

Name: Jennifer H
Age and Grade: 9th grade (14 years old)
Phone number:
Address:

First Day of School Terrors

I've always hated school.

I stumble through the thick forest of trees and finally find it. My new school. My heart drops with a thud as soon as I see it, those dark colors, the towers that seem to taunt me as I stand in front of the building. I feel like a bug. A helpless little bug.

I've never seen a school like this before. Aren't schools supposed to appear welcoming? Or prestigious? This school is nothing like those I've seen before. This school looks as though it walked, well I guess *appeared* straight out of a horror movie. Schools don't walk. Schools aren't supposed to look like this.

I moved here yesterday, I've begged to be homeschooled but my mother won't hear of it. She says that I need the social life that comes with school.

"Well, here goes nothing", I whisper to myself in what is supposed to be a comforting manner. It doesn't feel very comforting. I glance at my watch, 10 minutes until class starts.

Before I can even take a step into the school a tall girl steps out. She looks like no other I've seen before. She has messy black hair and these eyes that can only be described as *tired*. There's something about her that sends a chill down my spine. Kind of like when you see something that looks normal but doesn't seem quite right. Something is wrong and you can't put a finger on it.

"Welcome, you are the new vict--i mean student, correct?", the girl asks in an unexpected scratchy voice.

Did she almost say victim? I look up at her with an expression full of unreadable emotions. Something is wrong, I can tell. Straightening my posture to look more confident, I answer quietly.

"Uhm..yeah." The girl nods, her expression remaining emotionless. The entire situation is terrifying. It feels as though something is about to happen, like in horror movies where the scary and suspenseful music starts playing that warns you something *horrible* is about to happen. Except I can't hear the music because this isn't a cheesy horror movie.

"This is an *interesting* place, huh?" I ask with a smile, trying to make small talk. If there's one thing my mother taught me, it was to be kind. She always says, small talk can make an uncomfortable situation more bearable. I think that's a bunch of bologna, but it's worth a shot.

The girl stays silent and instead stares at me. I start to wonder if she even heard me. The silence is deafening. I open my mouth to speak, but before I can even utter a word the girl cuts me off.

"You're different.", She says as she stares at me, her eyes finally showing some sort of emotion. Hopeful maybe? Interested? "Maybe you'll survive"

My breath hitches a little when I hear those words. *Maybe I'll survive? What is that supposed to mean?* I find myself trying to assure myself that she is joking. Maybe this school has some sort of dark humor social norm? I wouldn't be surprised. This town can only be described as having a haunting feeling. Everywhere you go it feels like there's a secret you don't know about, or something watching you.

"Wha-", Again, before I can even speak the girl cuts me off. She hastily shoves a crumpled paper into my hands. Her cold skin brushes against mine and I feel a shiver run down my spine.

"If you want to survive you'll follow these rules. Fail to follow them and you'll end up the next kid on a missing poster. Forgotten". The girl's voice is blank. Although her voice is emotionless as a rock, I can't help but feel like I'm a part of an elaborate prank. Are they just trying to scare me, the new kid? That's what happens in the movies...

I glance down at the paper. It is crumpled, and very clearly old. There is elaborate writing scribbled in pen. Written on it is what appears to be rules. The rules are as follows:

Don't talk to anyone, no matter what.

Avoid eye contact with everyone.

DO NOT help people, no matter what they say.

At 11:00 find a place to hide.

Don't try to leave before 12:00 P.M, they'll catch you.

From 8:00 to 9:00 cover your ears.

Don't eat the cafeteria food.

At 1:00 hold onto something heavy as best you can.

No matter what you see, don't show fear.

Don't let them know you're human.

What the..? These rules are so absurd, I'm sure it's a prank now. *Don't let them know you're human?* I need an explanation.

I lift my head to look at the girl, She is still watching me. I open my mouth to ask about this, but yet again, she interrupts me.

"Asking questions is going to get you killed. Follow the instructions, good luck", the girl then walks away, leaving me at the entrance of the school alone. I roll my eyes a little at the stupid prank, crumpling the paper and shoving it into my jacket pocket carelessly.

A part of me though, can't help but wonder, what if it's not a prank? No, that's nonsense. Schools are safe, schools don't have absurd rules to guarantee your survival. Schools don't have non-human creatures.

I sigh under my breath, this isn't a very good beginning. Walking over to the door, it more so resembles that of a giant old castle than a school. Instead of regular metal school doors, this building has large wooden doors with unsettling knockers shaped like sharp monstrous teeth. Before I can knock, the door creaks open and I get my first glance of the school.

The inside is, ironically, just like a normal school. Something feels off. Almost...old? That seems to be a universal theme here. It can only be described as liminal space. It just looks familiar, almost like I've seen it before. I can't put a finger on why though I carefully step onto the white tiled floor and look around. It's empty, the only thing filling the space is an oddly eerie feeling and the humming of the old lights that occasionally flicker slightly. Where is everyone?

I cautiously walk further into the building and immediately feel a pit in my stomach. I round a corner to find my first class. English. Should be an easy class to start off with. I walk the empty hallways until I find room number 666. That's...ironic. Are there really over 600 classrooms here?

I swallow nervously as I enter the classroom. It's empty. *'Well that's surprising'* I think bitterly. I walk to the back of the classroom and sit down in a back row seat. Maybe I'll draw less attention to myself back here. As I sit in the back of the classroom I can't help but think back to the list of rules. What if they are real? I shake my head as if to shake the thought away.

I glance at my watch again. Two minutes until class starts. Suddenly I hear rumbling in the hallway. I look at the door anxiously as a shadow creeps closer. A part of me is expecting a horrid monster to appear and eat me alive. Surprisingly enough, or rather unsurprisingly a line of normal looking students walks in. Maybe that strange girl is getting in my head.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath to relax my nerves. *Nothing is wrong..just some first day of school nerves.* I try to assure myself. I take a final breath before opening my eyes only to be met with all of the students turned around in their seats staring at me. It's at this moment I'm sure something is horribly wrong.

All of their eyes are black. Not as in their Irises are black. *No.* All of their eyes are black, even the sclera. It's like staring into endless black pits. I feel the blood drain from my face as my body freezes up. Not fear freezing up, well, partly, but this is different. I feel like I'm actually being frozen. Like, someone dumped water over me and stuck me in a freezer.

I manage to tear my eyes away from theirs. I glance down at my desk. *Avoid eye contact. Avoid eye contact. Avoid eye contact.* That's what the list said, right? As soon as I look away the frozen feeling dissipates. The teacher clears her throat and all the students turn to face her. I glance up, albeit, fearfully at the teacher. She has normal eyes. I look at her name tag. Ms. Benish. I reach a shaky hand into my pocket and pull out the crumbled piece of paper. The students all remain eerily still and stoic. It's like they aren't human. Well, now I'm not sure they *are* human. I reread the list again and take a quiet breath. I'm confident that this isn't a joke anymore. Maybe I'm dreaming? No, dreams are scary, but this is *scary*. Dreams don't make you feel like this. This fear is indescribable. It's like no fear I've ever felt before. It suddenly hits me: this is a matter of life or death now.

