about to faint to the ground. But she soon said something in a quiet voice. “Please don't be scared of me!” Our mouths dropped.

“She can talk?!” I thought. Chloe probably thought that too. I tried to speak, but nothing came out. But Chloe pitched in for me.

“Um… h-hi little girl…” I could not believe Chloe managed to say something. Well, I should have assumed that she would, she loves this stuff. Well I guess I should say something, just to be kind, I thought.

“Uuuumm, H-hi?” That is all I could manage to say.

Then she spoke again in her tiny soft voice. “I will not hurt you. I saw you come into my home on Mary Street. When we heard you, we came down. My name is Ella.”

Chloe whispered something to me. “Oh… that must have been her family who tapped us on our shoulders!” So, I asked her myself. She replied pretty quickly.

“Yes, that was me and my mother who tapped on your shoulders.” I was scared for a moment but she said something that kinda made me not scared anymore.

“My mother died because she got a bad sickness and my father died in his sleep.” We sighed softly. “How did you die?”

Chapter 8

“I died in my sleep as well.” Ella said. I felt bad for her. Her and her family lived in a haunted house with her not scary family.

“How old were you when you died?” Chloe asked. I nudged her lightly.

“Well I died in 1992, and I was about 9 years old. My mother died in 1987 and my dad died in 1992 as well.” I needed to say something to make her feel better.

“I am so sorry about that. It must have been hard for you so far.”

“Thank you, but it is no big deal. I have been dead for more than 30 years, I have been OK.”

All of us talked and talked for hours until Chloe's mom texted her on her watch that she had to go home.

“Oh, I have to go home now. Well it was nice talking to you Ella, have a great rest of your day,” Chloe said as she stood up.

“It was nice talking to you too, Chloe. And you too, Mia.” Ella said. Then she disappeared. Chloe left and I did my homework. I also thought about Ella and all the things we found out about her. I wonder what will happen in our lives next.

Watched by Arabella Guy

I was out on my late evening fall walk in the woods, the leaves crunching beneath my feet. The woods are where I used to play with my dog. His name was Max. One day he ran off into the woods and never returned. I still wonder where he is.That was back in 2013. It's 2018 now.

I heard the birds swopping over my head. I looked up and there were ravens, three of them. One of them had a scar over its left eye and they suddenly flew away. I looked back and they were diving straight for me! I ran for it. I ran for a while until my twiggy legs finally gave out. I tripped and fell down a hill, barely escaping smashing my head on a sharp rock while escaping those horrid ravens.

At the bottom of the hill there, I saw an old abandoned laboratory. I heard the ravens' call and I hid inside the lab, which reeked of chemicals and cigarettes. I looked around. There was blue ooze everywhere. Beakers were spilled and there were big lab tanks, three of them. One was smashed open and glass was everywhere. There were also blood stains on the glass like something was cut on it. I looked out of the lab and it was dark. I checked my phone.
"Oh great, no service," I said downheartedly. I thought to myself, *if I get out of this valley I could probably get a bar of service.*

I started climbing up the hill. I slid right back down, the heavy rain made it almost impossible to get up the hill. Suddenly I got a feeling that something or someone was watching me from the dense woods surrounding the lab. I darted back to the lab. I heard a loud bang come from behind me. I looked and saw it was a tuxedo cat but something was different about it then all the others. It had one blue eye and one green eye. The cat was knocking over books and beakers. It suddenly jumped off and trotted toward me.

I knew Easton's curse. If you saw a tuxedo cat with a scarred or blue eye, you would be cursed with paranoia, which I already had. The rumor had been going around for years and years, with each generation believing it less and less every time. I heard people used to hear voices in their head telling them to do something, and if they don't do what the voice said in seven days, they get possessed and start walking into the woods and never return.

I was surprised to find a little bedroom with a minifridge and one twin bed with a foldable table. On the table there was a badge with the name Jackson Woods on it in bold letters. Under the name there was a photo of a lean man with jet black, untidy hair. He had a raven with a scar over its left eye sitting on his shoulder, just like the one that chased me down here in the first place. I sneered at the raven. I got into the bed and it groaned. When I finally laid down, it felt like I was laying on a rock on a mountain.

It was the next day I checked the minifridge. It was stocked with food so I had my breakfast and climbed the hill and got service.

"Yes!" I said thrilled. I texted my mom.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hey Willow, where are you?"

“Lost in the woods.”
“Are you near something?”
“Yes, a laboratory”
“There are no laboratories in the woods.”
“.....”
I paused, no laboratories?
“You must be having hallucinations”
How am I having hallucinations? I sent her a picture of the lab and tent.
“All I can see are trees, and a cat?”
“Oh yea, I named her Eclipse, she is a tuxedo cat.”
“Get rid of her, she has the curse!”
“No!”
“See, she has already gotten into you and is driving you insane!”
Mom has never said anything like that before.

I remember when I was very little, I met a cat in the woods that looked like the same cat I heard was immortal. It could get run over by a car and puff back up and survive. Maybe it had come back. I still remember that my mom said I was too attached to the cat. I named the cat Asher because it looked like ashes from a fire. Now it’s not me, it's Willow. I'm getting worried for her. It had been two days since I'd last seen her and that last time, she was bright and smiling.

Now she’s gone. I miss the sound of her piano, playing *Beautiful Dreamer*, and the books she jabbered on and on about. I loved the way she helped me bake and cook meals. She is probably very scared right now. I texted her, “Hey Willow, how are you doing?” I waited and waited and she still didn’t answer, not even one text. I started to freak out because she hadn’t texted back yet. It had been an hour. I had already undone and redone my braid three times, until the tweet of my phone snapped me back to reality. *Could it be*, I thought to myself. I checked but it was my husband asking how my day at work was. I was about to clear it until then I got another message. It was from Willow with only a few words but they shook my brain.
“I’m back home, now a little different.”

I was astonished by the way my mom acted earlier today. I was still trying to figure out who this Jackson Woods person was. I searched him up on a website. The only thing that showed up was that Jackson Woods has been missing since 2012. People say he was a great scientist but one day, someone saw him walking into the woods. And as he turned around, his eyes were as white as snow, blood dripping out of his eyes and mouth. He had a raven, with a scar over its left eye, sitting on his shoulder. Woods, on the other hand, was pale and lean. The picture was more terrifying than the description. I saw small print below the picture that said “If you see this man, don’t make eye contact with him and run immediately. He has been said to lure with a hypnotic gaze, then drink the blood of his victims with his long-barbed tongue, slowly sliding down the victim's throat.”

Exhausted, I went to bed. Today I explored more and under the bed I found two journals. I opened the maroon colored one and I read the first and only paragraph.

10/18/12

Dear Journal,

I was always curious about what I could make, so I set out to find more materials for new experiments. While I was walking, I fell down a hill almost hitting my head on a sharp rock. It was unpleasant. After I got my head to stop spinning, I saw an abandoned laboratory. After I fixed it up the voices in my head wouldn't stop. Each day they kept getting louder and louder every time. I am sick of it. Is it something in these walls that's taking my sanity? Am I losing myself? Will I ever make it out? What have I done?

I wondered what he could have done to end up this way. All the way in the back of the book was one more picture that drew out his plan.

I walked out of the lab to get some service when I heard a low throaty sort of sound come from the dense woods and then I saw it. A werewolf like creature but thinner, low maroon eyes. And a twisted human-like smile that made my bones quiver with fear. But there was something about this creature that I seem to recognize.

"Are you Jackson Woods?" I asked, the crack in my voice noticeable. Suddenly, the raven from before flew over and landed on the beast's shoulder.

"So, it is you," I said as my voice finally choked out the words. We stood in silence for what felt like eternity, his maroon eyes piercing into my soul like knives.

Suddenly, he lunged at me, knocking me off my feet and into the lab, where I had hit my head on the shelves of books and testing beakers.

I never thought I would die like this, the cold hand of death resting on my shoulder. After seeing a beaming bright light ahead of me, I got brought back to reality from a burning sensation coming from my forehead. Waking up immediately, I looked above me. I noticed that one of the contaminated beakers had spilled on my head. The burning was unbearable. I felt like the sensation was slowly seeping into my bones. It was almost like it was taking control.

What was happening to me…

The End
For Now…

A Spooky Season Adventure by Raelynn Heinicke Umana

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, 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 stopped, 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 purred 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 beholden in front of their eyes.

A black cat, the same color as the inky dark night, was sitting cross-legged, staring his perfect circle eyes 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, and lightly walked back in the direction of the path he came from. Startled, the girls stared at the cat 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:

The season changed to 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 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? People remembered for only eight hours. When the whole town's lights went off? They could 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– all 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 said 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 would 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 parking 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 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. They interviewed the people at the library. 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 that day. 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, stepping back, brushing 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 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 shaked.

"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 hung with cobwebs. The "rug" they stepped on was made out of broken glass that didn't hurt their feet.. 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 was 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 came clear to them. Snips of the past were revealed. They saw a young woman, blond hair and a small nose. Her skin was a fair tone, and she had freckles scattered on her soft face. She wore a black cloak, the color of a deep night sky. And 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 move. 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 was simply 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 that 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.

As Reese’s mind looped, 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 pop into her mind, they cannot 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. The choice would affect 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 opened new doors. And those new doors they opened together.

The End

Apophis (uh-pOw-fis) by Victoria Huerter

Based on a nightmare.

I've never really liked reptiles. Some might say I hate them, but when I heard the school was offering a free field trip to a snake-themed indoor jungle gym, well, who could say no?

"Aren't you excited?" my best friend, Emma, exclaimed.

"More about the indoor jungle thing than the snakes," I admitted as we sat down on the bus.

"Yeah, snakes are so freaky-looking. The very thought of them is gross!" Emma said, making a dramatic, disgusted face.

"Hey Emma, don't you think it's a little weird that we're getting the end-of-elementary field trip so early?" I asked.

"I don't care. This sounds more fun than the other fifth-grade field trips," Emma said, looking out the window.

The bus pulled up to a large, boxy building that looked like an abandoned warehouse, except for the large, peeling sign that read "Snakey Nick's Jungle Gym".' Inside, a ton of other kids from third to sixth grade were already gathered, chatting loudly among themselves.

"This is about as legit as any school trip," I thought aloud to myself. "I bet they hired a motivational speaker or something."

The inside was exactly what I expected. A dusty, slightly faded rainbow jungle gym, a ball pit that smelled like something died, and trampolines that had definitely seen better days.

"Aww, it's so cute!" one of my classmates squealed.

I followed their gaze to the chaperones, each holding a tiny snake. These things were so small. The littlest one was wrapped around my teacher's finger and tilted its head curiously.

"Okay, I admit that one is a little cute," I whispered to Emma, who looked like she might throw up.

"Uh, you good?"

"You know I hate snakes!" Emma hissed back.

The tiny snake flicked its tongue out, and my teacher patted its head, which wasn't even half as big as her thumb.

After a long, rambling pep talk about how the owner overcame their fear of snakes and how we shouldn't be afraid to try new things, they finally let us into the jungle gym. Snake-petting carts were everywhere, staffed by bored-looking teenagers.Emma and I walked over to the swings, tucked away in a small section under one of the jungle gyms.

"Hey," she said, her voice quiet.

"Hey," I replied.

A low, constant hiss of snakes filled the room, punctuated by squeals from our classmates, some excited, some terrified.

“Do you want to go to the trampolines?” I asked, wanting to get away from the hissing sound.

“Sure,” Emma replied reluctantly. “They look kind of dangerous, though.”

“Well, it beats doing nothing all day,” I shrugged.

“All right, let’s go, last one there is a rotten egg!”

Lunch

Later, around noon, everyone gathered in the main lobby to eat.

“Hey, do you want to get some ice cream?” I asked.

“Is that even a question?” Emma replied, a hint of her normal enthusiasm returning.

“The line is pretty long, though.”

“Let's just get there before it gets longer.”

Emma and I got in line and ended up chatting for a while.

“Hey, what flavor are you getting?” I asked her.

“Probably the cotton candy Dip'n'Dots. What about you?”

I looked over the menu, a ripped, faded poster with sticky notes showing the new prices.

“Probably the same as you. Nothing else looks good.”

A telephone rang sharply through the cavernous hall, and one of the staff went to answer it. Everyone continued what they were doing, and Emma and I got our ice cream. The staff began whispering amongst themselves, their voices low and tense.

After lunch ended, when we were supposed to leave, one of the chaperones stood up to make an announcement.

“There is a… situation… outside. You will need to stay here a little longer. Please, go back to playing.”

My class started heading back toward the jungle gym. The usual sounds of snakes slithering and squirming filled the air, but something didn’t feel right. Some weird instinct screamed at me to turn and run. A deep sense of unease crept down my spine, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“Hey, you good?” Emma said, snapping me out of my trance.

“Uh, it's nothing. Do you want to just chill here, since there are all those snakes back there?” I suggested, my voice tight.

Suddenly, screams echoed through the halls, followed by a loud, guttural hiss that seemed to come from everywhere at once.

I looked into the play area, and my breath hitched. My entire body froze in fear. A colossal black snake with an eerie, puce glow emitting from its scales coiled its way through the structure. The sound of people frantically trying to escape filled the halls, and cages filled with the smaller snakes were knocked over, releasing dozens of them. One of the snakes tumbled toward me, bumping against my legs. It looked up at me with an expression I could only describe as a pout, and I briefly chuckled to myself, forgetting the impending danger.

The chuckling was instantly cut short by a deafening crunch that mixed with gasps and shrieks of terror. A chilling silence fell over the hall as everyone, including myself, stared in horror at the giant serpent.

The snake finished consuming its prey—a third grader—and swallowed her with a sickening gulp. The only remnant was the child's hand, which stuck out of the monster's mouth for a brief, horrifying second before vanishing into its gullet. The creature's gaze turned toward us, its puce-glowing scales seeming to intensify. This was no field trip. It was a nightmare. This was not about overcoming fears; it was about facing the most terrifying creature imaginable. Panic surged through me, and a new, chilling hiss followed the snake's movement as it slid towards us.

The Night I Almost Died by Aurora Kelley

WARNING: This book may paint various pictures in your mind. This is not a true story.

Chapter 1

"What are you waiting for? A royal invitation? C'mon!" Auggie shouted enthusiastically.

"It's our very first camping trip together! We would've had one months ago, if there hadn't been a bunch of kids going missing right here in Southington! I say, we play it safe," Victor moaned as he hugged his dad goodbye.

Auggie and Vic have been friends forever, but they both loved each other so.

"I'm coming too! I'm coming too!" Emily sang down the stairs, dragging her backpack down the stairs. Emily was Victor's bratty little sister, who was only 12. Fortunately, Auggie shut and locked the door in her face. Once they got there, in the haunted woods of Southington, Connecticut, they set up camp and made a campfire.

"So, did I ever tell you about The Crusading Killer?!" Auggie asked creepily as Vic shook his head, no. "The Crusading Killer, is a serial killer that roams Southington on Cemetery Road, more commonly known as, The House on the Hill. Legend has it, if you enter that house, you are no doubt dead meat..." Auggie said grimacingly.

Chapter 2

"Have a good night!" Auggie said happily almost at once after.

"Oh, I will," Victor mumbled, leaning towards Auggie for a first kiss. Unfortunately, Emily came and ruined it as usual.

"Hey, guys!" Victor fell forward, and his jacket made the fire spread out into the trees, starting a gargantuan forest fire. They all coughed, and when they woke up, they were in an unfamiliar mansion.

"I think someone is smoking nearby," Emily said, looking quite scared, pointing at a man in the parlor holding a pipe in one hand, and a bloody coconut machete in the other.

Chapter 3

A newspaper flew, and the kids could only catch a glimpse at the headline, "Breaking News! A serial killer named The Crusading Killer is on a kill streak and has killed ten people this week already."

Victor's eyes widened at Auggie right before they made the smart decision to run. The killer chased them all the way to the attic, where the kids locked themselves in, not knowing how to get out.

"Auggs, listen. Where did you find that story, because obviously, it came true."

Chapter 4

Victor demanded answers as Emily tried rummaging through the useless junk that the killer had, for something useful. Emily tried calling for the boys when she found an old family photo, but they were too busy talking.

“I found a book of stories next to my mom’s grave at the cemetery. We came for mum’s birthday. It was in there, and I stupidly took it...” Auggie muttered sadly.

An axe came through the door. The killer reached his hand through the hole and tried to grab the lock. The kids backed up against a wall as Auggie looked at the portrait in Emily’s hands. “What is that? A photo... I have a brilliant idea that is most likely gonna get us killed! It really could go either way.”

Chapter 5

Auggie looked at the back of the photo and saw the words, “To my lovely son, Elliot.” The killer finally succeeded in opening the door, and just as he walked in, Auggie screamed, “Elliot! You don’t have to do this. Take off that mask that you have killed in and stop this madness! You won’t make anything better this way, so let us go. And free the souls you shattered.”

Emily looked up to see the killer with his mask off. He was blonde with a wrinkled face. He looked as if he had felt all the people he had slain walked right through him.

“I. I wish I didn’t have to do this. The mask had such evil inside it. It consumed me and made me do all this, and it cost me my family’s life.” Elliot said in despair. Emily walked up even though it was dangerous and hugged him. Elliot gained a nasty smile and picked up his machete. He sliced through Emily as her head fell to the ground.

Chapter 6

He put back on the mask as Auggie and Victor gasped as they looked at her head.

“What on earth?! You killed her! I thought that you were turning over a new leaf! Have you a heart of stone?“ Victor asked passionately while hugging the head of what was once his sister. Auggie saw a sword on the ground and thought, “That is it! It is time for you to go to the depths where you belong! It is just like a video game! Slay the dragon, get the girl ermh boy...” He picked up the sword and ran towards Elliot.

Unfortunately, Elliot dodged and struck him instead. He wasn’t dead, just cut badly. Suddenly Victor thought he was hallucinating. “Am I suffering hysteria or is there a hot dog in your machete? Wait, don’t tell me Auggie that you were eating during all this?!” Auggie was still cut but there was ketchup and mustard on his arm. “Well, I eat when I am nervous! And you owe me a new hot dog Elliot! And you owe him a new sister. Luckily, I have tons of snacks because I’m nervous!”

For some reason Victor saw a millstone on the ground. What was Elliot planning to do with that?! Well, Victor knew exactly what he was going to do with it.

Chapter 7

He ran towards Elliot, dodged his attack, and smashed the millstone against his head. He came to Auggie's aid and asked, "Are you okay?! Can you walk? And why did you risk your life to save me? "Auggie smiled and replied, "Because I love you."

Victor was wide eyed and in awe, but he heard a neigh. They saw two horses and so they hopped on. They rode into the sunset and even though they were on horses, they leaned in for a first kiss, and they finally had no interruptions. They didn't know if they were ever going to find a place to call home but everywhere was home, for their romance was far stronger than anything else they had.

The Andrews House by Mason Minnocci

Long, long ago, in 1954 on Wilberry Ave, Morrow Bay, California, the Andrews family house was supposedly haunted. One day a group of teenagers went to see if the rumors were true.

October 17, 1954

Mason, Evan, Logan were a group of teenagers that lived down the block from the Andrews house. The house was abandoned, so they were free to walk in. They opened the door and heard a loud creaking sound. Inside they saw statues with cobwebs all over them and a huge long table with cracked dishes and cups. At the end of the long hallway, they saw stairs with a creepy painting leaning on them. They went up the stairs and saw a ladder. They didn't know what the ladder led to and they didn't want to know.

“Let's go, this place is stupid, I want to play video games,” Logan said.

“Seriously Logan,” Mason said.

“Yeah Logan this place is cool, we want to stay,” Evan said.

“And it's creepy too,” Logan muttered moving toward the stairs.

Mason grabbed Logan’s hoodie and said,“not now, we aren't leaving.”

Logan sighed and wined, “what is so cool about this place anyway?”

“You’ll see,” Evan said.

Logan found an old 1940’s TV in the next room. A letter next to it reads, “Dear Mr. Andrews I”- The letter was ripped.

“We must find the other pieces of the letter!” Logan exclaimed.

Soon after, Mason decided to see what's up the ladder. Evan followed. They went up the ladder to be greeted with a slam of the attic door. When they went to the attic, Evan found a big wooden chest under a white cloth. They saw a supernatural figure show up in the huge mirror for a few seconds when Evan opened the chest. Then the figure left with a huge scream, A couple seconds later they heard scratching all over the floor. They tried to open the attic door to leave the attic, but it was locked. They heard a window creak open, sending a gust of wind toward them. The wind brought the second half of the note.

The second half read, “Just wanted to tell you that your door was left open, Sincerely, Mr. Luca.” Mason broke out into laughter. They searched around the attic to find a key. They found a key under an old couch. They unlocked the attic door to find Logan waiting at the bottom of the ladder for them and showed Logan the other half of the note. Logan said, “I tried opening the attic door but it wouldn't open.” They taped the note together with tape. and read the note, “Dear Mr. Andrews I just wanted to tell you that your door is open, Sincerely, Mr. Luca.

The house lit up, the cob webs cleared and they walked downstairs to find the Andrews eating. They walked out and agreed never to step foot on that property ever again.

The Horror Jack-O-Lantern by Arfa Mohsin

“Thump!” Me and Kevin heard that near the front door.

“Kevin… what was that??”

“I don't know”. Kevin said.

We were both freaked out but we went out together. We saw… a pumpkin? I was confused and thought it was a delivery or a sicko prank.

“Phew, Alexis, what are we having for dinner?"

"Mac and cheese, "I said.

I went off to go make the mac and cheese but I remembered that we didn't have cheese. I thought to myself, *what bad luck* because I remembered that I brought cheese. I went to get some chicken from the freezer downstairs. I shrieked so loud that Kevin came rushing downstairs.

“What happened, Alexis???”

I was too stunned to speak so I just pointed. I pointed over to the same jack-o-lantern we saw on our front porch except…. It was all bloody. My body was shaking uncontrollably. I slapped my bottom down on the couch and Kevin sat right near me (I made sure to find the seat the furthest away from the pumpkin).

“It's okay Alexis. I don’t know how that got there but maybe it was some sort of mistake?”

I yelled out, “How could it have been a mistake if the same thing happened downstairs in the basement?” At that point I pointed Kevin to the stairs to go upstairs because I did not want anyone down with me because I was very determined to find out who put that jack-o-lantern there.

I started observing the pumpkin and looked through its mouth. I saw a bright orange, soggy, note on the inside of the freaky pumpkin. I grabbed tongs on top of the table and carefully grabbed the note. It read “Alexis and Kevin, find the clues hidden around your area. Find all the clues which shall lead you to me. If you don't find me by sunset/when the sun is fully down, you will be sent to the future and be trapped forever with no escape…Unknown”.

I sprinted my heart upstairs and gave Kevin a chance to read the note.

“Alexis, this could just be a sicko pranking us.”

I blatantly replied no because I had heard about this during the pandemic, the horror change of the pumpkin man. I told that to Kevin but he didn’t listen so off I went to go do it alone.

The first clue read from the note said, “Where kids are playing the sun shines bright and all the smiling erupts”. Suddenly, something sparked in my head!!!!! A playground! I rushed over to our local playground (Panthorn Park) and I searched around the playscape. I had around three hours till complete darkness so I wasted no time.

I went near the swings and I spotted a bright orange note under the gazebo. I frantically grabbed it and the note read “where it smells like chlorine where water is everywhere where kids can enjoy even adults.”

I thought that that was an easy one, obviously a pool. I rushed past guards and said I forgot something and they let me through. It was a small area so it was not tricky. I found it right beneath the first seat near the exit. I only had one hour until dark struck but I had not gotten a call from Kevin yet.

I read the next note which read, "Soccer goals, tennis courts with people all the time.”. This one I could not figure out. It was a tricky one so I spent around 20 mins trying to figure this out and rushed over (back to JFD school). Boy, I could not figure this one out.

I searched so long I completely lost track of time.

“AHHHHH” I exclaimed as I ran into a boy from our team.

“Sorry,” I said, “ I was looking for a clue from a pumpkin. Now that I think of it, I sound dumb. I’m sorry but I have to go now. Nice meeting you”

. He muffled under his breath “I'm Michael”, and a note but when I looked back at the counter I saw the same ol’ pumpkin. I shrieked, and Michael came down and asked what I was screaming about. We both kept our eyes there until I said, "there's something inside.” I went in and grabbed it with no expression but the letter read,“There would have been consequences if both of you didn't do it. You completed it but not Kevin”. I was scared but I was determined to find Kevin. I gestured to Michael to come to the car because I had a plan, and o boy if I had known…

We went back to the area that Kevin vanished and me and Michael explored the surface. And I started thinking about the backrooms, you can noclip so why can’t you just noclip to where Kevin was? I explained my idea to Michael and he responded with shock.

“Oh yeahh, I didn't think of thatttttt, that's a smart idea Alexis.” He had a grin on his face but I didn’t mind that. (Oh boy, I was wrong).

We started jumping and jumping until we heard some sort of gear moving under the ground. We followed the noise and we fell over on a stick, and poof everything blacked out. I woke up with my head throbbing like crazy. I quickly gazed my eyes around the room we were in. It was a mysterious room. I looked around for any sight of Michael and Kevin but I only saw Michael. I was so confused so I tried to wake up Michael. He groaned and said “Whatttt? Lemme sleep”. I told him we did not know more than one person had experienced that. I was not sure of what he said but I was running out of time.

“Twenty minutes left!!!!!!!”. I was bouncing around but then… I spotted a note!!!! I rushed over to it and it read “find out where I am. I’m somewhere around here… I see you 🙈” I threw my head right over my shoulder and scanned my surroundings. I walked closer to the fortress path and then…my heart dropped to my stomach. Around two minutes were left until

night time but then I saw KEVIN tied up with a brutal looking man. He was tall and blonde with an unusual face.
”LET HIM GO!” I exclaimed.

My heart was filled with fear. I scanned my surroundings for a big rock and I picked it up but as soon as I threw the rock, all I saw was a fog with no Kevin in it.

“Kevin,” I said while breaking down to my knees. I got a bad feeling, a rage of urge flowing through my body. An urge that made me feel like I go to the future and try to get trapped.

“Hello?” I yelled around the forest. CRACK! I heard. I looked behind me and there I saw Michael standing behind me with a bat.

“Whoahhhh, why do you have a bat??” I said.

“I heard you telling me that you were looking for a note from a pumpkin. I remembered a couple years ago my sister had the same thing happen to her but she didn't think much of it. So, she went. I don't know if she just… vanished”.

I told him all about what happened to the pumpkin, the notes, and Kevin you know. I signaled him to follow me because it was pitch black.

“Let's head over to my car. I can't see anything and this place is giving me an eerie vibe. It was around 12 am when we got home because I had to pick up things.

“Want me to drop you off or wanna come to the spare room?” I said. He agreed to go into the spare room but I still had an eerie vibe about the lantern.

It was around 7am and I woke up to make us breakfast. I went down with a sober feeling because of Kevin. I made my normal breakfast (eggs) and made another batch. I got everything from the fridge here so we went over to the slimy door handle that looked and felt like it'd been opened many times.

“It's locked,” he said while sounding half asleep.

“No duh, Sherlock”.

No sunlight was in the room, only the dark flickering lights that made it extremely hard to see. I got my lipstick that had a secret blade in it. I tugged on the rope to see if it was easy or rough but it was obviously rough. I started slicing right through with no problems until I heard something that made my stomach turn. I heard a voice chanting some sort of black magic on not just Kevin but a whole group of people. I was about to rush into the room but Michael grabbed my shoulder and tugged me back to the room and hid me around the corner.

“What were you thinking Alexis!! That's so dangerous!!”.

“I don’t care. Kevin, who knows what they're doing to him?”I started attempting to get my shoulder free but I could not get free whatsoever.

“STOP, I'm trying to help you! Do you really want to get captured like Kevin?"

My face got so red from how mad I was. I pulled my shoulder away so hard. I was so mad at him. Like why did he say I would be captured like Kevin? Does he not think I'm capable enough? I left him and barged into the room with Kevin in it. I grabbed Kevin's arm and attempted to pull him but he pushed me away which was so unlike him. I looked all around the room and saw 15 other people in a frozen state praising the pumpkin man.

The man looked up and said "Well, well, well, look at who we got here, someone who can join our family". I yelled at him so hard and told him to let them go or I would call the cops. He said, "That's only if you can find a way out". I felt my body tense up after he said that and I looked right behind me and didn't see Michael. As soon as I turned back around, a smooth white fog made me black out.

I woke up four hours later. I looked all around my surroundings but it was a dark room that was filled with nothingness. I looked for a door. When I spotted one, I stood up and went to open the door but it was locked.

"Darn it, they wouldn't have made it that easy". I started banging on the door and hoped someone would hear me but they didn't. I grasped my stomach of how hungry I was. I hadn't had anything to eat or drink for God knows how long. I was losing hope until I heard the door go CLICK. I tried to find something to hide behind but there was absolutely NOTHING. So, there I stood right in front of the door not knowing what to expect. The door creaked open and I saw Kevin! I was so joyful and went to go hug him but he just pushed me off and dragged me off into some sort of green halfway that could pass for a full on greenscreen background. I asked him where he was bringing me but he did not answer and it seemed like he was put under control by the pumpkin man. I begged him to stop but he would just not listen. And then and there we were facing a bright yellow door that looked like it was made out of stainless steel. Kevin scanned his wrist on the door handle which made the door fly open like it just did not care. I was relieved when I saw no one there but as soon as I closed my eyes with relief, it opened right back up.

"Well looks like you're here again, you really thought you would be free that easily. Well you thought wrong, they all have been put under my control relocating people who did not do the clues or people who did not help so now all you guys belong to me 😈".

"I did the clues though!!!!!".

"You should've thought about that before you came here, it's only meant for people who I took…but I can't have you revealing my secret, so make yourself at home ^_^".

"I won't! I promise, please let us go!!! I will not tell anyone".

I fell to my knees and begged to let me and Kevin go, but he would just not listen.

***

Then we ended up in a bright lime green room that made my eyes tense up. I looked around the room… Nothing. I saw absolutely nothing, but when I turned back around I saw a

bright orange lantern… the same one on our doorstep. I looked inside of the mouth like I did last time, except I grabbed the note out like I just didn't care.

"Michael was here" it read. "Michael? Are you here??????"

I saw the pumpkin man holding a knife…I shrieked so hard and tried to get out of the room but the door was locked as usual. I held my mouth shut with my petrified face. He started laughing frantically as he saw my petrified face. I wanted to yell at him so badly but let's be real here, he was the one with the weapon. He scratched his knife and put it awfully close to my face, practically scratching it. I screeched my voice that was left out of all the screaming I did, God knows how long I'd been screaming. He grabbed the knife in a position that looked like he was about to stab me. When I thought it was all over I saw his eyes from the eye hole widen and shut… it was a girl! A girl who saved me!

"Thank you sooooo much, I don't know what would've happened if you weren't here. Omgg I'm so grateful. Thank you❤ my name is Alexis. How about you?????".

"I'm Katie." I asked how she had ended up here and it was the same way I had gotten here. We were talking until…

We saw him again, the pumpkin man charged right towards us with his knife. We both yelped and ran until we hit a dead end and teleported to a strange room?

"Where are we?" we both asked. We gave each other a concerned face.

"Let's look around for some clues. That's our best hope". Little did we know that's not true. We searched for hours and hours, maybe even a day or two until we found the same ol' knife from the man. It had a scent that was a recognizable scent, it was Michael's scent.

I explained to Katie who Michael was and she said "I'm related to him, he came down looking for me??".

"Yes? Why wouldn't he?"

"Ohhh it's just because he was working on some sort of experiment and I disappeared as soon as he finished. I would think he would just work on that".

I shrugged it off and let it pass, but I was also wondering what his experiment was.

"Wait…I just started wondering? If the knife was bloody and had his scent, did he die?"

"ALEXIS YOU SICKO, WHY ARE YOU THINKING MY BROTHER DIED?"

She went to the corner and started wailing. "I was just saying something, my opinion. Sorry".

She completely ignored me and dug her head in her knees. I rubbed her back and apologized hundreds of times, but she wouldn't say anything, all I heard was a little whimpering.

3 days later…

I felt so groggy the day I woke up, I stretched my body.

"Katie? Are you awake?" I said.

"Yes, I just woke up. Do you know how long we've been asleep for?" I responded with a non-emotional answer and said no.

“Well you should know now, we have been asleep for three whole days!”

I raised my eyebrow and told her it’s been a hot minute before we checked outside. We both debated on looking outside but we were not sure what's lurking out there. Finally, we came to a conclusion and decided to shove Katie’s phone under the door (I didn’t know where my phone was). I asked to help but she just shoved me off like she saw something we weren't supposed to see.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“No… a bunch of people are outside and it looks like they're holding a pickaxe that’s made from a pumpkin?” I asked how many there were and she said only two.

“We can probably take them down considering they have pumpkin pickaxes. I think we will be fine because the pumpkin is not that strong.”

I suddenly pulled out the knife we saw and gave a big grin to Katie and we were armed right then and there. We quietly peeked against the cold metal wall and squinted our eyes, looking through the small crack we made by opening the door. Suddenly, I saw one of the guards turn around and they spotted us just like that.

I threw the door open and shook around the knife and said “Let’s go on now, huh?” They simply turned around and walked off embarrassed but I knew that was not gonna be the end of that. I closed the door and said “I thought the door was locked? How did I open it?” Katie responded with a confused expression “Yeah? Oh wait, I saw a camera up there. It was probably run by the man and unlocked the door because he thought we were not capable enough to fight them”. We fell to the ground and explained to each other how EXACTLY we got here.

“Wait… how are we going to get out of here😱,” I shrugged.

“Should we go outside and find an exit?”

Suddenly, the pumpkin man walks in.

“AHHHHHHHHHH!” we both shriek.

“Well, well, well, look who we have here.” I whispered into Katie’s ear and said,“ that sounds awfully like Michael.”

She agreed with me and grabbed the knife from the floor. She dashed towards him at full speed and pinned him to the wall. She called me over and I rushed over and helped her out. At this point he grasped on to the knife. “W-wait I-Im M-M-Michael”.

“WHATT!!!!”. We both shrieked.

“Prove it,” I said, loud and clearly. He pulled off his mask and under there we saw Michael's sweaty face, gasping for breath.

“ARE YOU BEING FOR REAL MICHAEL, YOU SICKO, YOU LEFT ME TRAPPED IN HERE FOR AGES OH MY LORD!” She continued to yell and I plugged my ears against how loud she was but I agreed with her.

“Where's Kevin?".

“UMM I-I may or may not have um put him on our team…”

“What do you mean! Take him off right this instant". I grabbed the knife half falling from Katie's hand. I cut myself in the process but I did not care. I went over to him and demanded him to TAKE HIM OFF! He was willing to do it and whistled and said some sort of code word?

“KIM LE SHEY OM DEY RUM RETURN TO ME”.

There I saw Kevin in a zombie-like state. As he saw me near Michael, he came to grab me because he was in charge of protecting Michael.

“STOP KIM LE SHEY OM DEY RUM”. He willingly stopped?

“OPAY NO RUM SEY DE LEAVE AND RETURNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN!”.

His head flew back and he returned to himself. .

“O THANK GOD KEVIN”

“What happened?”

We spent the next hour explaining what happened to him but when we turned back around… Michel was gone?

“Where is he?” I exclaimed. Everyone followed up with an I don't know. I looked around and threw my head behind my back because where did he go? I grasped so tightly on the knife while Kevin and Katie comforted me. I was SOBBING. I was scared that we could never escape.

“It's okay we WILL escape”.

Suddenly we all got knocked out and I woke up on a dirty ground. I looked around and saw a note saying “I will be back soon 🎃”. I rushed home, running while sweat was dripping from my forehead but I DID NOT CARE. I got to our front yard and leaned over, I threw up everywhere because of how much I ran. Kevin came rushing outside.

“Are you okay???? I just got home from the incident”.

Suddenly two slime covered hands grabbed us and pulled us…

The School Bus by Mia St. Pierre

October 30th

One day around 3:05PM, Hatton Elementary school was dismissing for the day. The buses were arriving and the cars were coming and going. Alex and Jacob were on bus 1. When their bus pulled up, they scurried down the hall and into line to get on the bus. Once they boarded, they were talking about what adventure they wanted to go on next but they had no ideas. About two minutes passed then finally Alex came up with the perfect idea, it was about a story that Alex did not believe but still wanted to try. When he told Jacob about it, Jacob said "Alex I don't think that is a good idea, I heard that story a few times. I don't want to go." "Come on, it's not real." Alex replied. Eventually Alex got Jacob to agree to his little story.

October 31st

Alex and Jacob were both on their phones texting each other, then Alex told Jacob the street name. The name of the street was Shadow Lane. They met up at 8:00PM and hopped on their bikes. When they got on Shadow Lane, it looked like any old windy road. They got off their bikes and started to walk. It got dark fast and Jacob was super nervous.

5 minutes later

Then they approached a school bus. Jacob's jaw dropped.

"I thought you said that it was just a story".

"I did." Alex mentioned under his breath. The school bus looked like it slid off the road. It was covered in blood and they went a little closer. The doors swung open and they walked inside.

There were dead bodies, backpacks and water bottles everywhere. They heard voices, but not just any voices, kid voices. It got louder and louder. They tried to ignore it but Jacob knew something was not right. Then suddenly, what sounded like a bus driver said, "Hi boys, would you like to go for a little ride?" They tried to run off the bus. Alex made it off the bus but Jacob was trapped. There was screaming coming from the bus. Alex sprinted away crying. He did not know what to do, so he did the first thing that came up in his mind: went to get an adult. When they brought backup, it was too late-Jacob was gone. They tried and they tried but there was no sign that Jacob was still alive.

30 minutes later

Police arrived at the scene but it was too dark and nobody could see. Fortunately, they brought flashlights but all of a sudden everything went black. The police decided to investigate the next day because it was already 12:00am and everyone was starting to get a little freaked out.

The Next Day

Police arrived at 6:19AM. Jacob's parents arrived at 7:00AM. Everyone knew that Jacob was gone but his parents still had to try because they know that Jacob was very smart, so they brought him to the hospital. They had the doctors figure out if he was alive or dead.

21 minutes later

Jacob was dead.

2 years later

Police finally figured out what happened. Turns out that Alex was secretly a serial killer and pretended to be Jacob's best friend and go on adventures with him. Alex hated Jacob but never showed it and he knew all along that his little story was true. And his plan worked out perfectly, and he was very good at acting it out, then police caught him. He was in big trouble and he knew he had been caught and did not feel bad about it. But Alex knew he was not going to get grounded because his parents were lazy and didn't care.

Court

The judge has never seen anything like this. Alex had a big smile on his face. He knew he was not getting into trouble with his parents. (They didn't know anything about this). Although Alex did get in trouble while in court. He was sentenced to death by electrocution. His smile immediately dropped as he was forced into the electrocution room. He thought it was a joke because he was so young (Alex was 10 years old.) Once he was in the room, he knew this was no joke but he really did want it to be one. Once his parents found out that he was dead, they jumped for joy because Alex was so annoying.

Parents

Jacob's parents were so sad; they could not live without Jacob. They would do anything to bring him back.

EVERYONE LIVED MISERABLY EVER AFTER

THE END

The Sleepover *Gone Wrong* by Marlee Rutolo

It was a dark, hollow night. Milee was heading over to her friend's house for a sleepover. Once Milee got there, her friends invited her over to the living room. While Bianca and Milee cuddled each other under a soft blanket, Miesha shot up off the couch, her popcorn flying everywhere.

"We should tell ghost stories!"

"What?!" Milee exclaimed, "that's perfect!"

"Yeah! We should head into the forest too, to make it feel scarier!" Collin added.

"What are we waiting for?!" Bianca exclaimed, her adrenaline rush getting to her, "Let's go!" They grabbed the flashlights off the kitchen counter, and flew outside and into the forest.

Once they all got into the depths of the forest, they sat down in a rather mossy area. They gathered in a circle, and started off with their storytelling. It had gotten to Miesha's turn, and everything was going great. But, Milee had felt as if something was wrong, like something was watching them…

So, it started off with-" Miesha got cut off by the sounds of phones ringing.

"Hm? What's that?" They all took their phones out of their pockets, to find the same exact message on every. single. Phone.

"Woah. What is this?" Collin asked.

"It said: 'Clock starts now. BE READY.' Be ready for what? For Halloween? Who does this guy think he is? Definitely NOT Shakespeare," Milee said, almost disgusted.

"Whatever. Let's just-" Bianca got cut off by the piercing howling of wolves, and crows cawing. Just then, a crow swooped down, and dropped something that looked like a scroll. Miesha picked up the scroll and it read: ' You have until midnight to survive.'

"We need to do some research," Milee decided, "because why would we randomly get chosen to 'Be ready.'?"

"Exactly! Let's just get home." Bianca said, "I'm getting tired anyways."

They all rushed home, they NEEDED to find out what was going on. They burst into the doors, and rushed up to Bianca's room, tripping over steps, and stumbling over each other. Bianca's room was decorated with orange fairy lights, a GIANT sign that said: 'BEWARE', and bright yellow caution tape on her door to her walk-in closet.

"Woah! Your room looks sick!" Collin complemented Bianca.

"Oh thanks! This isn't even half of it!"

"Yeah, your room is cool! But…we need to get going." Milee reminded them, "where's the computer?

***

It had been hours, and they still couldn't find anything! Just when they were about to lose hope and call it a loss, Milee finally found something. "Guys! I think I found something!"

"Wait, WHAT?! Lemme see!" Bianca demanded. They all gathered around Milee. "It says that whoever gets a message on their phone on Halloween night…"

"Tell us!"

"...is targeted by an unknown entity, at 2:59AM." The room fell silent. They could all feel the tension in the room, it had to have been at least ten seconds of silence. Collin was the first to speak.

"So, you're telling me that WE were 'chosen' to survive until midnight, by a random entity?!"

"Yep."

"And you're also telling me that we could potentially 'BLEH!?'"

"Yep."

"AND you're ALSO telling ME that WE could potentially find out who or what this thing is, and end this Halloween night horror story?!"

"COLLIN! Stop! But, you do have a point there. We need to find this person or thing…it could help other people in the future!" Milee pointed out, "But before we do anything, we need a name." They thought hard and long until Miesha gave out the name: OPERATION ✨Midnight✨.

It was PERFECT! Now all we needed to do was…

SURVIVE

***

They woke up to Bianca's screams.

"What's wrong?!" Milee exclaimed, feeling scared for what was going to happen next. "I-I saw a figure in the corner of my room." Bianca says mortified, "I guess that's the entity we are looking for." This time she had a sterner look. Miesha looked like she was about to cry.

"W-WHAT?!"

Milee was known to almost NEVER be scared, but this time was different…

THEY NEEDED TO SURVIVE

If they couldn't do this, if they COULDN'T survive this…everything would be over…what would their parents think? Surely, they would be disappointed, right?

Milee shook her head, she needed to snap out of it. She had to get a better mindset if she wanted to survive. Then, a snap was thrown out in front of her. "Milee, you good?" Bianca asked.

"Oh, yeah-sorry…"

"Anyways, what's your plan?"

"Oh, um I don't know…" Milee looked up from her bed, "WHAT THE-Bianca, you…might want to look in the mirror..."

"What's wrong?" Bianca looked over at Collin and Meisha. As soon as they saw what was going on, their eyes went wide.

"Okay, you guys are actually scaring me! This isn't supposed to be prank time!"

It took Bianca a second to realize that they weren't joking.

"No…NO!" She rushed to her bathroom, not able to handle the anxiety. *Welp, that's the entity's target*, Milee thought, slapping her hand onto her forehead. Bianca came out screaming. Her skin was…turning grey…

"GUYS! How can we fix this?!"

Milee broke out into a cold sweat. This is the first time she couldn't find a solution. But she couldn't give up. Her friend NEEDED help!

"Omg! I think I have a solution!" Milee spurted out. Milee had read about a witch somewhere in her area. She thought it was fake before but, this witch could be their only HOPE.

***

They stood outside of a small broken shop.

"Are you sure about this, Milee?" Collin asked, uncertain.

"It's our only hope." *At least for now*, she thought. As they stepped inside the abandoned looking shop, Milee got a whiff of...old smelly cheese?

"Ew. Does anybody else smell that?" she asked. They all gagged behind her as a yes. Just then, an upside-down head popped in front of her. Milee jumped a bit.

"Uh, hi?"

"Oh hello, deary. What brings you here?" the old looking witch asked.

"Um, my friend."

"Which one?"

"Maybe the 'turning grey' one, because it's NOT normal."

"Oh! Yes! Yes!" The old witch exclaimed happily as she hopped down upright. "Don't worry! I know exactly what to do!"

"Which is?" Milee asked, impatiently.

"Now, now. Be patient."

Milee rolled her eyes. She just wanted her friend back to normal. She wanted everything back to normal. *Isn't that all a girl can ask for?* The witch took them into the backroom.

"Are you sure that this is going to work?" Bianca asked the old witch.

"Yes. Yes! Of course! What do you think I am?"

"I just want to be normal again." She sighed solemnly.

“And you will be! Just in a second!”

They all waited, patiently as the old witch gathered her stuff.

“Are you ready, sweetie?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Bianca answered. The old witch took Bianca into a room. It felt like forever. Milee focused on the clock ticking irregularly. Then, they all saw a bright light explode in the room Bianca was brought into.

“I kinda have a bad feeling about this…” Miesha said out loud. The door creaked open, and Bianca was normal again! They embraced a warm hug, ready to take on this entity themselves.

Part 2: Wait…it’s you?!

They ran back home after thanking the old witch. They got to the doorstep of Bianca’s house. The door creaked open.

“We should go to the living room, I'll get more snacks.” Milee decided. As Milee walked over to the kitchen, something caught her eye. It was something shiny, and it wasn’t there before.

“Wait! Guys! Come over here!”

“What is it?” They all asked in unison.

“I don’t know, it's something shiny.”

Miesha, Bianca, and Collin all rushed over to Milee. They hovered over the counter, where the shiny thing was spotted.