I lift my head slowly and look up at the board, it's only then I notice that this isn't English on the board. Instead of words, strange symbols cover the board. I've never seen symbols like these. This isn't normal. I turn and look at the bookshelf to see various books that appear to be hundreds of years old. There are books in English this time. *The History of Human Torture Methods* a title reads. My posture stiffens. Definitely not normal...I want to go home.

The first class went well. Well, I guess as good as it could be considering my life is in danger. None of the students looked at me again. Ms. Benish seemed to keep the attention off of me. It seems like she's being held hostage though. The list said 'Don't let them know you're human'. I don't think they know I'm not one of them.

I'm walking to my second period right now. The hallways are full of creatures. Some look normal except for the eyes. I'll call those ones the eyeless. I've also noticed another creature. This creature is not even fully there, it's almost like a mist, a ghost really. I'll call those ones the gliders since they glide across the hallways almost like hawks circling their prey.

I look down at my watch which will surely become my best friend throughout this horrifying school day if I'm going to follow the list, which I will. It couldn't hurt, right?. 7:58.

I make sure no one else in the hallway is looking and pull out the list once the coast is clear.
'From 8:00 to 9:00 cover your ears'

Cover my ears..? I notice all of the creatures entering class rooms. I don't want to go to the second period. I have a higher chance of being caught. If I decide to skip, I'll have a smaller chance of getting caught as a human. I start to walk towards the bathroom, my safe haven for the next hour or so until I come up with a plan. What a wonderful first day of school.

Before I can even enter a loud screeching sound starts. It's so loud I can practically feel my skull vibrating. I quickly cover my eyes as hard as I can to block out the noise and run to the bathroom. The noise hurts. Now I know why the list said to cover your ears. I don't know what the noise is, and I don't really want to find out either. I stumble into the corner bathroom stall and quickly fumble with my backpack to get out my headphones. I practically jam them into my ears and start blasting music to stop the noise.

I must have fallen asleep. I sit up and rub my tired eyes. My headphones have fallen out. I don't know when. It seems the noise has finally stopped. I glance at my watch yet again. 10:30. I was asleep for a while. I'm definitely not dreaming then. Not that I thought I was anyway. I'm sure this is real now. I'm made aware that I am hungry as my stomach rumbles like a volcano. Maybe I can go get lunch. The cafeteria food can't be that bad, can it? I slowly exit the stall and creep towards the cafeteria.

The hallways are empty. I mean, It is in the middle of a class period. I wonder what is for lunch today. The cafeteria is about as dull as the rest of the school. It smells heavenly though which is a stark difference from the rest of the school which has an unpleasant moldy odor. I wander inside and notice a table of sandwiches for lunch.

These aren't normal sandwiches. They look delicious. When I say they look delicious I'm not exaggerating, they look as though Gordon Ramsey himself made them and they were blessed by Jesus Christ. Perhaps it's just my stomach rumbling. I quickly snatch a sandwich before running back to the bathroom.

I enter my stall again, excited to eat this sandwich.

The list says to hide at 11:00. I suppose this is an okay hiding spot. I mean, in the movies it's where people hide from people, that and their problems. I think both apply in this situation. I don't want to move for the fear of whatever will happen if you don't hide. It's already 11:00 so I should probably just stay here.

Not even 10 minutes later I hear someone enter the bathroom. I haven't even eaten my sandwich. Loud thumping footsteps make their way to the stall I'm hiding in. I pause and stay silent. I can't get caught. Not when I've made it this far already. It was then that fate must have decided it hates me because I noticed that the sandwich isn't as good as I was under the impression it was. Bugs start crawling out of it, causing me to let out a shocked and fearful gasp.

Why are there bugs in my sandwich? The list was right after all. Food isn't supposed to have bugs in it! I knew this school was messed up, and now the evidence just keeps stacking up. The footsteps walk right up to the outside of the stall door. Then stop. I shouldn't have made any noise. I'm so stupid.

A large silhouette streams through the bottom of the stall. I slowly peek through the crack to see who's there. I'm only met with the sight of a large red eye staring back at me. I gasp and jump back with a little scream. An eruption of dull humorless laughter comes from the other side of the door.

"I know you're there, come on out. I won't bite" the creature says. It looks like a glider, except in a humanoid form rather than a big blob of mist. I'm not going out there. You couldn't pay me to go out there.

"I need help getting out of here..these monsters are scary, right? I disguised myself as one to keep on the down low", the glider says. Wait- is she a student too? No, it can't be. I haven't seen anyone else here, and this 'costume' seems way too realistic. My hiding spot must not have been good enough. She must know I'm a human if she is trying to trick me out of here.

I don't say anything and instead try to think of a way out. There has to be a way out, right? My heart is pounding. The lights ominously start to flicker, making this situation more eerie if that was even possible at this point.

A loud sigh can be heard before the door to my stall gets slammed into.

My eyes widen as I start to panic. Where do I go?! I'm cornered. I notice the gap going into the next stall. I quickly kick my backpack under the door and out of the stall to distract the glider before crawling into the next stall, and standing on the toilet so she can't see my feet. Maybe she'll think I was able to get away. The stall I just crawled out of is broken into.

In a moment of pure adrenaline I exit the stall. The glider is still in the original stall, so I quickly lock it in. I then quickly ran out of the stall and into the hallway, leaving my backpack there.

I need to get out of here. They clearly know I'm here, and I'm not one of them. As I'm running an alarm goes off and I hear doors slamming open. They are trying to get me! Before I can even process what is happening an arm reaches out and pulls me into a room.

This is it, this is the end. I try to fight against the person's tight grasp only to realize the person's skin feels oddly warm, and if I know anything about these monsters it's that they are cold. Inside and out.

"SHHH! If you want to get out of here stop struggling! I'm on your side!", the person says. She has a trembling yet older voice. I recognize it as the voice of my first period teacher, Ms Benish. The human one. I slowly stop struggling and she releases me. I turn to look at her and she has a finger in front of her lips signaling me to be quiet.

"You're..you're on my side..?", I ask warily as I examine her. She really looks like a real human. *Real human*. I never thought I would say that in my life. The only thing that seems off is how tired she looks. Although, that's to be expected. She's working in a school filled with monsters. Literally.

"Yes! Let me make this quick, you're not the first person to come here. Every human who has the misfortune of coming here doesn't make it out. Those are the children without eyes, I'm sure

you've noticed them. Look, you have made it farther to getting out than anyone else has. The teachers are being held hostage, and if you get out, we get freed. So i'm going to help you"

Ms.Benish runs a hand through her graying hair and starts to pace. "This is going to be difficult, I mean, they know youre here. You left your backpack, correct? This is practically a suicide mission now!", she exclaims tiredly.

"I've made it this far, haven't I?" I ask, trying to keep a positive outlook on everything. We can do this. I take a deep breath and pull out my list.

"We have time to plan..I can't leave until 12", I glance at my watch. "I have 20 minutes until i can leave relatively safely"

When I look up, Ms.Benish is looking at me intently with a confused expression on her face.

"Who gave you that list?"