***

After looking the shiny thing over, they all assumed it was a necklace. Milee played around with the necklace, when all of a sudden, she dropped it. It broke open.

“Milee! Why did you do that?!” Bianca exclaims, frustrated.

“Do you think I dropped it on purpose?!”

Bianca opened her mouth but didn’t say anything. Milee went to pick the necklace up, but there was something in it… “Wait! There’s something in it!”

They jumped up from the couch, “It looks like a picture!” Bianca guessed.

“It is!”

“Wait, let me see!” Bianca took the necklace from Milee and investigated the picture. She froze in place.

“What is it?” Collin asked.

“It’s a necklace...of me and my cousins, when we were younger. But why is my face and my cousin crossed out…and the other one circled?..”

The room became so silent, you could hear a pin drop.

“What?! Okay! We REALLY need to find out what’s going on. Like REALLY.” Milee started panicking. She had never gone through something like this before. This was the first time she had been scared ever since she was five.

“Who do you think did this…?” Bianca blurted, her face widened, still staring at the necklace that laid in her bare hands.

“I don’t know.” Milee felt hopeless as she saw the golden necklace glistening in Bianca’s hand.

Five seconds of silence went by.

There was a knock at the door, then someone burst through the door.

“HEY GUYS!”

“Uh…who exactly are you?” Milee asked.

“I’M KINSLEY!!!”

“Who?”

***

“Wait, wait, wait. Back it up there. You went to Elderberry Elementary School?” Milee responded.

“Yeah! Is there anything wrong with that?” Kinsley said sorrowly.

“Oh! No! Sorry. I did not mean it like that. " Milee explained.

“Oh good! Cause then I would have traveled here for nothing!”

“Traveled?” Milee wavered, “Why would you travel here just for us and where did you come from? Missouri?”

“Actually, YES!”

“Wait, what?!”

“A little birdie told me that YOU were the CHOSEN one.”

“What?! The chosen one?! You mean ‘the group of kids who get haunted by an entity every Hallows Eve?”

“I mean yeah. If you want to call it that.”

Milee felt overwhelmed by all of this information. She felt hot, then cold. Hot, then cold. Every tiny little thought was racing through her head. That’s when it CLICKED.

“Wait!” Milee picked the broken necklace up and started sprinting.

“Wait! Where are you going?!” Collin started to run after Milee, but Bianca held him down.

“Let her do her thing. Yes, she could get hurt, but I have a feeling she knows what she's doing.”

Milee ran so fast, her heart felt like drums. As she ran, she turned the picture around and saw EXACTLY what she thought she saw. The clock was ticking irregularly, now this necklace? It all made sense now! There was something Milee hadn’t told her friends though...she had read about a prophecy before. It was about old witches, working in their broken shacks, with certain

patterns nobody could figure out. She never knew that those old, dusty history books that kids used to bully her about, would actually help her.

She ran and ran, and ran, and ran, and ran, and ran, until she couldn't catch her breath.

Her feet made a scuffing sound. She smiled when she noticed.

She finally got there.

Milee opened the door so hard, it slammed against the wall. She was half expecting the old witch to be there, but the old witch was NOWHERE to be found. "What?" Milee questioned under her breath, "Where is she? This isn't what was supposed to happen!"

Milee looked around everywhere for the old witch. Milee turned around and got jumpscared by the old witch right in front of her face.

"Now, now, missy. What are you doing here?"

"I need you to help me."

***

"So, you need help finding this 'entity', if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes. I also believe I'M the person in the prophecy."

"Yes! Okay, let me go find the book."

The witch grabbed a big, heavy book named *The Prophet*.

"Is this what you need?" the witch asked.

"Yes! Thank you!"

"Also, on page 259, you should find some information about this 'entity' of yours."

"Thanks! Bye!"

Milee ran out thrilled.

Milee burst through the door to her house, the heavy book clutched in her arms. Her lungs burned, but she barely noticed, she had a mission. Flipping frantically to page 259, her eyes scanned the yellowed paper, taking in every detail.

"The entity seeks to complete its list each Halloween, marking the chosen. Only those who uncover the truth behind the marks can survive the night. Beware: the entity can appear as anyone, even those you trust."

Milee's stomach dropped. 'Even those I trust?' She glanced around the street outside. The wind rustled through the trees like whispered warnings, and a shadow shifted near the corner of the old shop.

She turned back to the book, flipping a few more pages. There it was, a ritual. A way to reveal the entity's true form, but it required courage, precise timing, and something deeply personal from the chosen.

Her heart sank. The "shiny necklace", Bianca's childhood picture, crossed out. It was part of the ritual. She clenched it tightly in her hand.

Suddenly, her phone buzzed again. Another message. "You're close… the clock is ticking."

Milee took a deep breath. She had a choice: wait for her friends and risk losing time, or face the entity alone and try the ritual herself.

Steeling her nerves, she whispered to herself, “I can do this. I HAVE to do this.”

With the book in one hand and the necklace in the other, she ran back toward Bianca’s house, determined to save her friends, uncover the truth, and survive the night.

But little did Milee know… the entity had already been inside, watching, waiting, smiling…

Milee burst through the front door of Bianca’s house, just to find them cornered by the entity. “GUYS! I got it!.” She eyed the entity, “YOU.” Without thinking, Milee dropped the book and ran towards the entity.

“Milee!” Bianca exclaimed. But it was too late. Milee tackled the entity to the ground, and got ahold of the mask they were wearing. Milee ripped the mask off. She was proud of herself but then she noticed who it was…it was her old friend, Nyra.

“Wait! It’s you?!”

“Get off of me!” Nyra complained.

“No! Not until the police get here.”

***

Milee frowned as she saw Nyra getting handcuffed…looks like after all of this nonsense, she didn’t have to follow the prophecy. But, it really made her think about how fragile friendships could be, how special they are. As all the drama ended, Milee smiled ready for what was coming NEXT.

Part 3: So... it’s over? (Or is it?)

The ‘entity’ had been put in prison, and you know everything was back to normal, just how Milee wanted it to be. But she still had this gut feeling that something was wrong. She shrugged it off, but little did she know, her world was changing right in front of her.

You wanna know what happens next? Well, I guess you’ll never know…

A Little Harmless Fun by Allie Russo

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Chapter 1: Deadly Time

Once upon a deadly time…….

My friends and I were watching a movie in Jake’s basement. And then, all of a sudden, there was a creepy creek sound coming from upstairs...the sound of someone or something opening our door.

“Ah!” the girls screamed.

My friend, Sam, sprung to her feet. Our other friend Jake was with us too. Jake is Sam’s older brother. We have all been friends since we were three years old. Jake muted and paused the television.

“I’m out,” said Lily, who was also with us.

“Me too. I’m leaving,” said Sam.

“But you live here Sam,” I replied.

“Yeah, well I’m going home with Lily,” said Sam. “It’s too scary here”.

“Then, I’m coming too. Let’s go,” I said. “But, wait. How are we gonna get out of this house?”

We haven’t thought of that yet. CRRRREEEEEEEKKKKK!!

“OMG!” said Sam. That was the highest pitch sound anyone had ever heard in the last 17 centuries.

“Oi,” said someone.

“Hello??????” said Jake.

“Jake, be QUIET," whispered Sam frantically.

“Let’s go out the hatchway,” said Lily.

“Right,” said Jake.

“DON’T TALK. JUST DO IT,” Sam whispered frantically, as she started quietly sprinting towards the hatchway.

“Whatever that sound was….it heard us,” I said in a quiet voice. “Thi-” said Jake.

“Just GO!” grunted Lily.

Chapter 2: The Creepy Escape

Finally, we all scrambled into the darkness. The sky was navy blue, with twinkling stars that were creamy silver.

“Shut the hatchway,” said Sam.

Just then the creepiest sight met our eyes. He had an overly large fixed grin, double chin and a chalky white face, with a big bloody red nose. He was wearing an orange and black striped shirt under a black vest. Over the vest was a bloody jabot. He wore black jeans that were so torn they were almost shorts with really long strings. The jabot was so bloody I couldn’t even get a taste of the original color.

“A CLOWN!” screamed Sam.

Suddenly, Lily spotted a cave. “A cave! Go quickly!” Lily whispered.

We all ran to the cave and when we got there, we found this huge boulder next to it. We were lucky, but we had to act quickly. We made it in. Then, Jake and I shoved the boulder in front of the entrance just in time. We were all relieved. But, then, as we were sitting there, we had a thought. How were we going to get out?

“Does anyone have their phone?” I asked. I didn’t have mine. “Nu-hu,” said Sam.

“No actually, I do, but it's dead,” said Jake.

“Well that helps! Thanks a lot,” Lily and Sam laughed.

“Uh, I think I do. Yeah, I’ve got it in my pocket,” said Lily.

First, we checked the time- it was 1:49. We decided it was best to save the battery in case we would be in here for days. We sat there for 10 minutes…. then 20…30……. and 40. It wasn’t until we had been sitting there for almost 50 minutes when I asked Lily what her real name was.

“Why are you asking that when we are trapped in a cave!?” Lily responsed.
I told her that I’ve been wondering. Now was as good of a time as any to ask her. We were all just sitting there. She told me that her name was Lilabelle. She said it so quietly she was practically whispering, but all of us heard it.

“Oof,” Jake said. Sam nudged him hard with her elbow in the rib. “Sorry I asked,” I told her. “I didn’t know you didn’t like it.”

“No, it's fine. I figured I would have to tell you soon anyway seeing as we are all best friends. I trust you. It’s just that I have hated my name since 4th grade. I liked this boy. His name was Jack and he and his friends bullied me because every time the teacher called on me she’d say ‘Lilabelle’ and all the kids would laugh and yeah,” Lily confessed. Tears were rolling down her face as she told us.

Just then, Sam came in and said, “I have an idea!!!! We should CALL THE FIRE DEPARTMENT!"

So, Lily tried to call the fire department. “Stupid cell service!” Lily exclaimed as the call wouldn’t go through. There goes that idea. We needed another idea.

“So, let’s try to push this boulder out of the way,” I suggested.

Jake and I tried and we grunted until it moved half an inch. But then, we heard footsteps slowly walking toward us. So, who was out there? All of a sudden, we heard Sam scream. Then, her scream faded away.

"Sam?"

Chapter 3 "Sam, where are you?!"

We walked into the darkness searching for Sam for what seemed like miles. "Guys it's 5:00 already!" Lily exclaimed.

"SAM!" Jake called but there was no answer. "SAMANTHA!" Jake screamed, but there was still no answer. "SAMANTHA JONES!" Jake screamed.

Then, we heard murmuring in the distance. Jake took off. Lily and I glanced at each other and then sprinted towards him.

"I found her!" Jake screamed. Just by hearing Jake's voice I knew that we were almost there. We ran closer and when we finally got there, we saw Sam tied up on a pole. There was a fierce looking clown in front of her.

"You stupid clown," Lily exclaimed.

"That's the same clown as in the basement," I said.

"No duh," Lily exclaimed.

"Hey! I know how we can save Sam! Clowns are scared of one thing," Lily told me. I had to ask her what it was since I don't know anything about clowns.

"Huge spiders," Lily said like I was the only one who didn't know that.

"I saw one over there a few minutes ago," I said to her. She asked me if I had anything to catch it with and I told her that the only thing I had was my water bottle.

She said that will have to work. "C'mon," I said.

Chapter 4: The Truth Comes Out

We ran for a couple of minutes, looking like hawks, for that gross spider that might actually save Sam. Then, we found it. I squatted down next to it. It looked all hairy and like it had diseases that needed surgery and stitches. I shoved it in my water bottle. We sprinted back to where Sam was, and when we arrived, we opened the water bottle and dumped it in front of the clown's face. The spider had a web coming down slowly. The clown jumped away. It worked! He ran away like it was for his life. The rumor was true! Clowns really are scared of spiders! We quickly untied Sam and untapped her mouth. We ran and ran and ran. BUMP! Lily bumped into something in our mad dash.

"Ow!" exclaimed Lily. We all looked up to see what she had bumped into and gasped! It was our friend, Aiden.

"Help me! Help me! There is a huge spider on the loose! Rumor has it that it is roaming this CAVE!" Aiden said in an alarmed deep voice. "It has a spell on it. I think it can kill people by looking them in the eye!"

"What does it look like," Lily asked concerningly.

“Hairy, and has cuts that look like stitches,” he said.

I stopped and thought for a moment. How would Aiden know what the spider looked like? Something was shady here. Suddenly…it came to me. Aiden must be the clown!
I confronted Aiden. “I know it was you! You are the clown!”

“Gotcha! replied Aiden. “Ya’ll were so scared! You should have seen your faces”.
We all looked around at each other! This was just a prank?! Aiden kept explaining.

“I saw this Halloween prank and knew I had to do it to you guys. I called up Sam and got her in on it too”.

We all glanced over at Sam and yelled at the same time,

“SAAAMMMMMMM!!!!!!!!”.

And…that is how a fun movie night between friends turned into the start of a huge prank war. Stay tuned to see how we get revenge on Aiden and Sam.

The One from Us by Giuliana Velez

October 31: 1950‘s-

It was the sound of a howling soul and the smell of smoke and cigars that woke me up. I clenched my wounded leg then dragged it across the hard cement floor to the window where the smell was coming from.

I could see right then where the smell was coming from, two old men were smoking and laughing. I shook her head in disappointment. The old men risked their lives for stupid smoke.

My mom and pa lost their lives in the war. So now, I live in an orphanage all alone, where I have no one except these stupid bratty girls that brag about how their other family members are sending in cards for Halloween. When I have no one left in my family to care for me. *No one. Now I'm all alone in this lonely world*. Those words will be stuck in my head till the day I die…

“MADELINE YOU HAVE MAIL!” My heart skipped a beat! How could I have mail? Who was it from?

As I stepped down the frigid ashy stairs, I came to see our caretaker Laura holding an envelope with my name on it. I took it into my hands and ran up the stairs before the other girls could see. I sprinted into my room and fell onto my bed.

My fingers slid across the sharp archaic envelope; it was smooth and brown. I carefully opened it up to find a letter that read:

Dear Madeline, I hope you are having a happy Halloween with your mom and dad. I miss you very much. I hope to see you soon.

Love, THE ONE FROM US

My eyes went straight to the name, who sent me this? What did this mean? So many questions were spiraling in my head, unanswered. Whoever this person was, they didn't know I had no one left in my family.

It was right then I remembered that day, that day when everything ended, the day my parents died. I remember we were in a safe house with a safe roof and a safe family. I was sleeping in bed until I heard a scream. It wasn't a normal scream, it was my mom’s scream. Blood was on the floor oozing out from the bedroom door.

I felt dizzy and everything felt unreal. I wished I was in a dream, in a world where my parents were still alive.

The morning of the day that it all happened, the morning of the day that I couldn't, I couldn't live without them…

One Halloween Night by Carly Vieira

Once upon a time there were two creepy witches. The first witch's name was Delfina. The second witch's name was Yenge. They were both obsessed with power. Delfina was one of those witches that spent her day mumbling around her cauldron. Yenge, however, spent the day by the pond, gathering frogs to boil.

One day, while Yenge was at the pond, she saw a fish. This was very unusual for Yenge, because she was too busy looking for frogs.

"Hey little fishie! You look nice to boil in a pot!" So Yenge grabbed the fish and a few frogs and flew off to her house on her broomstick.

Meanwhile Delfina, who was standing around the cauldron waiting for Yenge, was yelling at no one, "You're late! Late late late late late late! How can you be late!?" she screamed.

"Whoops, was I late? I can't really tell," said Yenge from above on her broomstick.

"Get down here!" said Delfina. "They're already here!

"They are?" said Yenge as her eyes widened.

"Well, who are you waiting for? Get down here already!" said Delfina.

Once Delfina had shoved Yenge inside, they looked around at the members of the Witch's in the Children's Home (W.I.T.C.H).

"Well, um, hello! Delfina said.

"Get down to business already!" said the supreme leader of W.I.T.C.H.

"Yes, well, you know the witch's and wizards' war, right?" said Yenge.

"Of course, we do! We're the ones who started it!" said the secondary supreme leader.

"Well OK. We think we've found the wizards' weakness," Delfina said. The supreme leader scoffed.

"You two, the biggest piles of rat dung in the world, found the wizards' weakness? I wouldn't miss this for the world," snorted the supreme leader. Yenge pulled the fish out of her pocket. It was the one she had found at the pond.

"This is the wizard's weakness," Yenge said proudly. "We figured out that every single day, the wizards spray bottles and bottles of perfume on themselves. A single smelly thing would drive them into surrendering."

As whispers broke out in the crowd, Delfina and Yenge shared a long and nervous look.

"We have looked in the Answers for Everything Book, (A.E.B) and we found out that unfortunately, you two are correct," said the supreme leader sadly. "And since we are very loyal, we will keep our promise. You two have a guaranteed spot on the leaderboard." The leaderboard was very difficult to get onto. Delfina and Yenge jumped for joy.

And then, they lived happily ever after.

A Halloween Trail by Ariela Xelhua

It was Halloween night and I was at Panthorn Park with my best friend Jessica. We were hanging around near the monkey bars. Jessica was just standing there, watching me reach for another bar.

"Why can't we go trick or treating again?" Jessica asked me with a groan.
I sighed.

"Trick or treating is for little kids. We are in 6TH GRADE now. It's time to be more grown up." I said, as I grabbed yet another bar.

"Okay," she said. She reached up to touch the hanging bat decoration on the monkey bars.

"Grown up enough to go through the Haunted Trail?" she asked in a spooky-ish voice.

"Definitely NOT," I said, letting go of the bar.

"C'mon!" Jessica grabbed hold of my arm.

"Wait! Let's go trick or treating now I've changed my mind not on the trail! Not on the trail! Please! It's Halloween! Let's have a sleepover instead, or something!" I said quickly.

"NO Wendy, let's go," Jessica stated.

"BEARS! Bears? What about bears?! How are you not SCAAAAAARRRED?!?!"

Usually walks were calming with Jessica. But had she not heard the story of Mr. McKay? He was an old man who suffered from cancer. One Halloween night, he went to Panthorn Park, and took a walk on the trail. At EXACTLY 12:00PM, he died. Justlikethat. Legend says that he haunts the trail only on Halloween, and he does something really scary, at exactly 12:00PM! But no one knows what exactly happens. Once two silly boys went on the trail at 12:00PM, and the next day the first boy got cancer, and the second boy's mom died! Now you are not allowed to go on the trail on Halloween EVER. There's even a sign! That story is EVERYWHERE. How had Jessica not heard of it?

We ducked the sign that said, "Please do not enter. The trail is haunted today. If you enter… Your loss."

Okay, creepy sign. No biggie…

"Woah…" Jessica said, looking around.

"I CAN'T be here, I'll wait for you outside of the maze!"

I ran towards the entrance and waited. And waited. And waited.
Where WAS she? She should be back! But she never CAME back. I never told anyone the story. Not even my parents.

Two Years Later

I was at home, reading a book when my doorbell rang.

“JESSICA?!”

“WENDY?!”

“You’re back!” I squealed.

“No, YOU’RE back!” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You weren’t there when I came out…!” she started.

“So, I looked around at the park but there was no sign of you. I also checked your house but you weren’t there either. Your parents were WORRIED.”

“That doesn't make sense, because YOU. Never came out until now. And I ALSO checked your house. YOUR parents were worried too.”

“That’s weird. But who cares. We’re together now!” She grabbed both of my hands and tried to lighten up the mood.

“Yeah. Who cares!” I said.

“WHO CARES!?” We yelled. Then we start laughing. After that, we never really cared about that mystery ever again.

The End

Panthorn Park was decorated with spooky decorations!

Tale of the Hybrid Killer by Gabriella Acquaviva

Chapter One: How It All Began

I walked around my mansion, my blood boiling with anger as I smelled the scent of my greatest enemies… humans. I was the hybrid of death. I was also known as the monster version of the grim reaper. As I walked to the balcony, I saw the monster hunters.

"Great, just what I wanted to do," I mumbled. They always try to kill me even though all who come don't make it out alive. I spread my wings and flew down, my red and black wings flapping in the cool wind. As I landed, the humans started yelling and screaming, calling me a monster and telling me that they'd kill me. Yet I heard this over and over and it didn't affect me. I opened my hands revealing my claws, which were sharp almost like a knife. I smirked at the humans as I slowly walked over.

"Look, you made a bad choice coming here." One of the humans charged at me with a knife. I quickly blocked and used my claws, I stabbed the guy through the gut and then I sliced him up. As blood dripped from my hands, all that could be heard was screams as people tried to run. I charged as fast as lightning and cut them one by one until none of them were left. My body was covered in their blood, my white hair turned red. All that was left was blood puddles. One by one, all I saw was red. My body felt no remorse or sadness. The smirk grew on my face as I laughed and flew back into my house. I had no time to feel any remorse. I mean I was a monster, it was all I was and all I wanted to be.

Chapter Two: The Meeting of the End

I walked to the bathroom to wash the blood off. The sink water turned red as I washed it off. Once I finished washing, I snapped my finger and black smoke surrounded me as I changed into a clean dress with a leg slit.

"Perfect, maybe I won't be late for once," I said with a laugh at the end. I walked out of the bathroom and out the door where I spread my wings and flew to the monster meeting hall. We had meetings but they were rare. Since the monster population was decreasing, there were not many monsters left. There were 50 vampires, 20 werewolves, 15 demons, and 1 hybrid… me.

I flew down once I saw the meeting hall and I opened the door which revealed each leader from each monster type. There was Luna the werewolf queen and my best friend. Aamon the demon king, and Edward the vampire king. Luna looked at me and smiled.

"Hey Amelia, you're finally on time," I groaned but I didn't hide my smirk," Yeah, yeah. I know but at least I come." As Luna was about to respond, Aamon spoke up with his normal cold expression.

"Now that all rulers are here, it's time to talk about the situation." We all took our seats at the table as Edward walked to the front."The humans sent me a letter last night which is the reason I booked the meeting on such short notice," Luna groaned as she spoke in a snarky tone.

“Yeah, we always get hate mail, it's not a big deal.” Edwards shot her a glare, his eyes glowing a bit red.

“I understand that but this letter I fear is something none of us ever expected.”

He reached out into his cape revealing a letter. He looked up with the letter in his hand and read it.

“Monsters, we will not allow you to live any longer. My people and I are releasing an all-out war which won’t stop till every single one of you monsters is killed. We will be waiting for you.”

We all stayed silent. All that could be heard was the sound of our breaths as Aamon stood up and slammed his hand on the table, almost breaking it.

“THIS HAS TO BE A JOKE!” We were all shocked by the news. We had been fighting with humans for generations but never has there been a war to the death. Luna growled, her eyes turning black at night.

“So, they want a war, never would have thought they had the guts.” I stood up, my patience running on thin ice.

“So, we're going to war with them, do all members agree?” Luna nodded, so did Edward but Aamon seemed hesitant. He spoke, his voice cold but still there was hesitation.

“What's making them want to go to war? I mean do we really wanna risk it?” I nodded understanding his hesitation.

“I get it but this is destiny, we don’t have a choice.” We all looked at the ground. “We were all born like this. This is our fate.” Aamon nodded agreeing as Edward spoke.

“It's settled then. The day after tomorrow will be the day where humans and monsters go to war.” We nodded and walked out the door and I flew back home. This was it, the war would happen. As much as I hated humans, something about this didn’t feel right.

Chapter Three: Day Before the End

I woke up and started gathering my weapons. We were all busy preparing due to the war, so we had to take caution. This was it. After centuries, a war was finally taking place, but to me, it felt weird. I liked killing humans but there are so many people who could get in the middle of the war, like a kid. Something about this didn't seem right at all. I walked to my room and opened the door. I walked to my desk that had a big case with a spell book. That was the deadliest book in all the monster world. If we were going to war, this is what we needed. I packed the rest and I headed to the meeting spot since it was a day flight so I would be there just as the war began. I spread my wings and started flying. This was time to go to war.

Chapter 4: The End

After what felt like forever, I finally made it to the village. When I got closer in view, I saw it as clear as day: both monsters and humans blood spilling, magic weapons blasting. This truly was a war. I flew down to my army where I saw no leader, just me and a couple of monster

soldiers were left alive. The corpses of all the leaders rotted. I glared at the humans. If I didn't use the one thing that was forbidden, magic monsters would become just an old legend. I pulled out my spell book and then snapped my finger so it turned into the spear that was known as the Spear of Rebirth. This spear was a forbidden power. I raised my spear. I was ready to end this battle even if that meant I would die alongside them.

"DARK SPEAR LEND ME YOUR POWERS WARPHOLE BLAST!!" I shouted as the spear made a dark black hole sucking everything. I looked up at the hole but then everything went dark. I opened my eyes a couple minutes later. As I sat up, all I saw was red and white. Was I dead?

Spectral Encounters of the Ghost-Hunting Kind by Oliva Albanese

I pushed open the old, creaky door, revealing the inside of the Colonial style house. I held the door open behind me, so that Logan could walk inside as well. It was practically freezing inside, a chill coursing through my spine as I shuddered. The owner of the building- a short, sickly-looking old man- stood in front of the staircase, patiently awaiting our arrival.

"Oh, sick," I heard Logan mumble under his breath, already grinning. He was always like this whenever we started an exploration, and a scaredy-cat by the end of it.

I held my hand out to the owner so that he could shake it.

"Hi there. Via Eastwood," I introduced myself, before gesturing behind me. "This is Logan Crawford."

The old man reluctantly took my hand, immediately scowling at my appearance. Not uncommon for me, to be honest.

"Thank you so much for letting us-" I began, but he abruptly cut me off.

"Yes, yes, I've heard it all before," the old man grumbled, "You teenagers and your 'ghost hunting', I swear. Nothing abnormal happens in this house, I can assure you of that."

I frowned, and almost jumped as Logan tapped me on the shoulder. He held out before me one of the devices I had packed in my bag- typical for him to go snooping through my things. Anyway, I glanced at it nevertheless. As I previously supposed, the paranormal electromagnetic fields in this house were off the charts, and we'd barely even stepped in the door.

"Yeah, well," I spoke up, "We've got proof otherwise. Now, we're gonna do our investigations, so sit tight and we'll get back to you, got it?"

The sharp tone in my voice was far from intentional, but it worked, so I guess that's all that matters. To my dismay, however, the old man exited by using the door behind us without another word.

"Via!" Logan exclaimed, "We were supposed to get a tour of the house! When haven't we done that?!"

"Whoops," I shrugged. "Sorry about that, I guess."

He groaned, before I slung my backpack off my shoulder and unzipped it.

"Okay. You already took out the EMF reader," I began, pulling out some of our equipment. "I brought the Alice Box-"

"Ghost-y talk-y thing," Logan interrupted.

"...Alice Box," I corrected, before moving on. "REM pod-"

"Electromagnetic motion sensor thingy," he interjected again.

"Are you going to interrupt me every time I try to speak?" I huffed, rolling my eyes. He goes quiet after that. "And… there's a few more things, but that's basically it." I stood up and closed my bag.

"So, do you wanna start with the kitchen?" I asked, looking down the hallway. Logan shrugged, and I took that as a yes, so I continued with the idea.

When we came into the house, I'd assumed that our investigation would be like usual- maybe we'd see a little activity, but mostly a blank slate with no spirits present. The EMF reading being so high did pique my interest, but it wasn't until we entered the kitchen that my beliefs were secured.

As I stepped into the room, it immediately smelled disgusting- almost as if something had died recently, and its flesh was just beginning to rot. However, that wasn't the main attraction that the space brought forth. I took a moment to contemplate, but it didn't exactly give me the opportunity to. I had only a split second to move as a plate was hurled at my head. It crashed against the wall next to Logan, shattering into a million pieces of white porcelain.

"Watch out!" I called to Logan as if it wasn't obvious, diving to the floor to avoid the onslaught of silverware soaring through the air towards me.

My next actions were a blur, but I can remember that I somehow ended up with a broom in my hands, smacking flying utensils and plates headed towards Logan and I.

"Stupid ghosts!" I cried out as a plate shattered to glass shards when I struck it with the broom, almost drawing blood from my skin as they flew past.

"Don't say that, you'll provoke them! Logan lectured, despite being a shaking mess on the floor in the fetal position.

All of a sudden, the barrage of kitchenware came to a halt as the levitating objects crashed to the floor. The plates broke on impact, a chorus of glass shattering echoing through the room as they struck the wood lining the ground. I lowered the broom, my breaths heavy as I extended a hand to Logan. He took it, reluctantly standing up again.

"...I think the spirits are hostile," he confessed to me.

"Yeah, you think?" I scoffed, taking off my beanie and running a hand through my hair. "...I've never been more scared of ghosts in my life."

"And you always say I'm the scaredy-cat," Logan smirked triumphantly.

"You are. Let's keep going," I replied, grabbing his wrist and tugging him along into the parlor.

The room felt even more chilling than the rest of the house, and not just in a spooky way. I lifted up my sleeve to see that my arms were coated in goosebumps. I glanced towards Logan, who was practically shaking as he pointed towards the center of the room. My gaze followed his finger, and my eyes laid on a sickly, translucent figure of a woman. There was no denying it- we were witnessing a real, live (well, dead, I guess) ghost.

The apparition's face was sunken, what once was skin appearing to hang over her bones. Long locks enveloped her in what seemed like a makeshift cocoon of hair. I looked around the room for any type of projector that would enable me to see this figure. When I spotted none, I knew that this was the real deal.

"Logan," I commanded, "Run the other way."

Naturally, he obliged, screaming in terror. I stayed back with the spirit.

Great choice there, Via.

"Hi there," I attempted to make contact. "Can you speak…?"

No response from Ms. Ghost. I sighed, taking my bag off from my shoulder and pulling out the Alice Box.

"You can talk through this," I instructed. Immediately after I spoke, the device beeped, and read out a word to me:

Leave.

Unfortunately for her, I'm not one to listen to threats. Especially from dead people.

"I'm not going to go. Do you have a name?" I asked, looking down at the Alice Box afterward.

Leave. Now.

"Well, this is getting repetitive…" I mumbled under my breath. All of a sudden, the Alice Box 's screen dimmed all the way to black. My thumb moved to the power button, pressing it repeatedly, but to no avail. A red icon of a battery flashed up on the screen, showing me that its power had been drained. That prospect made no sense, however, as it was just at full capacity not even a minute before.

I glanced up at the figure, who was now ostensibly melting. She let out an obscene shriek before swiftly approaching my position.

At that moment, I decided it was best to run for it.

I rounded the corner back into the kitchen, grateful beyond belief that there was no kitchenware flying this time. I bolted out of that room, heading into the entryway as I slammed the door to the house behind me. I was now outside, and greeted by a shaking Logan.

Despite being pursued by a literal dead person just moments ago, I was smiling like I've never smiled before.

"Via," Logan asked worriedly, "...you good?"

"...I just got chased by a real ghost."

"...are you sure that's a good thing?"

"Of course, it's a good thing!" I objected. "This proves that ghosts are real! We just saw one! Come on, you can't deny that this isn't somewhat cool."

"Via, I know this is like, your dream, but I don't think it's safe to be in this house anymore," Logan fretted. I rolled my eyes in retaliation.

"Come on, Logan, don't be a loser. This is our first successful investigation! Plus, it's fun! Can't you have a little fun for once?"

"Being attacked by angry spirits isn't my idea of fun," Logan protested.

“You don’t have an ‘idea of fun’. You think ‘fun’ would be staying at home and reading a book!” I scoffed back, my hands settling on my hips.

“Yeah, I would,” he conceded, “because I want to get home in one piece, Via!”

“Stop being so whiny!” I snapped.

“Stop putting us in danger!” he retaliated. I groaned exasperatedly.

“You know what? Fine. Be a wimp. Go home. I’m staying, no matter what you say.”

The second the words left my mouth; a chill ran down my spine and I shuddered. Logan’s face turned pale, and I turned around slowly to face whatever was causing his sudden spew of distress. Hovering in front of me was the translucent figure of the woman I had just escaped. Somehow, she had escaped the house through the front door, which I previously thought was impossible for spirits to do.

“Via,” Logan said shakily, “I thought ghosts couldn’t leave their houses, like, Beetlejuice-style.”

“Yeah, I thought that too…” I admitted, my breathing suddenly heavy and labored. A few yards away, a toolbox filled to the brim with various gardening tools started to levitate, and I knew that we were in deep trouble. Especially when a pair of garden shears being hurled through the air just barely missed my face.

My hand wrapped around Logan’s arm, tugging him along down the street as fast as my legs could carry me. The bombardment of garden gadgets doesn’t end, even as we sprint down the street. Logan’s relentless screaming doesn’t cease, probably waking up every poor person trying to get some sleep at this hour.

We hid behind a nearby house, trying to catch our breaths. Like before, however, the onslaught suddenly stopped, as we could hear from the abrupt clatter against the pavement.

“I think we’re safe,” Logan estimated, and I agreed with him for once.

Until the sirens came into earshot, and a police cruiser rolled up next to us. The officer inside climbed out, crossing his arms and looking at us sternly.

“Now what on Earth are you two doing at this time of night on Halloween?” he inquired, his tone sharp.

“Ghost hunting,” Logan and I responded in unison.

“Hmm, yeah. Well, I’ve gotten multiple noise complaints, and you’re also currently trespassing on private property. You two are under arrest,” he sighed.

“What?!” I immediately shrieked as Logan broke into tears beside me. “You can’t just- we- we’re allowed to be here! In that house!”

My finger stretched to gesture to the house- which was now about 50 yards away.

“Exactly. You’re allowed to be in that house. I do believe that you’re not in that house right now. Which is why you’re under arrest.”

I glared at him, trying to look as intimidating as possible (which was kind of hard, seeing as Logan was bawling his eyes out.) He pulled out some handcuffs, and jerked his head towards

the car, silently telling me that he wasn't afraid to use them against us. I groaned, grabbed Logan's wrist, and tugged him inside.

So, that's how we spent our Halloween- rotting inside a jail cell for three hours until Logan's mom finally got off of her shift and was able to bail us out.

But hey! We were able to prove that we're not just "amateur ghost hunters" anymore; Logan and I are the real deal! We've gotten levitating objects, an actual conversation with a ghost, and-

"Via?" Logan asked, glancing back at me from the passenger seat. "We didn't record anything."

I groaned, leaning my head against the cold window. No one was going to believe us now.

Despite that, I'm not going to give up. This exploration might not've been proven completely true, but Logan and I are determined to prove to the public that ghosts are real.

The real question is if you'll believe us.

Will you?

Midnight Dare by Jude Alnas

It all began on a crisp October evening, when the wind carried the scent of fallen leaves and the distant sound of a train whistle. I, Alex, was staring up at the infamous Harrow House with my friends Jordan and Lexi. The town had whispered about this place for decades — stories of screams, sudden shadows, and strange lights that flickered behind its broken windows. Every Halloween, the bravest kids dared each other to step inside, but none ever returned with more than trembling tales. Tonight, we were going to be different.

"Are you sure about this?" Lexi asked, tugging on her jacket. Her green eyes glimmered with nervous excitement. "I mean, we could just tell everyone we tried and leave."

Jordan smirked, his flashlight swinging lazily in his hand.

"Come on, Lexi. Where's your sense of adventure? You're acting like a scared cat." He nudged me. "Bet Alex here won't last five minutes inside."

I rolled my eyes, trying to hide my own nerves. "Bet I'll last ten. And I'll prove it by bringing back something from the attic."

The three of us approached the creaking front door. Its wood was cracked and weathered, hinges rusted from years of neglect. The doorknob felt cold and heavy in my hand. The wind howled as if warning us away, but we pushed forward anyway. With a deep breath, I twisted the knob and stepped inside.

The house smelled of damp wood and decay. The floorboards groaned beneath our weight. Dust hung thick in the air, catching the flashlight beams and making everything look ghostly. Old furniture was draped in torn sheets, and faded portraits stared down at us with eyes that seemed alive. Every step we took echoed through the emptiness like whispers from the past. A sudden slam behind us made all three of us jump. The front door had shut on its own. I swallowed hard. "Uh... guys? That wasn't me."

Jordan's confident grin faltered. "Maybe it's the wind?" Lexi shook her head, pulling her flashlight closer. "Yeah... the wind doesn't usually make the door slam like that."

We moved cautiously down the hallway. The wallpaper was peeling in long strips, revealing blotchy stains beneath. A staircase led upward, each step groaning as though warning us to stay away. At the top, the hallway stretched endlessly, lined with doors slightly ajar. Faint whispers drifted through the air, almost imperceptible, until the word "play" brushed against my ears.

My heart pounded. "Did you hear that?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Lexi nodded, gripping Jordan's arm. "Yeah... I think... someone's upstairs."

We climbed the stairs, flashlight beams quivering over the walls. Each door we passed seemed to breathe, shadows dancing behind the cracked wood. The further we went, the heavier the air became, as if the house itself was alive.

Then, in the room at the end of the hall, we saw her. A girl, pale and fragile, dressed in a tattered gown. Her dark hair hung in loose waves, and her eyes—huge and sorrowful—locked onto ours.

"Who... who are you?" I stammered.

She tilted her head, a faint smile curling her lips. "Do you want to play?" Her voice was soft, like the echo of a forgotten lullaby.

The three of us froze. I could feel the chill in the room seep into my bones. Yet there was something sad in her expression, not threatening. Lexi whispered, "She... she's alone."

Slowly, I stepped forward. "You're stuck here, aren't you?"

The girl nodded. "The house... it keeps me."

I exchanged a glance with Jordan and Lexi. A strange thought occurred — what if this was all we needed to set her free? Without saying a word, we joined hands. The room seemed to hum with energy, dust floating like tiny stars.

I spoke aloud, "You're not alone anymore. You can go."

A gentle light swirled around her. Her features softened, her eyes brightened. Then, with a graceful motion, she faded like morning mist, leaving the room warm and still.

We exhaled, feeling the tension lift. The front door creaked open, inviting fresh air. Outside, the world was calm, bathed in moonlight.

Jordan let out a laugh, shaky but genuine. "Well... that was... something." Lexi smiled, her fear replaced by awe.

"We did it. We really helped her."

As we walked home, the wind whispered through the trees, carrying a soft giggle that was no longer frightening — just happy. Harrow House was quiet now, finally at peace. And for the first time in years, the legend of the house ended not with fear, but with a smile.

The Spooky Adventure of Blackberry by Susannah Bartley

In a quaint little town, nestled between rolling hills and vibrant fields, lived a cute black kitten named Blackberry. With his shiny fur and bright green eyes, he was the pride of his owner, Luna.

One sunny afternoon, Blackberry decided to explore the town, his tiny paws padding softly against the cobblestone streets. As he wandered, he marveled at the colorful decorations adorning the shops and homes. However, as the sun began to set, casting eerie shadows, Blackberry's curiosity turned to fear. The decorations, once vibrant and inviting, now seemed to loom over him like monstrous figures. Spooked, he darted back home and found a cozy nook beneath the stairs, where he remained hidden for weeks. Luna, worried about her little friend, searched high and low, calling his name, but Blackberry was too frightened to come out. He could hear her gentle voice and the comforting sounds of home, but the fear of the decorations kept him tucked away.

One day, Luna had an idea. She decided to bake her mom's famous blackberry cookies, the sweet aroma wafting through the air like a warm hug. As she placed the cookies on the windowsill to cool, the delightful scent reached Blackberry's hiding spot. His curiosity piqued, and he cautiously peeked out. Luna spotted him and smiled brightly. "Blackberry, look what I have!" she called softly, holding up a cookie. "These are just as sweet as you!"

With a little encouragement, Blackberry crept out from his hiding place, drawn by the irresistible smell. Luna knelt down, offering him a cookie crumb.

"You see, those decorations were nothing to be afraid of. They're just part of the town's charm. You're brave, my little one. You can face your fears!"

With a newfound courage, Blackberry took a tentative step forward, realizing that the world outside was not as scary as he had imagined. He nibbled on the cookie, feeling the warmth of Luna's love wrap around him like a cozy blanket. From that day on, Blackberry explored the town with a brave heart, knowing that he could always return to Luna and her delicious cookies whenever he needed a little extra courage.

Pyromantiac by Nae Caldas

“I'm not crazy. People like to tell me that I am but they're all lying. I understand things they don't. I was a strange kid, nobody really wanted to hang out with me much. I didn’t care though. I befriended the bugs, the rocks, and the plants. It all started with ants. They were easiest to find and always willing to crawl on my hands. I'd also talk to the spiders! I preferred cellar spiders because they wouldn't hurt me. They listened to my thoughts and I’d listen to them talk about their struggles. I’m not crazy, crazy people found satisfaction in killing bugs when they were kids. Crazy people would cut them up, so I'm not crazy. When I wasn't talking to bugs I was conversing with the plants, which is normal! A lot of people talk to plants, it's therapeutic! Also, isn't it scientifically proven that talking to plants helps them grow?”

The person speaking suddenly aggressively twitched, quietly apologized and resumed their rant.

“So, I wasn't crazy for talking with the dandelions. I loved dandelions. I'm actually from here in Connecticut, my hometown had a lot of houses with big lawns so we had a lot of land for dandelions to grow. We don't have dandelions in our lawn now with the big mansion my parents bought.” The person paused then chuckled coldly to themselves.

“I always found it interesting that they were considered a weed even though they were so beautiful and we were taught to hate weeds. I admired dandelions, people would get excited to see them because it showed that spring and summer was soon. You'd wake up and suddenly they were everywhere! I love dandelions. I also really like rocks. I don't think people appreciate geologists enough, if you actually look into it you’d see that rocks are so cool! I read this short story about a pebble. I really liked it. Well, it wasn't about the pebble itself, it was a metaphor; a very beautiful one. Some kid from Southington wrote it. It was in second person too, an interesting choice that was.”

The person speaking paused for a moment. They turned their head to the back corner of the monochromatic room. They hummed a familiar tune.

Jack Flash sat on a candle stick, ‘cause fire is the devil’s only friend…

“Hmm. American Pie, song written and sung by Don McLean. I love that song. I love that lyric: Fire is the devil's only friend. McLean added that as a jab to The Rolling Stones with their feud with The Beatles but before I knew that, I interpreted it a different way. ‘Is fire a living thing?’ is a question asked in pretty much every science class I've ever been in. Fire is fascinating because it needs oxygen like a living thing and it dies like a living thing but it has no cellular structure and doesn't have DNA so it's not a living thing. Fire is the most lively, non-living thing. The devil's only friend is the liveliest non-living thing. Fire is so beautiful. The way it unapologetically takes up space until it's forced to shrink. It's a symbol of danger, destruction, and punishment, but it's also a symbol of rebirth, cleansing, intelligence and balance. I'm not crazy for liking fire. When you watch fire, it actually releases dopamine in your brain. So, I'm not crazy because I enjoy watching it unapologetically take up space.”

The person wrapped in a jacket, limiting their ability to move their arms, looked down and stopped speaking.

“No casualties but the parents got severe burns and the house's damages cannot be fixed.” The chief of the police spoke behind me. “They confess why they burned down the house?”

“Pyromaniac. They have a deep fascination and obsession with fire and burning things.”

Told You to Bring A Flashlight by Elise Capellan

It was a sunny Friday in October in Southington, CT. I was sitting at my desk making a list of what I needed for a camping trip with my friend. I had my friend McKenzie on the phone for help.

“So, what do you think we are going to need for the trip?” I asked Mckenzie.

“Well we will need flashlights, water, and warm clothes,” she responded.

“Wait, why do we need flashlights?” I said.

“Because that way you can see anything in the dark. Are you dumb!?” she said giggling I laughed.

“I just don’t think I'm going to need one.”

“Xandra, have you gone crazy!? There are kidnappers there!” Kenize said.

“Kenzie, I think I will be fine. Anyways I’m going to get my luggage,” I responded.

“Okay… don’t ask me for my flashlight,” she said.

I walked away from my phone and pulled out my blue luggage from my white walk-in closet.

“OK, let's pack everything neatly. I hate messy luggage!” I said.

I opened my luggage to see that there was a suspicious note.

“If you come to the woods you will regret it,” I read in my head.

“Um…OK,” I thought to myself.

I told Kenzie that I had to go so she wouldn’t ask questions about the expression on my face. I hung up the call and turned off my phone. I tried to see if I recognized the hand writing but I didn’t.

“Huh, weird. Must just be a prank,” I said.

I threw the note away and continued packing. I knew that it was probably a prank and that they were trying to ruin this day for me. After a few minutes, I finished packing. I zipped up my luggage and propped it up on my wall. I got a weird feeling that something on that trip might actually go wrong but I shrugged it off. Then I went downstairs.

“Hi Mom!” I said grabbing a granola bar.

“Hello sweetie! When are you going for the camping trip with your friends?” my mom asked.

“Oh, it's later tonight,” I replied.

“Alright, do you have everything? Also, it is a little chilly so bring a sweater.”

“Yes, and also I know.”

“Okay… honestly I still don’t agree that you should be going later when it's darker,” my mom said.

“Well can’t change it now…” I said.

Then I had a thought. Maybe I should tell my mom but knowing her she would have just freaked out.

Later on, my friend Alyssa's car was parked in my driveway.

"Oh Mom, my friend is here to go!" I shouted.

"Okay bye hunny have fun, also make sure you have your phone!" my mom replied.

"OK!"

Then I grabbed my keys and left my house.

"Heyy Xandra!" Alyssa waved. I waved back and got in her red jeep and closed the door.

"Are you guys excited?" my friend Valerie asked. I nodded.

"I'm so excited to get out of the house!" Mckenzie said.

"For sure! My mom has been driving me crazy about this trip. I had to get out!" I said.

"Oh, by the way, I brought snacks because this is a two-hour drive," Alyssa said, pulling out a bag full of chips and candies.

"Yes! You always have the best snacks!" Valerie said, stealing a bag of Doritos. Alyssa turned on the radio and started driving.

Later on, it was an hour later and we were all very hungry

"OK, let's get some Taco Bell and sit inside. I'm tired of driving," Alyssa said.

We all agreed and headed inside. After we ordered our food and waited at the table.

"OK guys. There's drama," Val said.

"Ooh! Don't tell us yet because I have to go to the bathroom. I will be right back," Kenzie said.