I hold up the list as if to say 'this list?'. "Oh..when I first got here this random girl with black hair gave this to me..she told me to follow it if I wanted to survive", I explain. Does she not know the girl..?

An apprehensive and shocked expression crosses her face. She mumbles something incoherent under her breath that I can't quite make out before shaking her head. Does she know something? I open my mouth to ask but she gives me a look that says not to ask.

What is up with everyone cutting me off at this place??

"Okay. I think the best way to get you out of here is going to be through the trash chute. I know it's not the most favorable exit, but no one goes back there and the food scent should mask your human scent.", she says after a few seconds. She walks up to me and adjusts my hoodie so that it rests better on my shoulders, almost in a motherly way. It looks as though she is terrified.

"You can do this..please..save us all" She doesn't even give me a chance to speak before pointing towards a vent. Her voice is shaking as if she's about to cry. "Go through there, the hallways are being patrolled in search of you. Take two lefts and a right and you'll be in the garbage room."

I can clearly understand she isn't very open about her emotions. She probably doesn't want to say goodbye. I walk over to the vent and slowly crawl in. The metal is cold against my skin, but I will manage. It feels wrong leaving without saying *something*. I slowly peek my head out and meet her eyes.

"Thank you, Ms.Benish"

I then crawl into the vent, trying not to look back. I've only known this woman for a few hours, yet it hurts to leave. What if I can't save her and let her down? I don't want to leave her there. I guess that's just another thing I was never good at. Saying goodbye.

The vents are cramped and frigid. I want to turn back but I know I can't. I have to keep going. For that teacher, for all the other teachers, for these lost souls and trapped children, for myself. Two lefts and a right later I drop into the garbage room.

The stench is absolutely horrid. Imagine the worst smell you can think of. I can guarantee this is worse. I gag a little as I look down the disgusting garbage chute. I whine a little as I swing a leg over into the chute. I pinch my nose with my fingers as I sit inside.

"Here goes nothing" I say in an odd voice because of my plugged nose. I take a deep breath like I always do before pressing the button to be dumped. I immediately start coughing because in that deep breath, all I got was the disgusting fumes of whatever these things eat.

As I get towards the bottom of the chute I notice that the ground is way lower than it should be for a two story school.

"Wha-"

I then notice the ground is moving. I gasp and try to grab onto something in the chute to stop myself from falling any further. The school is moving! Schools don't move! What is even happening anymore. It must be 1:00! The steel of the chute is too slippery to properly get a grasp on, and I find myself slipping all the way to the bottom.

What is this? The 5th time I found myself close to death?! This has been a long day.

I manage to grab onto a handle at the end of the chute. The only problem now is that I am helplessly hanging from the garbage chute of a *walking* school. Yes, I said walking. The school has now grown eight spider-like legs and is crawling around way over the ground. My arms are shaking. I'm gonna fall. Curse my weak noodle arms!

Suddenly my hand slips. I scream as I find myself falling through the air. Does this count as escaping? I mean..technically i made it out, right? Just not for long. My eyes tear up as the ground comes closer and closer.

The wind is whipping through my hair as I fall. The cold air is biting my skin. I tightly squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to see when I hit the ground. Before my supposed inevitable death happens Something catches me by my hoodie.

Huh?

I crane my head around and see a tree branch. Well, that was lucky I suppose. I wipe at my teary eyes and take a shaky breath. I'm absolutely terrified. I watch as the school walks away and I can't help but feel relieved.

The tree branch starts to slowly drop down to the ground. Not like it's breaking, no, It's almost like an arm slowly lowering me to the ground. I stumble slightly as my old scuffed converse finally meets the ground.

"You made it!", a familiar voice says. I turn around and am met with the sight of the girl that gave me the list, and behind her all of the teachers from the school. The girl's voice is no longer dark and raspy, now the opposite. It's more happy and upbeat.

"Thank you for saving us", the teachers say with relieved smiles. "We knew you could do it"

I am surprised that they are all standing there in front of me again. I quickly scan the crowd in search of the teacher I've grown fond of. A pit forms in my stomach when I don't see her.

"Where..?", I start to say. The girl shakes her head with a solemn expression.

"The English teacher, right? She didn't make it..she..she sacrificed herself so you could escape", the girl explains.

I feel my heart shatter. It can't be, right? As I scan the crowd I can tell they are being sincere. A sob escapes my throat as my knees get weak. No..

The girl comes closer and gently hugs me.

My converse echoed against the school hallway tile. It's the first day of school. A new school this time. I take a deep breath. I can handle this, right? I mean..nothing can be worse than that horror show of a school. *I can do this.* I think to myself as I enter the classroom. As soon as I enter my eyes meet a familiar pair of eyes that no longer seem as tired. I drop my backpack.

"Ms. Benish..?"

Note by the author, me :)

This story was pretty long, I'm sorry. I couldn't really find a way to shorten it. I wrote this about school. I mean, there were a lot of parallels to how actual school is. Oftentimes students really are terrible. They make you feel scared to be yourself around them, and often make teachers have a rough day. I sort of showed this with how the teachers in this story are being held hostage by the students who happen to be monsters. The students were described as being all the same, showing how often our individuality is stripped away from us and we are forced to act all the same. This can

also relate to how people follow others just to fit in. In this story there are also little parallels that I think aren't very serious but rather funny, like the terrible cafeteria food. All throughout the story there are things that relate to my personal experience with school. I thought it added a nice touch, and it's fun to look out for. Thanks for reading!

Justin F.
12th grade
Creative Writing

10/18/23

By the Candlelight

~ I ~

As dusk laid a cool blanket of mist over the rolling green hills of the Polish landscape, Samuel Piotrowski; a young boy, stood watching the sunset as it gradually faded beneath the horizon. Its warm colors that painted the skyline a breathtaking array of multihued lights that slowly darkened as the sun sank dimly toward the horizon; reaching outwards toward the fleeting light. Samuel had to admit to himself that the sight was indeed beautiful, and he couldn't resist standing for just a bit longer; admiring the view. Eventually, Samuel turned and began trudging onwards once again, frost-bitten grass crunching dryly under his weary boots. Having walked for days and nights on end through barren fields; he carried upon his back a weighted sense of resignation. It had been less than three months since the Great War had ravaged the Polish landscape; towns and cities had been left in ruin, and Samuel's parents were lost to him in the conflict. The German militia had been ruthless, mercilessly and effortlessly devoiding the once serene landscape of all beauty and desire. Now, left all alone, Samuel wandered through the icy sodden fields, continuing a fruitless search for signs of life in a desolate wasteland.

As Samuel rounded a new crest, he found himself staring down at a quaint, but expansive village. The houses meandered along the gentle hillside, each one varied from the next, and no two the same. Some were brick and mortar, others stone and thatch. Some had swooping victorian-styled roofs. Others had flat tops with chimney holes. Yet together they all shared a similar feature; they were dark and empty. Not one light was on in the darkened windows, not a single plume of smoke rose from a chimney, not a single soul wandered the empty stone laden streets, and not a sound was to be heard beside the wind that rustled the trees.