Alyssa and Valerie waited till she went inside the bathroom and then continued to talk about it without her. After her first few sentences, I zoned out and started scrolling on Tiktok. Then I got a message from an unknown number.

"Don't go to sleep tonight," I read in my head.

I felt shivers go down my spine and goose bumps on my arms.

"Uh Xandra what's wrong? You look scared?" Alyssa asked.

"Look at what I got sent," I said, turning my phone so that Alyssa and Valerie could see.

"Oh, that's weird. Probably just a joke," Valerie said.

I nodded but that text didn't sit right with me so I blocked the unknown contact from my phone. Then Kenzie came back and then the food we ordered was served to us.

"Did I miss anything while I was gone?" Kenzie asked.

"Oh, Xandra got a weird text from someone. It was like a threat or something idk," Alyssa said.

Kenzie nodded and started eating her food. Then the next hour passed and we all finally made it to our cabin.

"OK guys we are here!" Alyssa said.

My eyes slowly opened and I got up from the car and got out. I stretched my arms and got my bags from the trunk. The cabin was a dark rich brown with wood texture. There were bushes next to it and tall trees that were fall colors. I was in awe of how beautiful the scenery was. I grabbed my phone from my pocket and took a picture of the cabin.

“Wow, this is so pretty!” Valerie said. I nodded.

“Right!?” I agreed with her.

“Guys I can take everybody's bags,” Kenzie afforded. Everybody handed their bags and went inside. The cabin inside was so pretty. It was all made out of wood with big glass windows. All the furniture was made with soft cloth and wood. And the fireplace was big with dark brown wood inside.

“I wish I could live here!” I said.

“Not with all these bears and spiders!?” Alyssa said laughing.

I started bursting into laughter, then Valerie started laughing as well.

After we settled down we started watching TV and eating popcorn. Then it was 9:30 pm.

“Hey guys where’s Kenzie?” Valerie asked.

“I don’t know? She hasn’t come inside yet for some reason?” Alyssa said.

“Should we look for her?” I asked.

They both nodded and got up from the couch. I got up from the couch and grabbed my light green hoodie.

“Guys, do any of you have flashlights?” I asked.

“No...” they both said. I slapped my forehead.

“Let’s see if they have any here?” Alyssa said.

I nodded and started looking around. I checked in drawers, cabinets, and even the closets but I couldn’t find anything.

“Did you guys find any flashlights?” Valerie asked.

“Nope,” I said.

“Also no,” Alyssa said. I sighed.

“Guess we have to go without flashlights,” I said. They looked at me with disbelief and as if I was stupid.

“Fine, I will go alone,” I said, grabbing my Uggs. Alyssa snapped her fingers.

“Bring your phone! It has a flashlight on it,” Alyssa said.

“We shouldn’t leave her alone, let's look at her or at least try?” Alyssa said.

“OK, at least now we have flashlights,” Valerie agreed.

They both got their phones and jackets and headed out the door. I grabbed the keys to the cabin and locked the door. We all turned on our flashlights.

“OK I think we should split up and if we need help we call each other facetime,” I suggested.

“OK good idea,” Valerie said.

“All of our phones have batteries, right?” Alyssa asked. Me and Valerie both nodded. Then we all started walking farther into the woods and then split up. I walked for what seemed like a never-ending alleyway. Looking for people or any shadows of animals or anything. I looked high and low and still couldn’t find Kenzie. Then suddenly I heard a loud chop and a scream that sounded like Valerie.

“VALERIE?”

Then I hear a faint “SOS!”

I started running towards the sound of screaming. Then I stopped to see that Kenzie was right in front of me.

“KENZIE!” I said out of breath. Then I see her face with blood splatters. Then my eyes went to see that she had a big chainsaw covered in blood.

“I told you to bring a flashlight,” Kenzie said.

I stepped back to see that Valerie's head was cut off with blood running down her beautiful white cardigan, the rest of her body was floating in the murky red lake.

“HOW COULD YOU!” I yelled.

“I wanted to take what you loved the most because of what they did to me,” Kenzie explained.

I looked at her with shock and tears in my eyes.

“A few years back I was best friends with Valerie and Alyssa. We would hang out every single day getting smoothies, having sleepovers, and all that stuff. It was like that for a while. But then when you came into the picture, it was like they switched up on me having a whole new personality. After a month of having you as a friend for them, they signed me out in everything. Like as if I had no feelings. And then they did something I will never forget.”

I looked at her and waved my hands telling her to continue.

“They…turned everybody I knew into hating me by spreading rumors.. So instead of walking away, I planned to kill them.”

I looked stunned.

“I see Valerie but where is Alyssa…” I asked slowly, moving back.

“She ran too slow...” Kenzie said. “Ha, ha, ha, ha!!” Kenzie said, starting to laugh.

“I told everyone to bring a flashlight…” Kenzie said, pulling out her knife.

I felt a hard, sharp pain on my side and then everything went black.

What's Going On by Maddie Dean

After a few weeks, nothing changed.
The building? Perfect.
The students? Perfect.
The weather? Perfect.
Everything moved in unison.
In the halls, there were no overlapping sounds.
No voices, no overlapping footsteps.
Everything moved together.
Everything done at the same time.
You take no notice of this.
You never found it strange, it was all you had known.
You're used to it.
Walking in time with the others.
Doing everything with the others.
You're one of them, until
You begin to wonder
How does it work?
You ask.
No one answers.
So you search the internet.
Nothing comes up.
Search the address?
No.
Such.
Thing.
You know too much.
We can't let that happen.

The Hollow House by Khen Julia

When I asked Miriam to marry me, I told her I would give her everything she could ever want. Anything her heart desired, I said, would be hers. I only wanted one thing in return—something I'd dreamed of since I was a boy staring at old gothic movies on our flickering television. I wanted us to build a haunted house. A real one.

Miriam thought I was joking at first. But she said yes, the way people do when they think money can drown out madness. She had come from modest means, a bright young woman who caught my attention at the firm where I was the boss and she was just beginning. She laughed when I talked about fog machines and candlelit corridors, but her laughter didn't stop me. When you've got enough money, laughter just sounds like permission.

I told her my vision: a sprawling estate on the edge of the woods, a place that looked centuries old even though it would be brand new. I wanted portraits of ancestors that never existed, dusty hallways that whispered when you walked through them, secret doors behind bookcases. It would be an illusion of history, built from scratch. She smiled and nodded, the way you do when you think your husband's quirks are part of his charm.

We built it together—though I paid, and she watched. Over the years, we visited every few months to see the work progress. Gargoyles arrived in crates. Imported stones were laid down in patterns that seemed older than sin. I commissioned writers to invent family histories full of madness, curses, and disappearances. The place began to breathe before it even had walls.

When it was finally done, we moved in. The house—Hollow House, I called it—was magnificent. At night, the hallways filled with moans and rattling chains. I had speakers built into the walls for that. Miriam added one touch of her own, an unfinished corridor with cobwebs that would never be cleaned, a little tribute to her love for ghost stories.

The first night, we were happy. The kind of happy that feels like you're pretending, but don't know it yet. The second night, we held a grand party. People came from everywhere—politicians, writers, the kind of people who drink too much and call it art. Cameras flashed. Laughter spilled through every room.

For a few hours, the place felt alive, like it had swallowed something precious and was digesting it slowly.

And then came the third night.

I told Miriam there was one more surprise. She smiled, exhausted, the glow of champagne still in her eyes. I took her by the hand and led her down a stairway she didn't know existed, deep beneath the house, where the air was colder and the light didn't quite reach the corners.

There was a smell down there, damp and metallic. The smell of new concrete.
In the center of the room was a pit. A clean, perfect rectangle dug into the earth. She asked me what it was for. I told her the truth. Every haunted house needs a ghost. She didn't understand at first. Then she did. Too late.

When it was over, I stood there for a long time, staring at the freshly turned dirt, the silence pressing down around me like a blessing. Upstairs, the pipes groaned. Somewhere in the walls, the speakers hummed with the faint sound of a woman sobbing.

It's been years now. Hollow House stands at the edge of the woods, cold and proud. The windows sometimes fog from the inside, even when no one's home. People say it's haunted, that they hear footsteps when the lights go out.

They're right.

I finally got what I wanted. I became the master of a haunted house.

The Monster That Lives in My Closet by Ayla Khouri

The monster that lives in my closet is very afraid. He has been ever since I saw him there for the first time when I was five. I am now 14, and I haven't opened that door since then…

All the clothes in there, I just stopped wearing. Even my favorite sweater. I never built up the courage to look in there. That was, until Halloween.

It was the morning of Halloween. I got up and changed into my witch costume. I got a mirror on the door of my closet, so I went over to go see how I looked. Then, I saw it. Two tiny holes with red eyes looking through them. They weren't there yesterday, or even 30 seconds ago. I finally decided that it was time to open the door.

I slowly turned the knob, and pulled the door. There it was, the same monster that was there years ago. However, before I could even open my mouth, the monster let out a very loud shriek. I was very confused, because I thought I was the one that was going to be screaming, but the monster had this terrified look on its face, that I was expecting to be mine.

The monster suddenly let out another noise, then said out in a scratchy voice, "Please, don't come in here, I'm afraid of monsters…"

All I could do was laugh, because then I realized, this whole time I was afraid of the monster eating me, the monster was really the scared one.

Home Sweet Home by Maureen Maisana

You're awake. Hair in your face, eyes sore; adjusting to the darkness, head spinning, and air heavy but weirdly thin. How long have you been asleep? When did you last remember being awake? It was at 2, you think, after you'd got home from… something… You forgot, but that doesn't matter. You look up from where you lay; what time is it? 3.

Your head is ringing and reeling as you slump it down onto your pillow and close your eyes. You wait… and wait… and wait… You can't go to sleep. What time is it? 3? You rub your eyes, scraping your eyelashes against your skin. 3.

Your feet crashed on the cold floor. Winding through the halls your hands guide you; opening the pill cabinet, the air inside it thick and stagnate. You take some for sleep and force them down with a gulp.

Crawling back to your room, you creek open the door. It's a bedroom… But it's not your bedroom. The bed is empty but messy and desolate, the curtains closed, and the cabinets are open but barren; there's a clock on the wall. 3. It feels like someone's there but… No one is. You can't even remember whose room this is. Leaving the room, the walls and halls seem to distort, winding and twisting themselves into an everlasting abstruse web. You start opening more doors looking for your room. Nothing and no one; they're all the same bedroom you first looked into. The same empty bed, the same closed curtains, the same barren cabinets, the same 3 on the clock. You start thrusting the doors open, and slamming them when you're done.

Why is no one here? Certainly, someone is at least here? The suffocating silence surfaces, as you stand steady alone. You want to go home. There is no one for you here, there is nothing for you here. This is not a home.

The Portal Down to Hell by Vruthi NandiReddy

"AAHHHH" Lou screamed.

Zach and Maya got Lou's leg free and worked on getting the ghost out.

Two hours ago

One Friday night, a group of siblings were all alone while their parents were at a party for the night. They decided to play a board game since the power was out. As they were looking through their board games, they saw the Ouija board.

"Do y'all wanna play the Ouija board?" asked Lou as she held the board game up in the air.

"I don't know. What if we actually summon a ghost? I'd be the one in trouble since I'm in charge," said Maya as she questioned her younger sister Lou.

"We'll be fine," assured Zach.

As they set up the board game, they felt someone or something hover over their shoulder. They started to play the game and asked…

"Is there a ghost present in this house?" they all asked together.

"Oh, this is fake, I'm taking my fingers off," said Luke.

He took his fingers off.

"NO Luke, you're not supposed to take your fingers off or else you'll get a consequence." shouted Zach he warned his older brother.

"Luke, what are you doing? Where are you going?" questioned Maya.

Luke walked toward the kitchen to find a cutting board and a knife. Luckily, his siblings followed him to find out where he went. They all wondered why Luke was going to the kitchen.

"Guys, why do you think he is leading us to the kitchen?" asked the youngest Lou.

"I don't know but I think he is pranking us or something," said the eldest Maya.

"Yeah probably," added Zac.

Luke opened the drawer in the kitchen. He looked and he looked and finally he found both the cutting board and knife. He started to put his hand on the cutting board…

"LUKE WHAT ARE YOU DOING STOP!" yelled Maya.

The room went dark and Luke started chanting something in a different language.

"Raise your hand if you think he is possessed," said Zach, frightened.

All three of them raised their hands. All of them thought of ways to get the ghost out of Luke. Luke started to grab Lou's leg as she fell and screamed.

"We gotta get this ghost out fast, but how?" said Zach as he thinks of ways to get the ghost out of his brother.

"AAHHHH!" Lou screamed.

Zach and Maya immediately got Lou's leg free and were working on getting the ghost out.

They all grabbed hold of their brother and screamed "LUKE" three times.

WHOOSHH

"I'LL BE BACK!" screamed the ghost as he went back to the portal.

They all hugged Luke!

"We are never playing this game again, and not telling Mom and Dad." They all agreed.

THE END

A Little Too Perfect by Alexandra Nolan

I walked across the broken glass, through the house I had been in for five years. The smell of rotting food and black mold were in the air. Finally, I found the exit.

I haven't been outside in five years. I got kidnapped and locked up when I was 15. I wasn't expecting much had changed, but I walked out and it looked like everything was perfect, dangerously perfect. I had never seen anything like this before. It smelled like freshly made donuts. You could feel the breeze, you could see rows of houses and shops. Southington, CT seems perfect, but it has a weird perfectness. No conflict, everyone smiling, perfect families, nothing crooked.

Families walked by and no one noticed my disheveled appearance. My messy blonde hair looked like a rat's nest. My clothes looked like they hadn't been changed for five years (which they haven't), with rips all over. I didn't have shoes on because they broke and were thrown away two years ago. The most acknowledgement I got was when one mom looked over with their kid, who must have just got out of school, and smiled. It was the most unsettling smile.

I walked to town. I saw kids from Beecher Street school being let out. I noticed that everyone had that same unsettling smile. I was so focused on everything else that I didn't realize that one of the teachers had come up to me.

"Sweetie, are you lost?" the teacher asked.

"No. Well, actually, kind of. I'm trying to get to town but I don't know which way to go. Could you tell me where to go?" I blurted out.

"I can, but by the way, what's your name? I'm Mrs. Wilde," the teacher responded.

"Well I'm, I'm, I'm…" I couldn't remember my name, it's been so long since it's been used so I couldn't remember it, I just had to think of a random name I could remember, "I'm Alice."

"OK Alice, if you keep going down this street then turn left and keep going, eventually you will find yourself at the center of town," Mrs. Wilde explained.

I thanked Mrs. Wilde before I left. I headed towards town using the vague directions that she gave me. As I walked toward town I realized that everyone had that forced smile. Some looked like they didn't want to smile, others just had dead eyes. Something was wrong, this was definitely not normal.

I had finally reached the center of town. I saw little shops, I saw some houses. Everything in this town looked a little too perfect. Smiles at every corner, no conflict, no frowns, just smiles. Just that unsettling smile on everyone. Siblings playing, without any arguments, no conflict, not even one tiny conflict. If I knew anything about people, I definitely knew that they all have flaws and aren't always happy. This was definitely not normal human behavior. I wanted to find out why. But I did need a place to stay so I had to do that first. So, I tried to find someone willing to let me stay with them.

I found a place to stay. It was nighttime. I think it was 7:56PM and I kept seeing this thing outside of my window. Mrs. Wilde, she took me in and let me stay with her. It was really

sweet! I had my own room. She was kind enough to lend me her old office! I also had an actual bed! Not just a big, big piece of cardboard like before! Well I needed to get some rest so I tried that. I tried to sleep and I tried to think about other things but I kept seeing this shape.

It was 2:12AM. I couldn't sleep because I kept having dreams about this mysterious black creature. I kept waking up. I saw a black shape that kind of looked like what I saw in the dream and I could feel it was watching me. I don't know why but I felt like coming here was a mistake. I felt like I was being watched. I did not have a good feeling about this house. I just couldn't shake the feeling that this was a bad decision and this place was not safe. I just kept trying to sleep. Spoiler: it didn't work.

I jolted awake when Mrs. Wilde called up “Bye Alice! I'm heading off to work but breakfast is on the table.” I could smell the freshly made pancakes, with BACON! I rushed down to the kitchen. I still couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. As I stepped on to the hard wood floor, my eyes focused on that plate of pancakes and bacon! “BACON!” I screamed again in excitement. Bacon is the best thing ever. For one second there was a flash in which I felt like I couldn't control myself. Then boom, it went back to normal. “I have to find out what's going on! But first I want my bacon.” After I finished my delightful bacon, I was able to head out the door to find out what was happening.

I got a feeling that whatever was going on had something to do with a factory called Southington Cutlery Factory. I felt this feeling the closer I got to it. I knew something was terrible. But there was another part of me that thought that it was a terrible idea to go to the factory. I could get hurt and I didn’t know what was in there. But I just needed to find out what was happening.

As I got closer to the factory, I felt something in my body, something I couldn’t describe. It felt too complex, too weird for me to describe. It was like my life was a movie that I couldn’t control. But when I ended up getting to the factory, I felt it was stronger than before. Then I got another flash of where I couldn't control my body. This time it wasn't just a quick flash of where I couldn't control myself, it was longer. Not too much longer, but still longer. Long enough to startle anyone. Imagine living like this. Actually, I didn’t want to imagine it. But that flash happened again, but not seeing my surroundings, seeing words, a sentence but the background is black. Nothing else but the words.

“Alice Linda Williams, you need to stop. We're not joking around anymore.”

Then boom I could see everything and control myself again. I needed to find out what was going on before it was too late. As I walked in, I was beginning to slow down. It was like something (or maybe even someone) was pushing me back; it didn't want me to be here. So, of course I had to push through and go in. I don't know if I will ever truly know if it was a good or bad idea. But it was an idea, I guess.

When I got in, I saw something I hope to never see again. Something that makes me still shake today while I'm writing on this rusty typewriter. I saw a giant machine spitting this

foam-liquid-potion type thing out of it with a giant black creature behind it. The same one that I kept seeing in my nightmares, the same shape I saw outside the window in Mrs. Wilde's house. It was him, the one in control of this factory. And it looked like there was a possibility that he was the cause of this whole thing, I could just tell by the way it stared at the potion and looked in. I just had to stay for some reason.

"Who are you? Why did you make this town like this?" I questioned. For a split second I had that same feeling as before. Where I couldn't control myself, worst timing by the way.

"I'm the creator of this. That old town had too many imperfections. I needed to fix that." The black creature said as it took off its mask to reveal a short, brown haired teenage girl. I stood in shock.

"Amazed on how I did this, right?" she had asked me. "I just simply figured out the way to make the potion, had one of my friends help me make a machine, found this factory which was pretty empty so I was just able to take over this factory. Anyways, I am supposed to tell you my evil plan like in the books? I'm a big book girl!"

"I didn't get any of that, so I'll pretend I did. But I love my books too, girl! It was the only thing I could do when I was kidnapped. But I am actually proud that you did all that with just you and your friends. But can you not do this please? And I think you should tell me your evil plan," I said.

The girl replied, "Oh my gosh, thanks for the compliment! By the way, I'm Nancy. And my evil plan is this: Step one: make the machine and make everyone happy. Complete. Step two, well actually, I don't know what else. But by the way, sorry for this. I hate to do this to you but if you try to stop me I kind of have to take the potion off everyone an-"

"That's a good thing, right? Also, I'm Alice! Taking the potion off everyone has to be a good idea," I responded.

"Alice, you didn't let me finish! After I take the potion off of them, I'm going to erase their memory, make you seem like the crazy one, then they will have to send you off to a psychiatric hospital where you will have to spend a long time there. But please, do not make me do that because I don't want it any more than you do. I try not to be the mean one but sometimes I have to!" Nancy answered.

As I stepped closer to the machine I told her, "I know your bluffing, so just stop, we can stop this together. You don't have to do this!"

"I'm really sorry that I have to do this. I told you I don't want to do this but I kind of have to do this. I really have to. You have left me with no choice. Bye Alice Linda Williams," she told me with tears in her eyes, kind of looking like she was being controlled by someone else, someone stronger. Then she pulled out this remote looking thing with her whole body shaking like there was a little earthquake. She pressed the bottom button first, then the top one. She was still shaking, still looking controlled. Those brown eyes, those beautiful brown eyes. I could see the fear in them (and I'm not usually good at seeing emotion through eyes) which shows that it's written all over her eyes. I watched her as she walked outside to scream, "Help! My friend Alice is having her hallucinations again and they are worse than usual! I think she needs to go to a

psychiatric hospital!" I saw her look back at me with a mix of a smug smile and sadness in her face.

"Someone get in their car and take her to Connecticut Valley Hospital," I heard someone yell.

"She needs a lobotomy!" someone else yelled. Someone drove over with their Willys car.

"I can take her!" the one in the car said. I started to get pulled into the car. I was so crowded it was impossible to escape.

Once I got to the psychiatric hospital, he checked me in as a psychiatric patient for psychosis. Now I'm in the room that I'm stuck in until they can "fix me back to humanity" which is kind of stupid. But I kind of don't have an escape this time. But now anyone that comes to visit me from the town or anywhere, they just seem a little too perfect.

The Haunted Graveyard by Meredith Oblon

"Eliza, stop! You're freaking me out-"

"The wolves howled under the moonlight sky, as a horrifying torn up zombie emerged from the shadows!" Eliza yelled with joy, continuing her story. "He limped across the open field looking for his next victim. He needed brains to live, so he kept going until he found what he desired."

This vision of a brain-eating zombie at Camp Sloper scared the living daylights out of me. We were out on a hike at Camp Sloper at 6:48 pm so we decided to camp for the night in the field near the pavilion.

"Oh my gosh! We should visit the zombie graveyard, it's full of old memories!" Eliza grinned. We stepped just outside the zombie graveyard.

"Uhm how about we don't-" I said as Eliza dragged me into the graveyard.

"I don't understand why it's such a big deal! It's just a story." Eliza said as we were walking through the graveyard. The graveyard had a weird, uncomfortable feeling. The trees were still with no movement. It was a windy and rainy night. But when we stepped in the graveyard, it was like time froze. Everything paused like we were stuck in a loop.

"I told you it's not that scary! We're going to be okay!" Eliza mentioned as we were walking near a bunch of graves! She was delusional if she thought that we were going to be okay because she knew the urban legend is not true. What if it is true? She had no idea. I stuttered my words as I saw a hand rising out of the ground.

"W- what is that? Why is there a hand?" I stuttered as I backed away slowly. I looked back at Eliza and she was far away. She was making a run for it. As I looked back into the shadows, a cluster of zombies emerged. I screamed at Eliza, "ELIZA! YOU CAN'T JUST LEAVE ME HERE!" and get no reply. She's gone and she left me alone.

I tried to run. I tried my hardest to make it out. But at the last second when I was so close- the door closed right in front of me. I think about the day at the house. The day where I was locked out and thrown away. I will never be treated like that again, I will never just be thrown away. I had to fight back. I looked around, searching for something to help. I was in a graveyard! Where would I find- I looked back to see a shovel in a dug grave. Ohh that's what I was looking for!