Another casualty of the war, Samuel thought to himself. At some point in time, this village had most likely been a warm place, full of life and activity. The people who once lived here once had festivals

and celebrations, they conversed daily with each other and shared meals. Now, it was but a dark shadow of what it used to be. Samuel took a shuddering breath, clearing his mind. He had better things to worry about rather than the lives of people he never knew. His own life was his top priority, and he had no one left to rely on but himself. Night was setting in fast, and Samuel knew the temperature would steadily decline until the air became so cold it would freeze his lungs with a single breath.

So Samuel continued onward, he made his way down the hillside toward the village, stepping precariously around the shrubbery and wreckage. Up close, he could see the devastation of the village more clearly, some houses were missing walls, others roofs. Some were leveled entirely, others burnt to such a degree they appeared blacker than the night sky. Samuel observed no bodies in the streets, it was as if everyone had simply vanished entirely, the houses being the only remnants that they had ever been here at all.

Samuel spent the next while searching the homes, trying to find the best one to stay in for the night. It didn't take him long to determine an older looking brick home to be the ideal candidate for the night. It had the majority of its walls intact, save a small patch missing by the top of the backmost wall. The roof had no major chunks missing, and it had a chimney with a firebox for him to start a fire in. In his search Samuel found some rations he could eat, like a can of preserved baked beans, and a few sticks of jerky. He'd also found a slightly rusted pocket knife, whose blade was still sharp, along with a faded red candle that bore a faint yet familiar scent; the scent of strawberries.

Inside the house, Samuel used the pocket knife to cut up large strips of an old green armchair he would use as kindling, he'd also found a rack of dried logs he would use for the fire stacked neatly beside an nearby building. He was thankful that he had stumbled across this village, for the last few nights he had been camping outside in the cold weather, slowly running out of water and food. With winter setting in, Samuel began to consider staying in this village for the season. There would hopefully be enough food in the houses and nearby forest to sustain him, and it provided shelter from the frigid outside. He couldn't have hoped for a better place to stay, albeit one with living people might have been better.

Samuel piled the logs into the firebox, observing the thickly packed ash piled inside. He covered the logs with the fabric he cut from before, shoving dried twigs and pine needles into the middle. Turning Samuel reached into his satchel and pulled out a box of matches. He took one of the tiny red sticks and struck it against the box, watching as it flared to life. Carefully he used the dying light to ignite the dried foliage, leaving the match inside to burn. The fire came to life quickly, devouring the fuel within its reach. The flames grew, engulfing the fabric, and before long the logs. Samuel didn't step back until he was sure the fire was burning steadily, and when he was sure did he relax and lay back. The room began to warm, and Samuel breathed a sigh of relief, tonight he would not have to bear the cold and wind, it would be a peaceful night.

With the fire going, Samuel began getting ready to eat, he opened the can of beans and poured the contents into a little pot he'd found. Even though it wasn't the cleanest, Samuel felt there were more important things he needed to worry about than a little rust in his food. He held the pot over the fire, watching as the flames tickled the underside of its belly. Soon he observed bubbles in the soupy beans, so he pulled it off the fire and set it down. Taking out the jerky he'd found, Samuel ripped them up into little bits and dropped them in the pot; stirring it all together with a little wooden spoon. The meal was plentiful and filling, the best Samuel had had in awhile in fact. When he was done, he set aside the pot and spoon and laid down on his pillow by the fire. He pulled his woolen blanket up over himself and took a deep breath. His eyes watched the fire intently, studying the way the flames moved along the logs, like some sort of chaotic dance. It was hard to believe such innocent flames could also burn down entire forests, and desecrate a whole city.

For a bit Samuel just laid and stared with fascination, eventually his exhaustion began to set in, his eyes drooped, his body relaxed, and eventually he fell asleep.

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Samuel opened his eyes to find himself surrounded by darkness, was it still night? Glancing Samuel noticed the fire was still smoldering intently, which is why he didn't feel very cold, but it had died out for the most part which explained the lack of light. Why had he awoken? Shaking his head Samuel

pressed into his soft pillow and tried to fall back asleep, but he couldn't, something didn't feel right. Just as Samuel was about to dismiss the thoughts he heard, a low rumble. It was barely audible, and it sounded somewhat familiar to that of a mortar shell striking the ground far away. Was a bombing happening nearby? Samuel shifted gently, blinking a few times before he heard another noise. It was no mortar shell, it was a growl, like the sort of guttural noise a beast would make as it stalked its prey in the bush. Samuel whipped up quickly, his blanket falling down beside him. Was there a wolf or bear prowling outside the house, had something tracked his scent. Silence enveloped the room again, and for a moment Samuel began to think he had just imagined the entire thing, that was until the noise came again, just outside the door. It was a growl, like stones grinding against one another. It was most definitely not his imagination.

Quickly Samuel reached for his satchel, would a tiny pocket knife be able to fend off a wolf? Should he scream in an attempt to scare it away? Or stay quiet and hope it would leave? Samuel's hand brushed against the candle in his satchel, and realized he should probably pull it out and light it so he could see. He fumbled for a minute as he pulled it and his matchbox out, his fingers slipped and he dropped the box of matches, and they spilled out on the floor, tumbling about. He grabbed one and struck it quickly, his fingers shaking. Holding it to the little black wick the candle flared to life, and the room became dimly illuminated. Samuel looked at the door, which was cracked just a bit, but not enough for him to see out of it. Was the beast gone now? Samuel held his breath as he waited for any noise to come, but what came next was surely worse. Samuel watched in horror as the door slowly creaked, swinging ever so slightly inward. The rusty hinges screamed as the door inched open, and Samuel could see a long metallic like talon pressed against its frame. The claw-like shape was a shiny black, arched and thick, and the talon came to a sharp pointed end. What was outside the building? That was no claw of a wolf, not even a bear would have a claw that big. Samuel watched as the claw slowly retracted back out the door, and another grumble came from just outside. It was louder now with the door open. For the next few minutes Samuel sat, staring at the empty space, waiting for something to happen. Nothing came, and Samuel realized he needed to breathe. The boy sputtered as he let out the air trapped in his lungs, and he coughed for a moment as he tried to regain his composure. Shifting, he slowly stood up, shakily moving

over to the doorway, still holding the candle tightly, as he arrived Samuel quickly jumped around the corner. Darkness, it was just darkness, with his candle in hand Samuel could see nothing but darkness outside the door. He made a sigh of relief, and exhaustion flooded his limbs as the anticipation and anxiety he had been drowning in slowly seeped away. Leaning against the doorframe Samuel slid down until he was sitting again, taking a shuddering breath. Whatever that had been, it had left him utterly terrified.

~ II ~

Samuel opened his eyes wearily, blinking a few times as he tried to clear the drowsiness from his vision. He was curled up tightly underneath his woolen blanket, staring blankly at the fireplace which sat silent. The room was dimly lit as sunlight flitted through the glass paned windows, it wasn't very bright, which indicated the day was most likely cloudy. It was cold, but not unbearable, and underneath his layers Samuel didn't feel the chill. Sitting upright the boy yawned and stretched his arms, shaking away the sleep. Something didn't feel right to him though, it was as if he was forgetting something. Did something happen?

The realization hit Samuel like a freight train, and he whipped around to look at the door, which was closed tightly, a chair backed up against the door handle. That's right! Last night, Samuel had witnessed some sort of- monster? Something like that outside his door, lurking in the darkness, and it had scared him so thoroughly that he'd barricaded the door afterwards. He even remembered sitting by the restoked fire unable to fall asleep, apparently though his weariness had caught up to him and he'd fallen asleep. The memories were colder than the morning air, and shivers ran up and down his back as an image of that glistening black talon appeared in his mind. Samuel shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts as he pulled his blanket back up around himself, curling up again. It is gone now though, right?

~ ~ ~

The day progressed steadily, and by noon Samuel found himself sitting on the edge of a little stone well whose rocky blocks were grayed and worn from age. The boy observed little snowflakes falling all around him, tiny specks of pearlescent water that glittered down all around the abandoned

village. He could already see small piles forming around, and the ground was becoming a green and white mix. Winter was here, and Samuel had found himself a place where he could hopefully wait the long months out. During the day he'd scavenged around and began moving things to his home. He found many cans of preserved foods, jars and boxes packed with rations. He found carpentry supplies and spent a few hours patching up different parts of the building he was staying in. He even stung up some curtains on the windows. Overall, the young boy was quite proud of his own resourcefulness. Now, Samuel was taking a break, sitting and watching the snowflakes drift down around him while he had a snack. He thought about the night before, was he sure what he had seen was real? The noises could have truly been mortar shells in the distance, they could have also just been his imagination. The talon had seemed real, but what if it was a hallucination. After all, it was so dark outside that he could have just been imagining a shape among the inky night. Samuel felt conflicted, what if whatever animal that had been showed up again? If it had even existed in the first place. Samuel knew leaving the village now would almost certainly mean his death. With the brutal winter beginning to set in, he'd probably freeze to death within a week.

For today, Samuel would stay in the village. Hopefully whatever he had seen, had it been real, would never show itself again and he would be able to peacefully wait out the harsh winter months in the safety of walls. Looking down at the stick of dried venison in his hand, Samuel sighed and looked up to the sky. He was exhausted.

~ ~ ~

Samuel opened his eyes wide as a low rumble slowly droned through the night. The noise was so off-putting that it made Samuel's back tingle with fear. Slowly, and without making a sound the boy rose from his pillow, his eyes watching the door intently. In the darkness he could make out the shapes of the handle and chair pressed up against it. Looking away Samuel reached into his satchel again, he dug through it for a moment until his hands enraptured a small waxy item. He retracted the candle out of the bag, and blindly ran his hands along the floor to find his matches. Samuel stopped as he heard a noise, his blood running cold. He could hear the sound of the doorknob turning, it was very faint, but he could hear the sound as it clicked and the lock disengaged. Horror dawned on the boy and he hastily picked up his

pace. His right hand bumped against a small box and he snatched it up quickly, Samuel didn't even bother trying to rifle through it and instead just dumped the contents onto the floor. He snatched up a match, striking it quickly. The small flame brightened his vision and he held it against the stubby candle wick until it caught ablaze.

Samuel spun around quickly as he heard the chair squeal as it was pushed with the door, its legs raking the wooden floor underneath. The sound made the boy cringe at how loud it was, and Samuel was forced to watch in anticipation as the door slowly opened again, he noticed almost instantaneously the black talon from the night before pressed against the frame, urging it open.

What should he do? He was trapped in this house with just a candle in his hand as something prowled outside, it was no ordinary animal afterall. No animal could disengage the lock on a door, then turn the handle and force it open. When the door was more than halfway it stopped, and the talon receded. Samuel slowly stood up again, taking shallow breaths as he swallowed the fear in his throat. He backed up until he stood against the far wall, should he try and hide? There were secondary rooms in the house he could go into, but this was the biggest space. If whatever was outside came inside, he would need as much room as he could to try and navigate around it.

Samuel's thoughts came to a halt when it finally appeared, he watched as the largest foot he had ever seen stepped into the doorway, it had dark, mangled brown fur that was matted with mud. The fur continued up a long thick leg until it reached the waist. On its foot Samuel observed six glistening black talons, each one longer than his entire forearm. They were arched and curved, and as the beast planted its foot they dug into the wood; splintering it into pieces. As more of the monstrous figure moved into view, all sense of hope seemed to flee from Samuel, its arms mirrored its legs in terms of size, and it had massive black pads on its hands, with five finger like appendages with those giant black knife-like protrusions extending out of them. The creature was clearing hunching over in order to fit within the room, as it had to be almost ten feet tall standing upright. With the candle in his hand and the light it gave off Samuel was able to see the beast's face, and the sight brought terror to his every cell. A long blackened snout extended off of its matted face, it was glistening with moisture, and long murky beads of saliva

dripped from its muzzle onto the floor, jagged teeth stuck out from the sides of its mighty jaws, each one gleaming like they were made of iron. Its eyes were sunken black pits, with tiny lazer points like red dots where its irises should be. Everything about this creature was wrong, unnatural, unsightly. It shouldn't exist. It shouldn't be real.

Yet it was, and here it stood standing in his doorway. Watching him. The beast stood paused and unmoving, like it was studying Samuel. The boy took a deep breath and gripped the candle tightly, he didn't even feel the hot wax running down the sides and onto his fingers. The beast continued standing there, and Samuel realized that it wasn't staring at him, it was staring at the candle flame. He moved his arm away from his, and the little red dots followed the light. Was it scared of the flame? Maybe it was nocturnal, so the light was frightening. Samuel realized that if he waited any longer, the flame of his candle could go out and it would be over, so he summoned all the courage he had and took a step forward, extending the candle out in front of him. Although the beast made no move, Samuel could see the large muscles underneath its fur tense. So he took another step, and the beast shifted nervously. And another, finally the beast actually moved backward, and one of its monstrous paws raised up to cover its eyes. It was scared of the light! With this new realization in mind Samuel took another two steps closer, he had to be only five feet away from the beast at most now, and the monster began receding through the doorway. Finally Samuel took the final few steps, and the beast continued backing away until it was fully out the door. Now outside, Samuel was able to appreciate the immense size of this monster, it was truly massive. The beast continued to stare down the flame in Samuel's hand before it finally made a gruntal noise and backed away, turning and galloping off into the night it quickly vanished into the inky void.

Standing, now alone in the doorway, Samuel grinned and began laughing hysterically to himself. Tears began raining down from his eyes as he collapsed to the ground and began sobbing uncontrollably. All the fear and anxiety that had been building up in his chest was finally released. Samuel had just stared death in the eyes and survived miraculously.

This place.

It was cursed.

~ III ~

The next day came slowly, and Samuel could not find sleep as the long night passed. His body refused to sleep, refused to close its eyes because if he did he was sure that beast would come for him. Finally as daybreak came, Samuel found himself nodding off. When he awoke again the sun had almost reached its apex in the sky, clouds littered the sky, occasionally occluding the light. Samuel stood in the window, staring out at the snowflakes falling down on the ground below. He felt cold even with his woolen blanket wrapped around him, and he felt empty from the fear last night. He now knew that there was indeed a terrible monster lurking outside, it was hunting him, stalking him in the night. And Samuel knew that if he didn't leave this place it would find him, and he would die. Leaving was not a great option either, the snow continued to fall, and it didn't look like it would let up. He would be braving frigid temperatures, trudging through almost a foot of snow, he could only fit so many rations in his bag. Samuel would have to pray to find another settlement not too far away, or he would certainly die in the cold.