"But how would I use this?" I raised the shovel, and pointed it at the zombie running towards me, and swung! The zombie fell to the ground with no reaction.

"Huh, that's weird. But surprisingly easy." I ran toward the upcoming zombie and smashed him to the ground. Swing, after swing, I've done it! I've beaten all the zombies. I went over to the gate, thinking my quest was complete. Sadly, the door would not open.

One hour later…

I sat on the ground, dirt and sweat rolled down my face. I had been tugging at the stupid gate for over 30 minutes. At that point, I just gave up. I wasn't going to stay there forever trying to break myself out. I stood up, brushed my face off trying to stand up, struggling. When I finally got up, I wandered out into the distance.

The Creature in the Window by Ryan Scott

Jonathan couldn't remember the last time he slept. His head hurt and his eyes were blood red and dry. Ever since the death of his mother in that freak accident, something in the corner of the window had been watching him. Not moving, not making a sound. This … thing, "being" if you would, had been watching him when he tried to fall asleep. And whenever he woke up … it was gone.

This continued for the next week. Jonathan was, in fact, able to fall asleep after a couple of days, until one night. Jonathan awoke and needed to use the bathroom. He had to go downstairs to use it due to the house having only one bathroom. His stomach churned at the thought of getting up at this hour especially with that… thing in the window.

Jonathan slowly peeked one eye out from under the covers, inspecting the window. At first glance, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. There was, oddly… nothing in the corner of the window. Jonathan felt a feeling of relief spread across his body.

He proceeded to stand up and walk towards his door. He walked past his father's room. HIs father slept alone, saddened by the death of his beloved wife. A tear ran down Jonathan's cheek.

"If only she were still here," Jonathan thought to himself.

He remembered the night he heard the news.

A knock on the door and when Jonathan opened it, a police officer stood there in his uniform with a look on his face… like something terrible had happened.
They stood there for a solid ten seconds before either one said anything; until the police officer proceeded to speak.

"Is this the Edward residence?" he questioned Jonathan. Jonathan answered with a shake in his voice. "Yes… c-can I help you? The police officer with a deep breath answered.

"I'm sorry… but I'm afraid your mother is dead.".

A spear of sadness pierced Jonathan's heart. He clenched his chest struggling to comprehend what he had just heard. He finally managed to speak another word.

"What… what do you mean?" he barely spoke.

"She died in a car crash. It was discovered her brakes would not work and she slammed into a telephone pole. We rushed there as soon as possible but her injuries were too fatal."

Jonathon couldn't breathe, he couldn't speak, he couldn't even move or even shake his head. He just stood there dazed. A teardrop fell onto the floor, followed by another. Jonathan stood there bawling his eyes out but not making any noise;it was a silent waterfall coming from his eyes.

Jonathan snapped out of his memory, forgetting where he was for a second and then remembered. He made it downstairs and walked into the kitchen where on the counter he saw a photograph of him and his mom when he was three years old. They were at the park having a fun time. Jonathan stood there for a solid minute with a wave of sadness washing over his mind. But before any sadness could take hold of him, he felt it. A slight breeze brushed his shoulder.

He turned around behind him and pure horror filled his eyes. There stood before him, what he had feared the last week from the window, staring into Jonathan's eyes. Jonathan was completely petrified, not knowing what to do.

“How did it get into the house!” Jonathan thought. Pure panic started to spread through his body. He took notice of the creature's appearance. It was hard to see because the lights were off but he could make out that it was wearing a cloak style piece of clothing that was completely black. It had no legs, like it was floating. Jonathan took one step back. Then another. And then ran to the bathroom. The creature flew after him, almost catching up to him in the process but miraculously, Jonathan outran it. He shut the bathroom door locking it and sat down on the floor. He started to panic; he gasped for air panting like a dog.

Jonathan started to cry. The past week had been so much on him. Those sleepless nights, the headaches, the dry red eyes. He couldn’t take it anymore. He curled up and started crying on the bathroom floor.

When he sat up, he froze. Slowly, a black hand stuck through the door and grabbed the handle, twisting it until it opened. The door opened and the creature stood before him.
It slowly floated to Jonathan, who was now pinned against the wall trying to think of a way to get out of this mess.

The creature stuck its hand out toward Jonathan's face. Jonathan, expecting the worst, closed his eyes. But what he felt was not what he expected. He had expected a cold wrinkly hand but surprisingly he felt warmth… like his mother’s warm hand. Jonathan opened his eyes and looked at the creature and realized it had a face.

The face looked like his mother’s, almost identical. The creature placed its other hand on Jonathan and pulled him in, embracing him. Jonathan realized this was no monster or creature.

This was his mother. Jonathan started to cry of pure happiness. But then suddenly his mother started to fade until there was nothing left there. Jonathan paused.

“Mom… I love you.”

Spooky Story by Rylee Secondo

One dark night on Oct 3, 2025, Journee Getz listened to Taylor Swift's new album LIFE OF A SHOWGIRL, which was released that morning. She was listening to the song “Fate of Ophelia” when she got interrupted by her sister Sara saying that it was time for dinner.

That night after dinner, Journee decided to keep listening to the album and draw before bed. While drawing, she had a vision that someone was in the house and they didn't know because they have been hearing some weird things lately.

BOOM. CLASH. Fading scream.

At that moment, everyone came to Journee’s room and told her to come check the attic with them to make sure it wasn’t a rodent. They opened the attic door and it smelled like decaying people and rodents but apparently all they found were dead rats because of the thing they put up there. After that, everyone got ready for bed and heard more noises coming from the attic, but they just thought it was more rats.

The next morning, they saw things that they didn’t own but didn’t think anything of it. They purchased security cameras for everyone's rooms and some for the house just to make sure they didn’t have anyone in the house. That night, they hooked it up to everyone's phones so they could all see what's going on.

It was now Saturday morning and Journee tried to sleep in but Sara woke her up in a concerned voice and said, “ JOURNEE!!!” *thump* Journee fell out of bed.

“ STOP WATCHING ME SLEEP YOU WEIRDO!!” Sara yelled angrily.

“ WHAT DO YOU MEAN NO I’M NOT!! Journee exclaimed.

“ THEN WHY DOES THE CAMERAS SHOW YOU WATCHING ME!!” Sara yelled. Journee looked at her phone, went to the camera in her room and said “ HEY HEY HEY YOU SHOULDN”T BE TALKING, YOU WATCH ME SLEEP WEIRDO!!” Journee claimed.

“ OK THAT’S NOT ME!!” Sara exclaimed.

“ IT HAS TO BE! YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE THAT LIKES TO SNOOP SNOOPER!!” Journee yelled. They agreed that they would never go into each other's room, which meant someone had been in their room watching them sleep every night.

“ THAT'S WHY ALL MY ART SUPPLIES HAS GONE MISSING!!” Journee cried 😣

“ THAT’S WHY ALL OF MY MAKEUP WAS GONE!” Sara sobbed.

“ MOOOOOOOMMMMMM!!” they both cried.

“ What?” Mom said concerned.

“ THERE HAS BEEN SOMEONE WATCHING US SLEEP!!” they both said.

“ No there isn’t! Stop playing!” Mom said angrily, “ We don’t joke about that!”

“ WE’RE NOT JOKING!” they both screamed.

“ OK…calm down.” Mom said in a soothing voice.

Hugging the girls tightly, mom said they could sleep in her room until they caught the guy.

The Hidden Graveyard by Riley Shugrue

A couple years ago, on an island off the coast of Maine. It was just me, Terry, Robert, and Chris. We had just gone on a hike. It was supposed to be quick, and peaceful, but what happened that night was anything but. We had enjoyed the first half of our hike, but it was getting dark, so we had to set up camp. We started to talk, but soon after, we fell asleep. It was Terry and I in one tent, and Robert and Chris in the other. I was having a good dream about the coconut cream pie I ate earlier. Then I heard it. The yell that would kick off the worst night of my life.

"Chris, where the heck are you going?!" There was no reply. Terry and I burst out of the tent with our flashlights, looking around. Finally, my flashlight landed on Robert's horrified face. I realized what had happened. We ran after Chris, who was dashing through the dark forest with superhuman speed. We struggled to keep up, because we didn't know the lay of the land, so we were getting whacked and scratched by sticks and thorns. But it appeared Chris did, but he had never been here before.

Then, Terry stumbled over something large and stone, as did we all, tumbling over Terry. I stumbled to my feet, and swung my flashlight back and forth, looking for Chris. Then, I found him, bent over a grave, digging vigorously with his hands. I tried to pull him away, but he wouldn't budge. I called Robert and Terry over to help, but he still continued digging. We knew we couldn't move him, but maybe we could knock him out of it. We all started punching him, hitting him with sticks, but he wouldn't stop, until I whacked the back of his head, knocking him out. Robert carried him back to the tent, and we each spent the rest of the night, taking shifts, making sure Chris wouldn't run off again.

In the morning, we all wanted to get off the island, but we had to look at what happened to Chris. When he woke up, he yawned, and asked; "Why does my head hurt?" We all stared at him in surprise, and I asked him, "Don't you remember what happened last night?" He shook his head.

"You ran off," said Robert. "I- I did?"

As we walked through the brush, Chris kept asking us about what had happened over and over again, but no one wanted to talk about it anymore. When we finally reached the graveyard, we realized how old it must have been. It was crumbling apart, the headstones nearly overtaken by vines. We explored it, and then Terry yelled: "Over here!" He had found the grave Chris was digging up last night, and I bent down to read the faded writing.

Chief Joseph Attean

Suddenly, we heard a rustling behind us, and we saw a white figure, wielding a tomahawk, pointing at Chris with a menacing smile. Robert turned and ran, and the rest of us followed suit. We ran until we got back to our boat, and we all collapsed on deck. I got up, sat in the captain's seat, and slammed the pedal, moving at top speeds. As I looked back, I saw him again, the white figure, pointing at me this time.

20 Years Later

“Uh, guys, what is that?” said Gabe. “I dunno,” said Tyler.

“YOU ARE NEXT” Screamed the white figure, fueled with vengeance.

Dead Man's Secret by Abigail Sutter

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 carpeted-floor 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, 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 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, which 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.

Spooky House by Lara Bryant

As soon as his swing connected with the baseball, James knew the hit was no good. It wasn't his fault. Everyone knew Will Connor had a throw as crooked as a witch's nose. The only reason they put up with his lousy pitching was because he was the only one in the neighborhood with a bona fide baseball. Although it wasn't really his. He "borrowed" it from his older brother. And since he "borrowed" it, he wouldn't let anyone else pitch with it. If the boys wanted to play real baseball–and they did– they'd have to put up with Will's bad pitching.

James was a good batter, and his dream was to play for his mother's favorite team: the Boston Red Sox. But not even Babe Ruth could hit Will's cheese balls. He glanced at Will, then at his teammates waiting at their bases, then back to Will before he whispered a Hail Mary under his breath. Like a wind-up mechanical doll, Will stiffly pulled back his elbow, craned his right arm, and threw.

With a sickening CRACK, the bat connected with the ball. It would have been a beautiful home run, had Will not been pitching. It soared like a meteor towards second base before veering off course and arching over the third baseman's head and out of the vacant lot where they played. It whizzed through the branches of an oak tree, loosening wizened brown leaves from its limbs, then crashed through the second-floor window of the neighborhood's residential haunted house.

Every neighborhood has a haunted house. The house where no one was ever seen entering or exiting. The one with such overgrowth that no sunlight could pierce its dark canopy. Having a haunted house in the neighborhood was a tradition as old as Thanksgiving turkey, as expected as presents under the Christmas tree, and by golly every kid had a story to tell about it. No one's stories ever matched up, but that didn't matter. It was still a haunted house.

"What'd you do that for?" yelled Will. His face scrunched with anger.

"You throw like my grandma!" James yelled back.

"Go fetch it!"

"I don't wanna go in there!"

"So? You're the one who hit it in there! My brother is gonna kill us if you don't get that ball!"

Johnny Capriano was on first. He was a tall, imposing kid with shoulders like a bull. He and Will were best friends, which meant Johnny was on Will's side in any argument. It was also how Will won most arguments.

"You heard him," said Will, stepping off the plate. "Get in there and find the ball. Or are you chicken?"

"I'm no chicken," James said with vitriol. He glanced over at the abandoned house. It was two floors tall, and covered in moss that spread across its rotted siding and tiled roof like end stage leprosy. The wind blew and for a moment it looked like the house shimmered, as if it were an illusion.

Nonsense, James told himself, but he still didn't want to go into the house. James had heard all the stories about the haunted house. He once even heard his own story he made up, told back to him.

The scariest story he heard about the house was about a girl named Grace Tatro. Fifteen years ago, her pet cat went missing and she went into the house to look for it. She never came back out, and she was never seen again.

A missing child was frightening, but what frightened James the most was that Grace's disappearance was a true story. His mother had known the Peppins and had even helped her parents look for her–the whole town of Southington had looked–but her body was never found. No one had actually seen her enter the abandoned house, but that didn't stop the kids from spreading the rumor that the house was somehow responsible for her disappearance.

"C'mon, chicken! Bawk-bawk-bawk!" Johnny folded his beefy arms to his side and pantomimed a hen scratching at the ground. Several other boys cackled with ill-tempered humor.

Will walked up to James and spoke in a low voice. "Please just go in," he pleaded.

"Please. No one wants to go in there, but you're the one who hit the ball."

"Will–"

"Fair's fair." Will crossed his arms. "C'mon. Prove you're not a chicken."

James released a heavy sigh. "Fine. But we're going back to stickball after this!"

Resting his bat over his shoulder, James jogged across the road and up the embankment leading to the abandoned house. Johnny abandoned his chicken impression and the other boys cheered James on.

An old picket fence surrounded the house. It had once been white, but years of skewed Connecticut weather had worn away the paint and weathered the wood. Now it looked more like the exposed teeth of a wicked behemoth slumbering beneath the earth. James scrambled through a rotted hole in the fence, and stepped onto the property of the house.

Maybe it was all in his mind, but he could swear it was colder and darker on this side of the fence. Not far from him, a set of stone steps lurched up the embankment. He hiked the steps, two at a time, brushing aside heavy undergrowth that had reclaimed the land over the years.

The steps brought him to the top of the embankment, where the kids could see him again. He could hear Paul Kadic and Gene Nazaro whooping for him, but their cheers seemed distant. James felt like he was standing on the moon for as far away as he felt at that moment. An overgrown flagstone path spread before him, leading to the front door. The door was rotted, its wood shredded from years of animals–

Monsters?

–scratching at the door. Just looking at it made James afraid of getting splinters in his fingers.

The house cast a shadow that seemed to lean in the wrong direction. As he walked up the path, his legs began to wobble like wet noodles. Not now, he thought to himself, willing for courage, not while they're watching me.

He reached the front door. He slipped his free hand under his shirt and used the hem to test the door handle. Hungrily, it creaked open. An overwhelming smell of forest rot and mouse droppings flooded out, clotting James's nose. He didn't realize until then that he'd been holding his breath. He choked out a cough, then gagged as the odor assaulted his nose again. Forest rot, stale urine, and something else, something old and festering, poisoned the air with its rancid brand. He placed his sleeved arm up to his nose, let his ears fill with the sound of the cheering boys, then stepped quickly into the house.

Inside was darker than James anticipated. He had no source of light on him, but there was a dingy orange glow seeping in from the clouded windows that was enough to cast away total darkness. James's eyes quickly adjusted to the dimness, and in no time, he was able to distinguish large shapes from smaller ones. He couldn't discern a grandfather clock from a coat rack, but at least he wouldn't blindly walk into anything.

Or fall into a hole.

Where did that thought come from?

James pushed the fear out of his mind, but his imagination wouldn't let go of it. It envisioned a gaping maw in the center of a room, hungrily waiting like a Venus fly trap ready to snatch a fly for its unquenchable hunger.

Stop it, he told himself.

The front door led into a narrow foyer, which then opened into two larger rooms: one straight ahead, the other to the right. The room straight ahead was definitely a kitchen–he could make out the outline of a stove, and the curvature of a large stockpot resting atop the range.

Big enough to cook a cat in.

STOP it!

The room on the right might have been a living room, but now it was a shrouded memory of its former purpose. Debris was everywhere. An old arm chair sagged in a corner, and to its right two broken halves of an end table laid at rest. Beneath the debris was an old rug with an indistinguishable pattern James couldn't make out. Everything in this room strongly emitted the fetid odor he had smelled since opening the front door.

Like someone died here.

Like Grace.

STOP IT!

There was an underlying smell, too. A smell beyond the festering rancor he sensed outside, and not specific to the living room. It was everywhere, but he hadn't noticed it until now. It was sterile and metallic, like a lightning strike. It wasn't a bad smell, but it was an unnatural smell. He didn't like it.

Well, whaddaya got to say about that smell, wise guy?

Don't ask me, pal. You told me to STOP IT.

Ahead to the left was a staircase. James pushed down his thoughts and began his ascent with a soft, careful gait. The wood creaked like old bones breaking under his weight. He

found himself gripping the bannister, but as he stepped higher there was a slickness to the bannister that stuck to his hands like bad bubblegum. He wiped his hand on his pant leg, but he couldn't shake the slickness the bannister left on his skin.

At the top of the stairs was a narrow landing abutted by a narrow closet door and two shut bedroom doors. The sterile smell was stronger up here, like someone had been melding metal. Leaning against his bat like a crutch, he considered which room he would find Will's ball in.

Without warning, the house groaned. It seemed to lurch, like a child reeling a toy on a string. What had he felt? An earthquake? Could earthquakes cause houses to make noises like that?

James tottered forward, thankfully away from the staircase, but his bat was not so lucky. It tumbled down the stairs, clanking on every step until it rolled to a stop out of his sight.

James didn't feel particularly brave, but what little bravado he had was tied into his bat. Without it, he suddenly became very aware of his vulnerability. Staring down the stairs, James didn't notice as the door to his right opened on silent hinges. Inside was Will's baseball.

James turned back and was astonished to find the ball waiting for him. He was also surprised to find the door had opened. Wasn't it shut like the other two doors? They didn't open. Had this door been ajar and the quake was enough to open it?

Should he even be questioning it?

James crept into the room. It had definitely been a bedroom at one time or another. The remains of a four-post bed took up just under half the space. A rotted toy chest rested against the footboard, the wood lid having caved in years ago and left to rot like a cavity in a rotting corpse. Wallpaper peeled off the wall like sagging skin, grayed beyond color with dust and dirt. James scanned the room for anything that would hurt him, but found nothing. He stepped carefully into the room, left foot first, then right, and cat-toed his way to where the ball waited.

The baseball rested in a bed of broken windowpane. He reached down and pincered the ball with his non-sticky hand, shaking it free of glass. Finally, he thought triumphantly. He walked over to the broken window so he could show the other boys he had found the ball. What he saw outside was not his neighborhood.

Where once stood an old fence and trees now rose weird formations twisting into shapes his mind could not understand. They pulsed and thrashed, stretching upwards into a boundless, putrid orange sky that rippled like a wrinkled shroud, as if the sky covered the face of an ancient, resting god. Flashes of a color blacker than midnight spun through the sky like spiderwebs, leaving afterimages between James's blinks that looked like a gnarled, tendrilled claw reaching out to the house. To him.

There were sounds in the air, sounds he had never heard before. It was hard to describe what he heard–it was like the sound of absence. But it was a sound. The world he knew was a cacophony of life and breath and light. Where he was now was the opposite of that world, and the crashing nothingness of the void around the house drummed in his ears like a macabre

percussion. It was a rhythm nothing terrestrial could make.

The sterile odor, which before had smelled faintly of metal and lightning, was much stronger here. It was an unbearable ozonic miasma, and it was seeping into the room and cloyingly filling James's head. A headache bloomed between his eyes. He coughed wetly and hacked up something thick and sour from his lungs. He spat it out, then stumbled away from the window, his steps crunching on a broken windowpane. He turned tail and fled the room.

He was mid-step through the threshold when the house lurched again. He stumbled onto the top landing and hit the other bedroom door. Instead of being firm, the door was soft and fleshy. Blood seeped out from underneath the door, pooling at his feet, like he had just pushed against a ripened blister ready to burst. He screamed, unable to hold back his fear anymore. The narrow closet door suddenly opened. Tendrils seeped outwards, their sounds thick and wet like a nest of tongues as they flopped onto the floor and squirmed towards him. The tendrils were the same blacker-than-black shade he had seen streak across the void where once the sky had been.

He ran down the stairs, faster than he had ever ran in his life. At the foot of the stairs he spotted his baseball bat. It was covered in a thick layer of dust, as if a giant moth–the house–had claimed it as its own. He picked it up with one swoop and turned to the stairs. The tendrils eagerly followed him, flopping over themselves as they tumbled haphazardly down the stairs.

From the kitchen he could hear something bubbling away in the stock pot. It smelled rotten, like year old potatoes forgotten in a closet, starchy rot seeping like tears from the potatoes' eyes. Across from him, an enormous hole had opened in the living room. It had swallowed the debris and the beaten furnishings, and was yawning its way towards James. He ran for the front door and swung it open, then ran outside–

–to a world that was no longer his.

His friends were gone. The vacant lot where they played most of their games was now host to a large house bigger than any he'd ever seen before. There were more houses next to it, too. Every house had at least one vehicle that looked like a roadster, only sleeker and more brightly colored. The road was paved, and a parade of tall poles strung with thick black lines marked endlessly down both ends of the street.

He realized the trees were cleared from around the abandoned lot. He turned around, only to find the abandoned house was gone. An old rock foundation overtaken by brush and growth was all that remained.

Two kids on bicycles rode down the street, towards James. They looked about his age, but were dressed oddly with oversized boxy shirts and loose, baggy pants. As they rode closer, James could make out the Red Sox logo on one kid's shirt. He could hear them laughing.

"Hey! Hello, hey!" James ran down the embankment, ball and bat in hand. "Hey, what happened to the kids out here?"

The kids stopped their bikes and looked at each other. From this close, James could read the words under the Red Sox emblem: WORLD SERIES CHAMPIONS BOSTON RED SOX OCTOBER 28, 2018.

That can't be right, James thought. The Sox haven't won since 1918.

The kid with the Sox shirt stared at him like he had three eyes. "We haven't seen any other kids. Who are you?"

Beside him, the other kid pulled out a thin, rectangular box covered with a lacquered plate. It depicted a cartoon character with spiky hair and an oversized sword. He turned it horizontally and held it in front of his face like a camera.

"James Delano. I live on Meriden Ave."

The Sox kid looked at the Camera kid and they shared a shrug. "Okay?" posed Sox, unsure what to make of their situation.

"Dude," said Camera, "did you dye your hair or is that natural?"

"What?" James asked.

"Your hair is white."

Camera turned the thin device around so the plated side faced him and the other side–a blurry still frame beneath a glass surface–faced James. He tapped the surface and it played a Movie.

No, not a movie. It played the moment that had just passed.

"James Delano," his recording said. "I live on Meriden Ave."

The face of the boy in the video was him, but he looked like he hadn't slept in a week. Dark bags hung below his eyes like sacks of wet sand. His mousy brown hair was gone, replaced with an all-white mop that would make his mother weep.

My mother! Where was she?

What had the house done to him?