As the day continued on, Samuel gathered his things. He packed a bag as full as he could with food items, he wrapped two blankets around himself, also donning a large fur coat he managed to find. Everything was ready, he was ready to leave this terrible cursed place.

As Samuel left the borders of the village, he looked back on the eerily quiet houses. They looked different to him now, more ominous with their darkened windows. Turning away he pulled his blankets around him tightly and began marching on, he had to get as far away as possible before nightfall. Samuel tracked the sun in the sky as he forged his way onward. As it slowly sank toward the horizon the wind began howling fiercer, the snow whipping around him faster. His cheeks felt numb, and so did his ears. Every part of his body ached and hurt, he wanted to fall to the ground and give up, but he kept going on. Finally after what felt like an eternity, Samuel found himself walking into a small spruce grove. There were not many trees, but when he stood within the center of them the wind no longer felt as fierce or painful. Deciding this would be his only optimal place to rest for the night Samuel began setting up a temporary camp underneath one of the pines. The sun was caressing the horizon now, and the light was slowly fading. Even though Samuel knew he was away from that village now, he could feel his anxiety

and apprehension rising steadily, increasing the more the sunlight diminished. Samuel managed to get a small modest fire burning, barely shielded from the wind. He ate a small meal, enough to sate his hunger for the night before he curled up in a tight ball and started the fire down. He waited, and waited some more. Waiting to hear the sound of the beast coming to get him. Yet it never came.

The moon began to rise, and the snowstorm slowly calmed. Eventually the wind was gone and the sparse flakes glittered down lazily onto the ground. The night became still and quiet, and Samuel could feel his eyes drooping with exhaustion. But just as he was about to slip away into sleep, he heard the noise. It was so faint at first Samuel could almost not hear it at all. The sound of snow crunching underfoot, but as he listened closer he could hear it becoming louder, becoming closer. Panic overtook Samuel; he dumped his items on the ground and began frantically searching for his matches. The wind began to pick up, and the fire beside him dwindled against the cold wind. He found his matches and the stumpy candle, using his body as a shield he stuck a match and lit the barely visible wick. The sound of crunching snow was getting closer. As the wick flared to life Samuel took the candle in one hand and used the other to shield the flame from the wind. Slowly he rose, the wind continued to blow, but the flame held steady. Turning Samuel looked to the break in the trees, and he found red eyes staring back at him.

Samuel felt a sob rising in his throat at the sight of the beast, why couldn't he escape? Why was this beast chasing him? The beast stood stoically, staring at Samuel and the candle in his hand. Samuel clenched it tightly, holding it against his chest.

Timidly, Samuel took a step forward, his legs buckling with fear. The beast stayed still, so Samuel took another. The beast stared at him down, red eyes unmoving. Samuel took another, and another. He hadn't realized it, but tears were raining from his cheeks. He was walking towards death, placing one foot in front of another as he walked toward the end. As Samuel reached not more than a few feet in front of the monster he stopped, craning his neck to look up. The candle dwindled in his hands, the wick reaching its end. Samuel looked down and watched as a small gust of wind extinguished the tiny flame, and darkness enveloped him. Samuel took a shaky breath and looked back up, his eyes meeting those of the

monster standing above him. As Samuel swallowed a shaky breath, he finally spoke for the first time in a while.

“Please, I wish to suffer no more.”

The beast continued staring down, gaze unchanging, but in its empty eyes, a hint of compassion flickered.

And then. It was over.

SALEM HIGH SCHOOL

Man, I hate this school. I regained my composure after yet *another* inconsiderate student crashed into me on their journey to class. It has been an everyday occurrence since switching schools in the middle of my senior year. I cannot wait to escape the hell I call 'Salem High School'. The people in this town are snobby and eager to pounce on the next victim of their relentless gossip. I want to leave and never return.

"Hey Marina," Laila chirped, pulling me out of my hateful thoughts.

"Finally, someone I actually *want* to run into," I grumbled with an exaggerated sigh.

The only saving grace in this miserable town was Laila Shoran - the cheerleader with straight As, the hottest boyfriend in the school (according to the other girls, though I personally don't see it), and the perfect, put-together family. Laila Shoran happened to be my best and only friend. From the moment my mom and I set down our boxes from the moving van, there was Laila, sitting on our creaky old porch swing. She had introduced herself as our neighbor across the street and my 'new best friend'. Honestly, I had found her charm to be a bit ditzy and bubble-headed. Little did I know, Laila was anything but.

That very first night, Laila practically invited herself to sleep over and sat herself on my sleeping bag, surrounded by a mountain of boxes filled to the brim with junk.

"So, where's your dad?" she had asked boldly, as if social cues didn't exist.

"I don't have one," I said. "Not anymore."

"Did he die?"

“Excuse me?” I almost audibly gasped at the audacity this stranger had to ask such personal questions that I wasn’t even ready to discuss with my therapist - whom my mom was making me take sessions with. *Lucky me.*

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you...I just enjoy learning about people.” Laila smiled apologetically.

Something about this girl’s presence made me feel like I could trust her. So, I laid out the whole truth to this girl who was oddly comforting and very good at listening. I told her how my dad would come into my room and hurt me every night for years on end. I told her how when I would attempt to fight back, the punishment would last longer until all I could do was lie still and take it. I told her of the night it all came to an end. The night my poor mom witnessed the act and nearly killed my father. The night we thought he would be put in prison forever. How a month later he was released into society again and managed to track me and my mom down, nearly breaking into our new apartment. How we had to flee New York City and move to this small town in the middle of nowhere because the justice system couldn’t do their job. How we were still scared for our lives every single day, even here. The whole time, hot tears streamed down my face as Laila nodded and held my hand. I had poured my heart out to this random girl and managed to say what I had never been able to speak aloud to anyone before. Not even my mom.

That night sealed the friendship between Laila and I. I had become close with this girl in less than a day after having grown up quite antisocial and anxious. It was a shock, to say the least. That night, I decided I owed everything to Laila. Absolutely everything.

As Laila and I walked to class, we giggled and gossiped about our classmates and her latest boyfriend drama. We sat down in our only shared class: english. I rushed to my seat and

hid my face as quickly as possible. Laila followed me over, a knowing smirk plastered across her face.

“Ooh, is Jaden here already?” she asked as she nudged me playfully.

“Shhh, he’ll hear you,” I whispered as the blush began coating my cheeks.

She sighed, “Why don’t you just ask him out already?”

She didn’t understand. I wasn’t a vision of beauty, like her. I didn’t possess her long, shining blonde hair, her full lips, her upturned nose dotted with delicate freckles, her high, sharp cheekbones, or her toned, yet perfectly curved body. I was just average, if not below that. I just laughed and told her she was crazy. Insane, in fact.