"Where's the haunted house that was here?" James demanded. His voice was high and erratic as panic seeped into his brain.

"Uhh," stammered Camera, flipping the device back so the screen faced him, "you mean Spooky House?"

"...Spooky House?"

"Yeah, that old janky house? They demolished it a few weeks ago, after police found an old lady squatting there."

"Dude, I saw a post online that the lady died," Sox added nonchalantly.

"Rip," said Camera.

James didn't understand half of what these kids said. The words were English, but the context made no sense. He pressed his face into his trembling hands.

"What year is it?" James asked haggardly. He felt his mind losing its grasp on what was real.

"Dude–" began Sox.

"I'M NOT DUDE," James snapped back. His tone was high and wily, and barely recognizable to himself. "I'm JAMES! James Delano!"

"Sorry du–I mean, James. It's 2025."

Twenty twenty-five.

James's knees gave out. He fell to the asphalt but he barely felt the pain. He dropped his bat, but he still held onto Will's brother's baseball like it was an anchor to reality.
Sox looked down at him from his bike, "You okay?"

Camera nudged Sox and held out his device. "Dude, look at this. There was a James Delano that went missing ninety-six years ago. A paranormal podcast interviewed his grandnephew six years ago on the ninetieth anniversary of his disappearance."

"Ninety-six years ago?" asked Sox. "But that was–"

"1929," James said with a high-pitched laugh. He formed a fist with his free hand and pounded it into the asphalt. The other hand gripped the baseball so tightly he could feel his fingernails bend backwards.

"I got your ball, Will! I traveled through TIME and SPACE for your CHEESE BALL WILL. I GOT IT! WHO'S THE CHICKEN NOW JOHNNY. WHO'S CHICKEN NOW?

Sox spoke with worriment, but his words fell on unintelligible ears. James could feel his sanity slip away from him, like a hand on a greased bannister. Laughing, he took the baseball and smashed it into the bridge of his nose. Both kids were off their bikes and wrestling with James's arms as he repeatedly smashed the ball into his face.

When they finally managed to grapple James's arms, he leaned back and cracked his head into the asphalt road. Sweet unconsciousness took over his mind, and his fractured mind drifted to a realm where time and the voidless black were distant memories. Where Will was a good pitcher, Johnny Capriano never called James chicken, and James never had to retrieve a foul ball from the neighborhood's residential abandoned house.

From Spooky House.

Birds of a Feather Stitched Together by April Fenn

It is a known fact that the Undermountain Trail connects to the Appalachian Trail, and those who know, know that if you hear something, no you didn't. But what isn't very well known is that somewhere in Mount Riga State Park, there is an old cottage with a dark history.

Long lost tales speak of a woman who had lost her mind after her husband died in a war, which one it was is lost to time, but the rest of the story remained the same: The woman was so consumed with grief that she had moved out to the cottage in the woods, swearing to never marry again. Her late husband was her one true love, and the thought of betraying their vows even after death was unbearable. She slowly became obsessed with the idea of two souls being tied to each other. At first it was just the concept of souls being made for another but her obsession slowly started to take a dark turn as the thought of being able to stitch the souls together began to wrap its way around her mind until it became all consuming. It is said that her first experiment was on plants, to see if taking part of one plant and joining it with another would work, and naturally it did. However, her experiments started to turn more…concerning.

Eventually her curiosity turned to animals, pests at first; mice, chipmunks, squirrels, all fell victim to her curiosity, finding themselves dissected and sewn together, their bones tied together with whatever thread she had laying around. Now, what happens after that depends on who you ask, some say she was…dealt with…when those in the nearest village heard of what she had been doing, but others…others say that she had moved onto humans, with a small handful saying she had turned to the unnatural to try and bring her stitched together creations back to life. The story claims that if you explore where you are not welcome, you can still see them wandering around, ready to bring the next victims to their creator.

A Night on the Town by Alexander Garr

The door opened on silent hinges and in strode Death, sodden and muddied. Quiet descended except for the baseball game on the televisions over the bar while all eyes stared at the creature that stood at the threshold a moment. A gust of cool autumnal air blew outside but it sounded muted, as if it was afraid to catch Death's attention. The creature moved to the bar, pulled back a stool, and sat.

Ron watched it, his heart racing. Unsure what else to do, he said, "What'll you have?" Death looked up at the barman and Ron swore he heard tendons creak in that ancient neck. It opened its mouth and water poured out instead of words. Hollow eye sockets seemed to look straight through Ron as if he wasn't there.

A chair scraped back; Ron nearly jumped.

"I think that's it for me." It was Julius, a Thursday night regular. "Put it on my tab, Ron, but I can't stick around for whatever's coming."

He grabbed his coat and hustled out the open door and like a drain cleared of clumped hair, the place began to empty.

Ron distantly wondered if Chris would have his head for all the unpaid drinks and food. Meanwhile, Death continued to stare through Ron. It didn't look like it was supposed to — no robe, no scythe, no bones peeking out — yet it was unmistakably Death who sat in front of Ron. What little skin showed behind the mud sloughing off it was pallid and bloated like it had been living in the Quinnipiac River a block to the east for a week.

Do I call the cops? Ron wondered. Their station was five minutes away and it wasn't uncommon to see a cruiser passing by with the restaurant only two blocks from Southington center. And then what? You can't arrest Death or politely ask it to leave, right?

Not sure what else to do, Ron started to clean his station. Closing time was still over an hour away but he doubted the kitchen would be upset. Besides, he thought they had a good excuse to go home early.

As Ron moved, Death's eyeless face followed. Creeeaak went its neck. The sound of its desiccated body pretending at living was deafening and it was only then that Ron noticed the televisions had gone silent. He didn't dare turn his back on Death but he knew he would find blank screens above the mirror that stretched behind the bar.

Ron took a steadying breath. The first thing was to count the money in the register. The till sprang open with an explosion of noise and Ron couldn't help but curse. When he pulled out the first set of bills, they crumpled to pulp in his fingers. He noticed the few coins they were discolored and corroded.

What?

At that moment a squall roared down West Center Street. The door that Death had left open slammed into its frame, suddenly too warped to properly shut.

Ron watched Death as the tables and chairs behind it sagged with rot and the bar top turned into a mess of splinters.

Death held out a steady hand, its fingers like worms after a storm, and Ron, unthinking, reached with his own hand dark with necrosis. Old Death grasped new death.

“Oh,” said Ron

Who Is It? by Jasmine Johnson

Something is there. I can feel it but I can't see it. Why can't I see it? What is it? I can feel it creeping up then vanishing. What is that?

My friends and family say I have an active imagination. They think I'm making things up, like when I told them about the old lady in the house in front of mine. My friends said "no one has lived there in centuries because of all the deaths" so that's why everyone called it the haunted mansion but I know for a fact that she's there and she's lonely. Then there was the old man at the cemetery. I know I saw him digging something and he saw me too but no one else saw him. They say I'm seeing things but I don't think I was because we definitely made eye contact. It was creepy and I got chills. Now I feel like someone is following me. I had hoped it was just in my mind but I was proven wrong. I saw a shadowy figure behind me then disappear. My friends say that I'm just creeped out because it's almost Halloween but I know what I saw. The only question is will anyone believe me this time?

I said goodbye to my friends Jenni (Jennifer), Soph (Sophie), Jack, Sam (Samuel) and Zeph (Zephyr). I was walking home by myself as usual when I felt a cold chill run down my spine. Someone's watching me again. I turned around quickly to try and get a glimpse of who was following me. No one! I turned back around. Who could be following me? Then I heard footsteps coming up behind and someone put their hands over my eyes. I tensed up my hands-balled up into fists, ready to swing, my heart racing.

"Who is it?" My heart rate slowed down and I relaxed a bit.

"Oh, hey Jack." He removed his hands and stepped in front of me.

"How'd you know?" he asked, amazed.

"I've known you since we were like five. I know your voice," I said, satisfied. He chuckled then noticed my fists were balled up and my body tensed.

"Hey you ok, Jas?" I noticed he was looking at my hands. I relaxed them and looked at a worried Jack.

"Oh yea. I'm fine. You just scared me a little," I said. But he just looked at me with worry still on his face.

"Really I'm fine." I started walking again. "So, what are you doing coming this way? Your house is down the road back that way," I asked curiously.

"Oh yea. Well, for one, I came to tell you that Sam's having a Halloween party at his house and all of us are going so we wanted you to come too," Jack said excitedly. I stopped and turned to Jack.

"Really? Well that's cool and all but y'all know how I am with parties or around other people for that matter," I said nervously.

"Yeah but we still wanted you to come," Jack sighed.

"But I'm always so weird." I started walking again. He jumped in front of me and started walking backwards so he could walk and talk at the same time.

I sighed. "Hmm… What day is it? I'll try to come OK?" I asked.

"Oh, it's on Halloween. Tomorrow," Jack said excitedly.

I stopped again. "Wait, are you for real?" I asked seriously.

"Well yea. It's spookier that way," he said in a spooky voice trying to be funny.

"You're not funny Jack," I said half way laughing.

"Hey I am funny. Lots of people say I'm very funny," he said.

"Oh really? Like who?" I said as I started walking again.

Jack ran to catch up to me "Oh well, Sally said I'm funny," he said seriously.

"Yea well she has a crush on you she probably laughs at every funny thing you do," I said.

"For real?" he asked.

"Well, duh. Isn't it obvious?" I laughed.

"No, I didn't know," he said, shocked.

"Well, you're oblivious," I said.

"Hey, I am not!" he protested.

"Are too," I said.

"Not," he said back.

The words "too" and "not" kept going back and forth between us until we started laughing.

"Well whatever. I don't like her that way. I like someone else," he said blushing.

"Oooh and who's the lucky girl?" I said mockingly.

"Why should I tell you?" he asked.

"We've been friends forever!" I proclaimed.

"Well yea but I haven't even told her yet."

"What? For real? You totally should," I said amazed.

"Yea I know but I get stiff when I try," he confessed.

"Yea you always have been when it comes to that sort of stuff," I said.

"Hey, not true," he said, playfully shoving me. "Well whatever. The second reason I came down this way was..."

I got another cold chill and turned around but no one was there just like always.

"What's wrong Jas?"

"Nothing. So, you were saying?"

"Oh well. I was worried about you cuz you've been acting weird lately," he said worried.

"Have I? I didn't think so," I said bluntly. I started walking again. He walked faster so he could catch up again.

"Well you have, so what's been going on?" he said.

"Nothing really," I said.

He looked at me and said “Jasmine c’mon. I know you better than that to know that’s not true.”

“OK, OK. Someone’s been following and watching me but it’s no big deal.”

Jack was silent for a second till I looked at him to see an angrily worried Jack.

“What someone’s been watching you? And how’s that NOT a big deal? That’s a pretty BIG DEAL Jasmine,” he said furiously.

“OK, OK. You’ve made your point,” I surrendered.

He sighed. “So, do you know who it is?” he asked.

“No, if I did I would’ve called the cops by now.” I felt another cold chill but this time it felt like someone touched my shoulder. I turned around so fast I was dizzy but there was still no one. Fear started creeping through my body.

“Jas.....Jasmine hey.”

“Hu ye...yea.”

“You’re not ok, are you?”

“No. No, I’m not but I will be once I lay down,” I said.

“Well you’re in luck. We're at your house,” Jack said happily, trying to lift the mood.

“Yea, well I’ll see you later then.” I was trying to get inside as fast as I could because that cold chill wasn’t going away this time. It just stayed on my shoulder like someone was holding on and getting a tighter and tighter grip.

“I’ll see you at school tomorrow,” I said hurriedly but Jack said “Yeah…See ya...hey Jas,”

“Yea?” I turned around to look at Jack. His face became red. “Ne-never mind,” he stuttered.

I closed my door as fast as I could and went to my room and got out the box from under the bed and wrote down some notes like I always did. I needed to tell someone but no one ever listened to me. Well, except Jack, but he’s a different story. What am I going to do?

It was midnight and I had just woken up from a bad dream when I heard a crash from downstairs. I got out of bed and walked down stairs to see what it was when I heard another one coming from outside this time. I opened the front door and peeked out to see nothing. Then another crash came but was followed by a scream. I grabbed the bat that was next to the door and went out but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Well, except that the Maddison’s car wasn’t there but they weren’t home till next week.

Then the crash sounded again. I could hear it clearly now and it was coming from the HAUNTED MANSION!

But everyone said that no one lives there! At least they thought so. WAIT! The old woman I saw she’s in there, I thought to myself. I ran across the road with the bat in hand. I jumped the fence and banged on the door.

“Hello! Hello! Is there anyone there? I heard some screaming and I’m here to help.” No one answered. Then I heard another bang and a louder scream followed. I couldn’t just stand

there and do nothing so I opened the door and ran in but when I did, there were bodies everywhere and they weren't alive.

Oh my God what? What happened? I heard another crash coming from upstairs so I went to go upstairs but I couldn't move.

"Why? Why can't I move?" I was petrified. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw something move. I slowly turned my head, nothing. Then something else moved. I turned faster to see but there was nothing again. I was now shaking and my eyes were clouded by tears. I heard a blood curdling scream and I fell to my knees holding my hands to my ears. I had chills all over my body from the top of my head to the very tips of my toes and all the way to my bones. Why was I here?

Why was I here? I'm so stupid to think I could help...wait…I realized I hadn't heard anything in a while; no screams, no big bangs, nothing. I looked up to see someone at the top of the stairs where all the noise was coming from. It looked to be a man. I stood up, still a little wobbly but I was able to keep my balance.

"Um, hello sorry to barge in but there was a lot of screaming and banging so I came over to see if everything was alright..." he said nothing. "Well I did knock but no one answered and I heard a terrifying scream so I rushed in...um s.so is everything ok?" He just glared at me.

"OK so I'm. I'm just going to go home now." I turned around and ran to the door but it wouldn't open. I yanked and pulled, pushed and hit but it wouldn't open. I'm stuck here.

"You cannot leave Miss Jasmine." I turned around to see the man that was on the stairs was now in front of me.

"How...how do you know my name? And what do you mean I can't leave?" He didn't answer me, he just started walking into another room so I followed him hoping to get some answers but when I went into the next room there were bodies, more bodies but instead of being laid out on the floor they were hung up like decorations and under their feet were buckets. I looked inside one and almost threw up. Inside was blood and not just drips of it. No, they were drained of their blood and were hung to dry. I looked at the man in horror wondering what he was going to do to me. I could only imagine.

He looked at me with a questionable look and turned to a drawer and slid it out. He picked up something black and red and closed the drawer and turned to me. I looked at him and what he held in his hands. He walked towards me with it. I backed up and every step he took forward I took backwards until I hit the wall. I turned to the man who was getting closer and closer to me. He was at arm's length and tears rolled down my face. I pushed the guy back and ran out the room, looked around and bolted up the stairs trying not to trip over my feet or the bodies at my feet. I turned my head to see the man smiling angrily at me. He was really scaring me so I ran faster. Once I was up the stairs I saw about ten doors down the hall. It was the only one I could hide in.

"Miss Jasmine, you can't leave and you can't hide from us."

What? What does he mean, us?

I run to one of the doors (locked) then to the next one (this one's locked too) the next (again). I tried all of them. "It's no good. They're all locked. What am I going to do?"
I leaned against the wall, fear surrounding me. Then I fall. What? It's a hidden door.

"Oh, Miss Jasmine. come out, come out wherever you are."

I crawled the rest of the way in and closed the door behind me. I'll be safe here…for now. It's dark in the hidden room but I can kind of see but not all that well so I try to find a light of some sort. Oh wait…I have my phone. I got my phone out and turned on my flashlight and I started walking but after the first few steps, I tripped over something and fell. While dropping my phone, it lit up the room. I landed on the floor but my face was wet and sticky. I opened my eyes from where I had closed them when I tripped to see in front of my face was another face. At least part of one. Half of it was disfigured. I jumped up screaming and bumped into something else. I turned around and screamed again; it was another body.

More tears streamed down my face. I wiped them away but something speared on my face. I looked at my hand that was covered in a red liquid substance. My stomach turned and I felt like I was about to throw up. Blood.

I just might have if I didn't see the man who had kept me in the house come through the hidden door, smiling angrily. He walks towards me. I moved away from the body and got to the window. There was a big bush under the window. People in the movies always jump out the windows to escape from the bad guy. I turned around to see him closer to me but he was at one of the bodies. He picked it up with care but also like it weighs nothing. Then I noticed who the body he was holding was. It was the old woman I saw here. The man saw I was looking at the woman.

He chuckled, "You know, Miss Jasmine...well she was very bad, she let you see her, so she had to be punished," he smirked at me as I looked at him in horror.

He dropped the body next to him like she was garbage and started towards me. I backed up towards the window hoping I could get away from this freak.

"So...so all that screaming...it was..." I looked at the body then to him.

"Oh no, no, no Miss Jasmine. That was someone else. She was a very bad girl as well. She ran away so I had to stop my work to find her." He was getting closer and closer to me and I was so close to the window.

"And what work is that?" I asked but he just smiled. I hit the wall. He smiled a wicked smile. "Nowhere to go, Miss Jasmine."

I quickly turned towards the window and opened it when he grabbed my waist and yanked me away from the window. I hit him and screamed so I could get away but his grip was too strong. Then something shined in my eyes. A knife. It wasn't too far. If I fall I can grab it but he won't let go.

"Miss…Jasmine...please...please...stop moving," he said in a deep scary voice.

I stopped moving and let my body go limp. He smiled happily and loosened his grip. I smirked and shoved away from him and he lost his grip. I felt for the knife as he lunged for me with anger. He landed on top of me.

To be continued!

This story just happened way too close to home!!!

Just down the road.

A family of two kids, a sweet mother, with a strong father stopped at a nearby park holding a few kid sized objects. A gazebo with a creek behind flowing towards the woods that danced behind it. Now with no knowledge of the area they didn't think anything of the abandoned house in the woods but soon they would find out its inner story. As the girls ran off playing, they stopped at the creek, putting their hands in the water and throwing stones until they were suddenly pushed into the creek. Confused, they looked at each other before a great force pushed both their heads under the water.

With all the commotion of splashing and gasping breaths the father and mother turned around to see a tall dark figure with matted hair and a torn dress holding down both the girls' heads under the water. The father started yelling and cursing at the figure as the mother ran to the two girls to see if they were OK. To her dismay, they had no breaths left to give as their hearts stopped. They grew limp and the mother sobbed uncontrollably.

With a heavy heart, the man was enraged as he started looking around, only to find the figure a couple of feet away. As he got closer, she went farther until she was back inside the abandoned house!!!

Carter Hollow by Joseph Miller

The night had the kind of chill that made the bones hum. A crescent moon hung over Southington like a crooked grin, and the maples along Carter Hollow Road rustled their last gold leaves in the restless wind. Rick Crowe downshifted his old Ford pickup, headlights washing over empty fields where pumpkins sagged and corn stalks rattled like bones strung in a line. The shortcut through the hollow never felt right after dark, but Rick had promised cider for the Fall Festival-and you couldn't let down a festival committee.

The air carried a peculiar static, like the low hum of power lines, though there were none this deep in the valley. Only the old, forgotten farmhouse crouched behind a line of birches, its windows black and glossy as tar. Something about it pressed against Rick's chest, a quiet unease that made him tug at the collar of his jacket. A crow cawed from the edge of the field, flapping off into the inky night, and Rick's stomach tightened.

He killed the engine and stepped out. Boots sank into soft, cold mud, and the wind pushed against him, whispering through the corn like the hollowed voices of children. Riiick…¦ He shook his head, laughing nervously.

"Yeah, right," he muttered, fumbling for his flashlight. The beam cut a thin swath of gold through the black. Shadows shifted like liquid, brushing against him. His breath curled white and heavy in the chill, smelling faintly of iron, wet wood, and the lingering sweetness of apples left too long in the orchard.

Rick glanced toward the farmhouse again. A flicker-light in one window. It pulsed once, dim and yellow, like a lantern waving him closer. He told himself he'd just check it out. That's what he'd tell himself later, anyway.

Inside, the place smelled of mold and something metallic. The floorboards groaned beneath his boots, and a half-rotted stairway stretched upward into darkness. The lantern light came from a kitchen table. On it sat a mason jar filled with murky liquid and what looked like-no, what had to be-an apple floating inside. Its skin was gray, puckered, carved with tiny letters that shimmered when the light hit them: "The wind remembers." Rick's pulse ticked faster, his stomach knotted, yet his fingers itched to touch it.

From somewhere upstairs came a creak-a soft scuff, then a whisper. "You shouldn't have come after sunset."

Rick froze. "Who's there?" he demanded, but only the wind answered, rattling broken shutters. The lantern flared bright, nearly blinding him, and when it dimmed again, the apple had vanished. The jar was empty, yet the faint scent of rotting fruit lingered in the air.

He bolted for the door. The truck's headlights flicked on by themselves. The driver's door slammed shut, the engine coughed, then roared to life. And then Rick saw her. A pale woman in

a tattered dress, hair dripping like rainwater, sat in the driver's seat. Hollow eyes glimmered faintly under the cab light. He froze.

A sudden gust slammed the door in his face. He pressed against it, heart hammering. The woman's lips curved into a smile-a slow, impossible twist-and the engine revved. Then everything went black.

Rick jolted awake on the edge of the road. Fog curled over the fields like smoke, soft and heavy. The truck sat neatly where he'd parked it, door open, keys in the ignition, as though nothing had happened. His fingers shook as he touched the steering wheel, wet with dew.

He took a breath and glanced back at the hollow. The farmhouse was gone. Not a trace-just an empty field dotted with withered corn stalks and a single crow perched on a fence post, watching. The whispering wind carried through the hollow, soft but insistent, curling around the ears of anyone who paused long enough to hear.

Back in town, Rick tried to shake the memory. At the diner, he clutched a hot mug of coffee, steam curling upward like the ghosts of the hollow. "I swear," he told the waitress, " I saw something in the truck…someone… or something." She just raised an eyebrow, filling his cup again, muttering about Halloween stories and old farms. But the taste of iron in his mouth lingered, and the wind outside whispered like it hadn't let him go.

The next day, he returned-light breaking over the fields, leaves trembling in the early sun. Carter Hollow looked normal: nothing out of place. But a single gray apple lay at the edge of the field. Carved into it were letters, small and elegant: "Remember me." Rick picked it up, a shiver crawling down his spine. He understood, finally, that some corners of Southington held more than ghosts-they held secrets older than memory.

The Lantern at Bradley Mountain (A Southington October Tale) by Joseph Miller

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.

The Cockroach Plague by Steve Paschall

They had just been married by their minister friend and moved a few of their things into her grandfather's empty house down in the Lower Connecticut River Valley. It was a 17-room civil war survivor that had a place in the history of sheltering slaves fleeing their "owners". The house was a nearly derelict ancient thing with peeling lead paint and holes where mice or worse had freely passed in and out for many years.

The plan was to crash there while giving them time to complete the extensive renovations. The house needed a lot of work and cleaning but they appreciated the idea of renovating and reselling it at a nice profit. It would be an adventure. The house was in a geographically desirable area and had good accessibility. With a little cost (they naively thought) it still would be a little risky, but what the hell is life without a little risk? A bottle of red wine was opened and toasts made to their luck. Steve toasted to Judy's beauty and she toasted to Steve's shrewdness.