She responded with a short, “You have no idea, Marines” accompanied by a wink. I hated that nickname so much. Just as I was about to retort with something clever, a quiet girl, Amerie, began coughing. Her loud, urgent coughs suddenly became long and never ending. She ran to the hallway. As a group of students got up to check on her, the rest of the class heard a loud retching sound which we could only assume was Amerie. She was immediately sent home and class resumed as usual. In hindsight, it was strange; but, to be fair, I didn’t know it meant anything at the time.

Over the next couple of weeks, less and less students began showing up to class.

“What is up with all these absences?” I asked. “Even the teachers are out.”

“I’m not sure,” replied Laila. “But hey, at least Jaden is still here.” She nodded to him with a huge grin and a mischievous glint in her eye.

“Wipe that smile off your face!” I yelled. “He just asked me out on a date...it’s totally not a big deal.”

“Mhm, right...”

“I mean it!”

Although I had been telling everyone it wasn't a big deal, I was incredibly excited for my date with Jaden. He had found me after school one day and asked if I wanted to go see a movie with him - I know, cliché. Obviously I said yes. Now that I was standing in my room, tearing through my closet to find a good outfit, my nerves were becoming more apparent. Would he even like me? Would I do something embarrassing and scare him off? Oh God, the possibilities were endless. I decided on a simple floral dress with pink lipgloss and a couple coats of mascara. I brushed my dark curls back into a messy updo with a couple strands framing my face. To finish off the look, I threw on my old black high top converse and a pair of dangling crystal earrings. I rushed down the stairs just as the doorbell rang.

My mom gave me a thumbs up and yelled, “no later than 10:00!”

I giggled and opened the door to see Jaden's striking face staring down at me. He usually looked stunning, but tonight he wore a striped sweater with wide blue jeans and a leather jacket that left my mouth agape. His dark brown eyes looked pitch black in the night and the moonlight shone off his dark skin and black curly hair. I was in awe. I probably looked like an idiot, just standing there gawking at him.

To my relief, he flashed his pearly white smile at me and said, “you look beautiful.”

He offered me his hand and walked me to his car. His scent filled the air and drew me in closer to his body. All I could think about was his hand in mine and my head practically leaning against his shoulder. My heartbeat quickened as I got into the car and we sped off to the theater. After about 40 minutes of the cheesiest horror movie I had ever seen, Jaden told me he couldn't take it anymore and begged to take me somewhere, anywhere else. I laughed and agreed wholeheartedly. We jumped up out of the leather seats and walked to his car. We continued our

banter from before the movie and I could not stop talking. Something about this boy made me want to tell him everything, but I knew it was much too soon for that. Suddenly, I could feel his gaze drifting down to my lips, my chin, my cheeks, and back up to my eyes. As if I were a piece of artwork, and he was trying to memorize every single detail. My heart stopped when I found myself bringing my hand up to his cheek and kissing him softly as he bent down to wrap his arm around the small of my back. How could I have been so bold? Perhaps I had taken Laila's advice after all.

The moment didn't last long, however, because Jaden began to cough and retch, identical to the way Amerie had before. I immediately called for help and rode in the ambulance to the hospital beside him.

While we were on the road, I held his hand and he whispered to me, "you know, that was my first kiss."

My stomach fluttered and I squeezed his hand tighter.

As soon as my mom heard about what had happened, she rushed to the hospital to come pick me up. On our ride home, I told her the doctors claimed Jaden must have had some sort of infection. My mom got a strange look on her face then. She told me many of the kids in our community had been getting infected in the same way Jaden had. She told me they were all kids that attended Salem High School. How strange...but I promised my mom I would disinfect more and wait for the disease to pass.

A few weeks later, Jaden was back to his usual self; however, over half the school was now infected with whatever virus he had. Almost every single class was sparse. On top of the poor attendance, a horrid smell began to invade the school hallways. Despite this, the school decided they would still hold the annual homecoming dance. I had plans to attend with Jaden and

Laila. Laila and I had already picked our outfits. My dress a long, bodycon red gown, and Laila's a bright teal dress with an A-line shape. Laila always did love a good statement piece.

That night, Jaden and I met up with Laila and her boyfriend as we danced and talked and laughed about life. At some point in the night, Laila excused herself to go to the bathroom. After about 20 minutes she still hadn't returned, so I traced her footsteps and asked if anyone had seen where she went. Everyone pointed down the long, dark hallway that was closed off for the dance. It reeked of something putrid and rotten. Still, I walked in the dark, hoping Laila was just trying to scare me and I wouldn't actually have to go down to that creepy basement. No such luck. As I descended the stairs, the smell only got worse. So this was where it was originating from. Whatever was causing the smell was likely connected to all the kids getting sick. It was an odor I would never get out of my brain. I peeked into the large space to see if Laila was down here. There was only a single flickering bulb to light the room. In a dark corner, I spotted her teal dress. I heard quiet sobs and saw that Laila was sitting next to a large tank, with her arms wrapped around her slender body, as if comforting herself the way she had once comforted me. She was whispering to herself. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*. I cautiously walked over to her to ask what was wrong, but before I could get the words out, the smell found its way into my mouth, making me gag and almost double over.

Laila looked up and yelled, "Marina, no! You can't be here! You can't see this!"

She rushed over to me, eyes red and puffy from crying, and reached for my arm. She began pleading with me once she realized I would not move.

She sobbed and screamed, "MARINA, DON'T!" as I stepped closer and closer to the tank. Closer to the smell. I peered over the edge and almost flew backwards.

From the dark, murky water of the tank, I had seen glassy, lifeless eyes looking back at me. The very same eyes that had watched over me in the night for so many years. The eyes that had peered down at me as I struggled and fought. The eyes of my father.

“Laila, why is my dad in there?” I screamed. “What is going on?”

“Why is he dead? Laila, please talk to me!”

Laila’s eyes filled with tears as she whispered, “I tried to stop it. The violence. The blood. God, there was so much blood.” She almost choked on her words, “He tracked you down. Managed to find your new school. Followed us in here and threatened to kill your mother for putting him in prison.”

Then, her eyes flashed up and peered into mine, as if she were begging for forgiveness.

“Laila, what did you do?”

“I couldn’t stop it. I promise you I tried! I didn’t want this! I didn’t want this for you!”

“Laila, please *tell me the truth!*” I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself for the answer I already knew was true.

“He got what he deserved.” Laila sobbed.

Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, she said, “Marines...I couldn’t stop you.”

Sabrina S.

12th

Elana

Grade 12

Mesa Ridge High School

A Short Eternity

The love of my life; the plague of my existence. These were the thoughts that ran through my head as I stared at her grave. She said that we would be together for eternity. Well, who would've imagined that eternity would only last for seven days? I gazed down somberly at the rough-cut granite block and placed the white roses gently on the patch of dirt where she was laid to rest. The cemetery where she was buried was a sea of nobodies; unmarked graves with no history or memories to recall. The only outlier was the tombstone which I stood in front of. The only one inscribed with a name; Eternity. She had always stuck out like a sore thumb, or more like pyrite in a pool of gold. Truth be told, perhaps I didn't know her very well either. She had shadows breathing down her neck up to the point we had met. When we were together everything disappeared, she made life unbearably bearable. She was intoxicating. A bad trip with an even worse hangover. Our lows had been low, but our highs? They were moments written to be told centuries from now.