Out of the corner of her eye Judy glimpsed a dark flash along the floorboard. Her startle registered for a long split-second. It looked like a rodent, but it looked so small. Frozen, it took seconds to register. Was it just another of those blinking hallucinations she heard relatives discuss? A small mouse? Surely not a rat. He had seen it as well but, for a few seconds, he considered (but rejected) the idea of not telling his newlywed spouse what he just saw.

"Roach!! YEE YOW!!!!"

Both partners made disgusting sounds and vowed to rid the house of roaches through a merciless war of extermination. They scanned the rest of the house and cautiously decided the best place to roll out their sleeping bags was in the "safe room". There were no windows and no visible cracks for insects to enter. However, the sounds of squeaking penetrated through the door endlessly. He planned to call the exterminator first thing in the morning. But as he told her, his voice sounded a little shaky, even squeaky. Unusual, she thought.

It was dark in the room with only little slivers of light. Eventually, they dozed off (he had brought the unfinished bottle of wine with them into their hideout and it helped distract them). When she later awakened and opened her blinking eyes she glimpsed some movement in the darkness (maybe this has been a dream?) But then there was a sound like a squeaky door creaking open slowly. Judy listened intently and realized with some shock that the sound had come FROM STEVE. The high frequency screech had leaked from deep within HIS throat, RIGHT NEXT TO HER. It sounded like EEE-EEE-EEE. Her heartbeat stopped altogether, and only gradually restarted, fluttering as though she was running a road race. Then she turned and looked at his face and saw in the beam of light that it appeared somehow like A ROACH! She had never seen this in his appearance before. Now antennae jutted up from his pointy face like cattle prods, and they were waved wickedly. When he snorted he made high pitched sounds and his upper lip peeled back showing even more upper pointy teeth bared by his lifted lip. His snorting made a sound like hissing from down deep.

She felt desperate and could not stop her hands from trembling. It was quiet outside the safe room. She pressed her body as much as she could against the escaping door, as far away from Steve as she could. She threw open the door and, shaking convulsively, threw herself out into the dark large room. Then, she noted that it felt a bit unusual to be crawling.

But somehow it seemed preferable to standing on her "hind" feet. She looked for crumbs and any bits of food left behind by the huge beasts that lived in this house. She was starving.

Why did she call the humans beasts? Because they will chase her and step on her with great vigor. They stamp and stamp while yelling their roaring screams. They squirt unspeakable death mists. If she is careless, she knows she will be crushed like so many of her clan. She recalls shameful foggy memories of having been human herself at one time with the unbearable ridiculous chattering of blah, blah, blah. Who needs this booming noise the human beasts call words? These giant skin covered monsters only interfere with our foraging survival missions.

Now time means nothing. She thanks the roach clan ancestors for her rediscovered true identity. She squeals her roach squeal ecstatically! (Translation: "WHERE'S MY LOVER BOY?")

Mud Puddle in the Woods by Steve Paschall

In my early 20s I worked at a smallish old fashioned institutional mental hospital as an orderly and eventually 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 and 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 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 its 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.

Feed Him for Life by Ryan P.

This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,
And the pines above and along and beside the sea.
Auroras of Autumn
-Wallace Stevens

Despite the cold wind and setting sun, the woman sits upon a barrel and weaves a net in the dim, using the wall of the fishhouse to break the seaward gusts. Her net hangs limply from a peg in the fishhouse's girder and lies across her lap. She pulls her wood shuttle through the labyrinth of cordage and yanks the knots tightly into place. Her face is sharp and intelligent, and it grows ruddy from the cold. Far over her head, the long fingers of the northern lights have grabbed hold of the Connecticut sky, and tint the world emerald.

Her family's fishhouse sits on a rocky shoreline in Stonington, shouldered between white pines and tufts of beech grass. Its rough-hewn shingles give way to steep, slanting driftwood, gabled against the evening sky. Inside, visible through a small, misshapen window, her husband shucks mussels with a dull knife. He takes the grey-blue bivalves from sacks that crowd the floor, wedges his blade between their shells like a crowbar, and pops them apart in hisses of water. He scoops the gray flesh out of the shells with his finger and lets them fall into a bucket. He drops the shells in a box at his feet.

The man's hands are red with cold and his face is hawk-like. He has a bristly beard and gray, heavy-lidded eyes. Although he is sheltered from the wind, the stink of wet hemp and gutted pollock weighs heavy in the still air—a scent like an old friend to him. Three more gray heaps land in the bucket, six more shells rattle into the box at his feet, and he is done. He tidies up, dumps the mussels into a barrel of brine to soak for the night, and slips outside, nodding to his wife. Seeing her husband finished, she gathers her work to her breast and folds it gently in a tub to be continued later.

"He's still coming tomorrow?" she asks.

"Yes," says the husband. "We'll be back 'round dark."

The wife nods and they start up the road back home. Their voices are washed away by the din of waves and wind, wind that retreats from the land to gather strength at sea for tomorrow's assault; the pine branches wag and bend in the rushes, and the jagged fishhouse rakes the air into high whistles. An owl perches on the fishhouse's highest gable, ruffles her feathers, and swoops into the underbrush. The northern lights roll like grassy hills in the barren night sky.

On the precipice of dawn, before the sun has risen, the man walks back down the same road, this time, alone. He grabs his seine net and the bucket of mussels from the fishhouse and sets both in his skiff, alongside a cask of water and some salted hake. He sits against an oarlock and rummages through his pockets when the boy arrives. The boy wears an oversized brown oilcoat, presumably his father's, and worn work boots. The wind tousles his pale hair. His breath

scalds the cold into little puffs of steam.

"Yer late," says the man.

"Had to check on my mother, sir," says the boy. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Tomorrow, yer here before sunrise. Got it?"

"Yessir."

The man thinks for a moment, works his jaw. "How's yer mother?"

The boy smiles weakly and says, "Getting stronger, I think."

The man can't tell if the boy is lying, but he suspects that he is. Or perhaps getting stronger merely means that his mother isn't getting worse. It isn't in the man's nature to feel sorry for someone, but this was about as close as he could come. It wasn't right for a boy to go through that sort of thing so young. No siblings or friends to go to (none that the man knew of, at least). Must be real hard, thought the man.

The boy moves onto the dock and eyes the traps, stacked along its edges, with suspicion.

"You know why the traps are out here?" asks the man.

"No, sir."

"To weigh the dock down for when the ice comes."

"I see, sir."

"Ice lifts the wood right out of the criblocks. Next year, it'll be your job to move them."

"Yessir."

The man offers his hand to help the boy from the dock into the skiff, and in doing so realizes how frail the boy is. The man offers him some salted hake. The boy scarfs it down. As the man oars the boat into open water, he instructs the boy to take careful note of everything he does and to ask any questions should they arise. The man sets the mainsheet on the mast and frees the lines. The boy watches quietly. A smolder of sun emerges from the water and sets mirthless fire to the waves, like the bright sparks of anvils that make up for in fiery hue what they lack in heat. The man fastens the halyard and hoists it until the luff unwrinkles; the sheet inflates with air, and the man oars hard and steers west. The skiff gains speed and slides deeper into the infinite sea. The boy, standing near the stern, nearly topples over from the sudden motion, but he catches himself on the gunwale.

The man says, "Yer always welcome for dinner, y'know."

"I know, sir."

"Wife'll be happy for the company. She can get real lonely when I'm out here. She's been coming to help me at the fishhouse in the afternoons, just to have something to do. We don't have kids of our own, y'know."

"No kids, sir?"

"Nah."

"Why not, sir? Pretty much everyone has kids."

"Not us." The man exhales. "God knows we tried. It just didn't work out."

The boy nods as though he understands, but the man can tell he does not. After a few minutes of silence and oaring, the skiff nears the sand shelf. The man lets go of the oars and

stretches his sore arms in circles. The skiff gradually slows, rocking gently atop the small waves. The sun is still low and red, and stretches wide like a flattened carnation. The air is so sharp and clean that it burns the back of his throat.

"Alright, boy. See this here sand shelf? If it were summer, you could probably get in and stand up on it, and the water'd only come up to your neck or maybe your chin. When the sun comes up a little more, the water'll get warmer. This shelf will get warmer than the rest of the water 'cause it's more shallow. The fish, which are freezing cold, will come to where we are to warm up and to get some sun. We're gonna make it nice and enticing for 'em to come, too. You see that bucket?"

"Yessir."

"That's got mussels in it. Take some and throw 'em into that spot over there. Yeah, just like that. Don't look so disgusted now. They won't bite. Think of this as an offering of sorts." The boy takes two or three mussels at a time and flings them out onto the water with a series of splashes. He watches them sink in bubbly columns.

"Few more and that should be good. Now, while we wait for the sun and for the fish, I'll tell you how we'll catch 'em. Here's the net we'll use. See? It's got a cork rope on top and a lead rope on the bottom. The cork rope on top will float and the lead rope on the bottom will sink. Follow me?"

"Yessir."

"We're gonna be real slow, and put this net in the water, little by little, hand over hand. The goal is to make one big circle 'round all the fish in the middle. Y'ever seen a shepherd with his flock? He's gotta make sure he keeps all the sheep right in the middle, right? That's what we're doing here. Make sense?"

"A little, sir. But won't the fish know better and run away?"

"They're fish. They don't run, they swim, and they don't know nothin' at all. And if you were in this bitter water, cold and hungry and scared, and you saw a heap of your favorite food sitting right in front of you in the warm sun, wouldn't you take a bite, too?"

"I suppose, sir."

"You'll see. Once we make the circle it'll be like a brick wall to 'em. They'll have no way to get out. When we are ready, you'll pull the cork rope because it's lighter, and I'll pull the lead rope because it's heavier. We're gonna cinch the fish together, real slow, by pulling our ropes and shrinking the circle. Then, we'll put 'em in here." The man pats the sternsheets with his boot.

The man and boy sit as the sun climbs through steeps of sky. The ocean rolls off in all directions to the long and dizzying horizon. The boy asks some questions about fishing and the man answers. The man asks the boy if he is thirsty and gives him some water. In the place where the boy threw the bait, the water ripples, and occasionally small fish breach the surface in flashes of glittering silver.

"S'pose it's time," says the man, and the two begin. The man sits at the oarlocks, and, as gently as he can, steers the skiff in a wide circle around the disturbances. The boy, just as

instructed, lowers the seine net into the water, hand over hand, cautious not to scare any fish away and cautious not to tangle the cordage. He watches the leadline sink to the shelf's floor. He watches the corkline bob along the surface in a curve, as though he had inscribed some foreign letter into the water. The man regards the boy from the corner of his eye, leaning over the stern, lips taut, watery sunlight reflected on his face. He's doing good for his first time, the man Thinks.

Soon, they arrive back where they began and the circle is complete. They have no way to tell how many fish are in their trap, but the man thinks there are at least a few. The boy did a good job, after all, and the man was very careful not to scare any off with his steering. The man hands the boy the corkline and takes the leadline for himself. The man nods to the boy and in unison they draw their lines, slowly, steadily, tugging inward whatever has come to their offering. The lines drip with cold, stinging water, and the boy's hands begin to shiver, but he pulls on, grimacing.

With each pull, the water folds in on itself and their carefully laid circle shrinks. After a few minutes, the net nears the gunwale, and they see flashing scales, writhing against the dark mesh. The man takes the boy's corkline into his own hands, and the boy, as the man instructs him, takes a brailing net and scoops up the mass of jittering fish from underneath the seine. With grunts of effort, the boy applies all his weight to the pole and manages to tip the fish out of the water. The man collects the nets in one hand, takes the pole with his free hand, and drags it the rest of the way inside the skiff. The fish knock and thump against the skiff's floor.
There are three larger fish in the mesh—two pollock and one tautog—along with some shreds of kelp and a handful of silversides. The pollocks have backs like steel and pale bellies, and are young and small. The tautog is dark and heavier than the other two put together. It wriggles feverishly like a hatching chicken, and its blunt head's gills noiselessly close and open. The sun sheens iridescently off their scales as they flounder about in the skiff.

The man takes a club from the hull and beats them hard; the cracks are loud and jarring and shoot off over the water like gunshots. The fish seize, reaching their tails to the sky, then lying flat and still in puddles of cold water. The boy watches the fish at first, then his attention shifts to the man, who continues to beat at them though they no longer struggle. The boy thinks he's seen more expression in people digging holes in a field, and he wrinkles his face a little.

"Not bad," says the man with a final strike on the gills of the tautog.

"Yessir. We caught three big ones."

"Now, help me move 'em to the tub."
The boy nods and drags the fish by their fins and sides, one a t a time, into the tub near the stern of the skiff. The fish are cold, slimy, and hard. He doesn't like touching them. "Sir, may I ask a question?"

"Shoot."

"Well, sir, I just seen you beat those fish, and I don't mean any offense, but...I guess what I'm asking is, don't you feel bad at all? For the fish?"

"I feel plenty bad for them. Who says I don't feel bad?"

“Well, sir, I guess it was your eyes. Your eyes are sort of like this water here.”
The man grunts. “Say what you mean, boy.”

“What I mean, sir, is that your eyes are always the same, like the water. The water is no different for us having pulled out the fish. The water doesn’t care one way or another. It always goes back to the way it was. Your eyes are like that, sir.”

“More you see something, the less it surprises you. This ain’t my first time fishing. I saw my dad beat fish just the way you saw me beat these fish here.”

“I’m sure, sir.”

“And sure I feel bad for the fish, in a way. But then I remember the fish eat mussels, which are alive, too. Everything eats something else that's alive. It’s a vicious world, boy.”

“Yessir.”

“And the way I look at it, either the fish suffocate in our air, slowly and painfully, lives flashing before them, or I take them out quick and easy with my stick. If I got to choose how I died, I’d choose the stick every time.”

The boy wishes he could be as calm as the man. “Yessir, I think I would too.”

They do this four more times. They throw mussels in the water, deploy their seine in a wide, sweeping circle, and pull it into the skiff, slow at first, quick at the end with the brailing pole. They capture three more pollocks, another tautog, and a handful of silversides. On the last haul, the man gives the club to the boy and makes the boy beat the lone pollock jerking against the cordage. The boy closes his eyes tightly and does as he’s told, flailing the club wildly back over his head and down on the fish. The boy, hands red and clammy, stops after ten hits and opens his eyes.

“Not so hard, was it?” The man does not tell the boy that most of his strikes missed.

“No, sir. I guess not.”

“Just takes getting used to. Like anything does. Remember my dock? All those traps weighing it down? Life’s the exact same. The more you do something, the less you’ll come loose over every little thing.”

“I understand, sir.”

The man and boy take turns oaring home. The boy will be sore tomorrow, the man thinks. The sun is like molten iron as it sets on low, ragged clouds. The landward wind is unwavering and their sail bulges forward. When they reach the dock, the boy learns to anchor the skiff. The man and boy climb onto the dock, pass the traps, and bring the fish tubs to the fishhouse. The man gets to work, gutting and prepping them. The man can tell the boy won’t be able to do this part for some time, so he lets him go home. He gives the boy some food in a container to take home to his mother.

The boy takes it, hesitantly. “Thank you, sir. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s not a gift if you earn it,” says the man.

“Sorry sir.” The boy turns and starts up the road.

“Here before dawn tomorrow,” shouts the man after him.

“Yessir.”

The boy makes his way up the overgrown trail in the dusk, through the rocky dunes and down the hill. The sky is burdened with clouds and the moon is a mere stain of bent silver. The boy idly wishes the sky were clear. Though he could not bring himself to tell the man, the boy had stayed up late last night, admiring the northern lights. He thought they looked like a great curling snake, lying in the shade, and each star was a little fleck of white on its verdant skin. Neck craned to the heavens, he lost track of time, and he woke up the following day groggy and exhausted, rushing out the door without even saying goodbye to his mother. He is excited to tell her what he caught today, to split his food with her, to tell her all about the man and his ways.

He hops a small fence and plods his way home on a main road. The cold wind presses his oilcoat to his back. His feet and arms are sore and taught beyond anything he's felt before. He wonders if this is what his mother feels like. He passes by tall, square buildings, by brick markets and newspaper stands. He hopes his mother is still awake. He turns onto a dingy sideroad and stops when he sees Old Peters standing outside his door, talking to Ms. Delaney. He approaches them, holding the man's food close to his chest. When Old Peters sees him coming, he stops talking and points. Ms. Delaney then looks at him, quiets, and they both stare at the boy as he approaches. Old Peters smooths his white moustache and looks quite uncomfortable.
The boy comes up the stone walkway and Ms. Delaney uncrosses her arms and says,

"I'm sorry, boy. I really am. But she..."
The boy expects her to say more and she doesn't. She doesn't have to.
Old Peters opens his mouth as though he has something to say, then shuts it and looks at the boy's boots.

"You can't stay here until certain things are taken care of." Ms. Delaney gets down on one knee and looks the boy in the eyes. "Do you have someplace you can go for the night?"
The boy knows his mother is dead. He feels something pure and molten and wrenching well up from some dark place inside of him. It starts deep in his gut and blooms, down to his knees, up to his head, gathering quickly and powerfully behind his eyes. He falls to the ground and curls on his side, sobbing uncontrollably. His tears momentarily burn at his cheeks before the capricious wind imbues them with ice, and they sting with cold until they fall from his face to the dry leaves and dirt. He should've checked on her. He should've at least said goodbye. The boy clutches the food the man gave him as a village rustic would clutch an idol. His breath catches in his throat and he heaves.

He suddenly wants to see her. He wants to make sure she's really gone and they aren't lying to him. In an instant he is on his feet and trying with all of his might to push past Old Peters and Ms. Delaney, who grab his arms to keep him from going in. He screams at them incoherently, his voice shrill and wobbly, and presses his boots against the ground deeper still. Old Peters, still grabbing at the boy's arm, leans back with greater force, and the man's food flies from the boy's clutches and lands in the dirt. The boy falls to his knees and wails.

In the fishhouse, its cold air saturated with the stench of rot, the man finishes gutting the last of his catches and rinses them off in seawater. He separates the big fish, meant to be eaten,

from the small fish, meant for bait, and stows each in different receptacles. When he leaves, he takes the larger fish with him to the wharf and has them weighed at the market. The night sky bears thick, ridged clouds and the man knows rain will come soon. The road is dark but he knows his way well enough. He passes swaying pines and leafless hemlocks, gilded orange by the streetlamps, and the bleak silhouettes of stores and homes. When he nears his front door, he sees Ms. Delaney, Old Peters, and the boy, along with his wife. He pauses and blinks. Old Peters' face is more scowled than usual. The man can tell Ms. Delaney and the boy have both been crying. The boy's face is half illuminated by a lamp within the house. His eyes are bloodshot. He stares absently at his own feet and wipes his nose. No one notices the man. He looks on, hesitant to interrupt.

Old Peters says, "—knew it was coming, didn't know this soon. Got no family or nothing. It took a long while to get him to say anything, but the boy says yer husband said he could stay here if he wanted to."

"Just like my husband to offer things without my approval."

"I could take the boy for the time being if it's too much trouble," says Ms. Delaney. The woman stoops and examines the boy. After a few moments of deliberation, she says,

"No. If my husband offered, I suppose we could take him. We have room enough."

At his wife's acceptance, the man closes the rest of the distance, greets them all, offers his condolences, and takes the boy inside. He hears, faintly, his wife being offered fierce gratitudes for her generosity by Old Peters, then the creak of the closing front door. The man sits the boy at the table and instructs him to eat. The boy, between sniffles, picks at the woman's cooking. He takes a bite, shuts his eyes, and begins to cry again.

Rain patters on the roof. The woman gestures for the man to follow her into their chambers, which he does, and she closes the door behind him. The man knows what she will say in the dark room. He knows how she did it, too. No blood. No bruising. Suffocated, probably with a pillow. He can already hear her saying how it's best for the boy. How he can grow up with a mother and a father. How they can grow up with a son. She opens her mouth to speak. The man watches her.

Joe Teach's Dream by Lindsey, John & Albina Skedgell

It was an average day at the furniture store in Haddam, Connecticut. The fish were swimming in circles. Customers were trying out couches to fit for long stretches of TV gazing. Over in the corner of the store, in a blue plush recliner, someone was falling asleep. Not long after, someone was awoken by two men quarrelling outside in the furniture store's parking lot. The yelling escalated. The fish were still swimming in their tank. Customers were still testing couches as if nothing were wrong.

The sleeping someone went outside to try and break up the argument, holding their arms out wide as if he was a wind turbine. Then there was silence. Then there was the suggestion of visiting the local watering hole to simmer down and connect over a pint, to which the sleeping someone said, "OK." Even though he felt deflated. Even though he felt exhausted from acting as the argument's mediator.

That sleeping someone was Joe Teach, the owner of Joe's Furniture and the fourth great grandson of Edward Teach, known better by the name of Blackbeard. Five drinks in, the great great great great grandson of Blackbeard began to divulge his family history to the other men, one of whom went by the name of Clemmons. The same name as Blackbeard's first mate.

"Have you ever heard the legend?" Joe asked. "The legend of Blackbeard and Clemmons." Clemmons shook his head in denial as Joe continued on.

"There was a treasure buried four generations ago here in Haddam. I once had a dream about where it was buried, in the old lot behind that old factory by the willow tree, the one with the carved heart in it. Do you know the place?"

This time Clemmons nodded in agreement, a little rattled. One light buzzed above the long, wooden bar top. The conversations of bar goers seemed to crawl and slow and quiet to a halt.

All Clemmons said was, "Carvings in trees fade over time," to which Joe answered, "I'll take you there. I'll show you." The third man, the one who was arguing, leaned over, one ear out of commission. "What are we talking about?"

Joe and Clemmons walked the dark woods from the bar to the abandoned factory, surely passing by the willow with the carved heart, surely passing by the upturned dirt through the night's strong wind.

"In the dream it was here," Joe said, pointing with a small shovel to a mound of soil near a strong patch of mugwort.

"Then let's dig," Clemmons said, something now twisting in his eye.

Joe Teach, the fourth great grandson of Blackbeard, began to dig with all his strength. His energy had been spent on the day. Budget balancing, dealing with angry customers, feeding the fish, performing inventory. The furniture store business was no cake.

Clemmons watched Joe's grip loosen on the shovel. He watched him slow his digging and start to sink into the hole of his own making.

"I'll give it a go for a bit," Clemmons offered, a break to which Joe gratefully accepted.

As Clemmons began to dig, the reality surfaced within him that there could actually be treasure buried underneath the soil. He felt hungry with possibility. He felt possessive. He began leaning into the future, a future where he had his own home and his own car and his own yard. Maybe he even had a dog, one of those old hounds with saggy cheeks. He leaned so hard into this fictitious life that he became it. He leaned so hard into this fictitious life that he could not fathom sharing his findings, for this would stand in the way of him and his new life. As he placed shovel to the humus soil, as its lip sank into the top layer, he heard Joe say, “That’s probably deep enough,” and as the shovel hit the sound of tin, Clemmons swung it with force a full 180 degrees, hitting Joe in the skull. Knocking him dead. Securing his future.