It had already gotten dark by the time I had gotten to the depressing studio apartment I called home. It was the place we moved into on the 3rd day. It's been another full week since she'd been gone. I have no desire to find a new place. Still unsure if it's out of obligation for her or sheer uncertainty if my life would revert to what it was months ago. As for now I focused on the present. I laid down on the lone queen sized mattress that sat comfortably in the dimly lit

corner. I stared up at the ceiling awaiting the sweet release of sleep from my thoughts. When I close my eyes she's still all I see; Her delectable pale skin white as snow, with spots of black and blue that adorned her body. The horrific sight of the crimson pool of her own blood not only stained my hands but my mind as well. I will never forget the look on her face when I found her remains in the alleyway. Her limbs were severed at the joint roughly with the bloodied hacksaw that laid near what looked to be an arm, but her eyes were still wide open. It was a chilling sight. A nightmare in fact. I shot straight up from bed unaware that I had even fallen asleep. I had awakened with a racing heart and sweat drenching my long bangs. The police said they couldn't identify her. She was our little town's very own Jane Doe. With no witnesses or trace evidence it quickly turned into a cold case.

At 3 a.m. there was a soft knock at my door followed by a string of taps. Every night for the past week I've heard the same tapping at my door. It was always the same knock followed by the taps and always at the exact same time, 3 a.m. not a minute off beat like clockwork. I got up to go through the same routine. I opened the rickety door and peered out into the hallway. It was completely dark and deserted. I closed the door behind me, but as I was walking back to bed there came another knock. Following the knock was a series of taps. That's never happened before. Reluctantly I reapproached the door.

"Hello? Evan?" said the voice of a young woman. "Come on, let me in, it's scary out here".

"Who are you?"

"Aw don't joke like that, it's only been a week and you're telling me you already forgotten my voice?"

Now that she mentioned it she did have a note of familiarity within her voice, and then it clicked. I swung the door open and sure enough there she stood 5'5 and proud with her dopey smile.

"Eternity?" I asked reluctantly.

She laughed "Who else would be showing up at your apartment at three in the morning?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but she had cut me off.

"That was a rhetorical question" She frowned, and pushed past my shoulder. "Why is it so disgusting here? You really can't live by yourself can you?"

The lights flickered on and from her eyes I saw what she did in this already run down apartment. Pill bottles piled on the floor, dirty clothes were scattered about, the walls were crusted with decades worth of dirt and smoke, and to top it all off the occasional cockroach or rodent scampered across the floor feasting on rotten leftovers.

"Who are you?" I asked the woman in front of me. "You can't be Eternity. I just went to your funeral today. I saw your corpse. I saw them bury you."

"Is this your idea of a sick joke? I'm right here in front of you. The same as I've always been." The woman sounded slightly offended. "Or do I have to jog your memory?"

Her hand reached out to caress my face. She took one step closer to me and hovered over my lips for a split second then closed the gap between us. As I always had I melted into her. Her lips were still as cold and supple as before. Her tongue traced the outline of my lips, and then she bit down hard on my bottom lip. I drew back from her cursing loudly.

"What the hell was that for?" I raised my voice. She stood and stared at me with her head cocked to the side. She exhaled sharply and then frowned.

"Did that hurt? I'm sorry, what can I do to make it up to you?" She said mockingly.

I wiped the blood off my lip with the edge of my sleeve, and I raised my hand at her but suddenly paused.

“What's wrong? You've never hesitated before. What's so different about this time?” She asked me.

“Will you shut up? You're not real. I don't know who you are but Eternity is dead.” I shouted. “Get out.”

“Don't you ever wonder what happened to me? Why do you think there weren't any witnesses or evidence? It's because you got rid of it all. Don't you remember or do I have to jog your memory? She expressed in a disgustingly sarcastic tone.

I slapped her then she immediately crumpled to the floor. She had winced in pain, but with a hand to her now red cheek she gave me a light chuckle.

“There's the Evan I know and love” she said. “Typical.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Babe, I didn't just mysteriously die. I told you we'd be together forever right? That Saturday you tried to force yourself on me, but when I wouldn't give in you hit me. Then after that you hit me again and again until I couldn't get up anymore-”

“Stop it.” I said.

“And if that weren't enough after you realized I stopped breathing you brought me into the alleyway and sawed off my limbs then walked off. The next day you found me and genuinely forgot what you did.”

“You're lying, I wouldn't do that. I love you.” I uttered softly. “I love you so much. I love you.”

I shut my eyes. At this point I was hysterical myself and she just wouldn't shut up. Bang. I open my eyes. It's quiet. There's blood on the floor. I look down with shaking hands, and there she was laying unresponsive. I try to shake her awake but to no avail. I took a look at her face, she's still as beautiful as the day I had met her. Perfect pale skin. Panicked I shook her now in my arms begging her to wake up.

“Eternity? Who did this to you? I can't lose you again.” I panicked.

She was nobody, that's how I had found her. But if she was a nobody then who was I? No one cared for her except for me, and no one loved me like she did. We were the perfect match, a match created in Hell. My love, we're going to be together for eternity. With that I took a knife and plunged it deep into my side. The last thing I remember seeing were her gorgeous electric blue eyes. In them I had seen the sea, but beyond that I saw us.

Teegan K
Mesa Ridge High School
AP Literature 10/30

Writer's Block

Huddled in the dark basement of the old house sat Andrew. The author only has a small lamp to his right to light him and his work. Flustered by the knowledge he has, what he had just seen not too long before, he picked up his trusted pen, and started to write. He began to quickly scribble his experiences on the crumpled piece of paper:

The day is November 18th, and I am here to discuss the latest incident with the United States Government. I have been working here for some time, and I th...

The pen snaps.

"What?" he wonders. "I've had this pen for so long, why does it have to break now?" he murmurs angrily. He then gets up to reach for the nearby bookcase on his left, and grabs a pencil from the middle shelf. Sat on this bookcase are dozens of articles and books he has written in his past, many of them about controversial findings he has made in recent years. He has proof of aliens, secret manufactured weapons of war, and other findings. What he was writing now though needed to be shared to the public with the upmost of urgency, before it was all too late. Andrew sits back down, pencil in hand, and begins to write once more.

...ink that this may be the most disturbing discovery I have ever found. After taking a tour through the pentagon building, I wandered off by accident towards a guarded room. I could see th...

The tip of the pencil breaks off mid sentence, and solemnly rolls off to the side of the table.

"UNBELIEVABLE", Andrew yelled. This had to be heard by the public, people had to know about this. There was not much time before he was caught, before he was killed for knowing this secret. He began to grow desperate; the chill of being found by the authorities he worked for shook him to his very core. He jumped out of his seat and frantically searched for another writing utensil. He couldn't get caught, he couldn't let his findings sink into the earth with his soon to be dead body. He had to get this paper out to the people. As he searched his damp dark basement his paranoia grew, and he began to sense himself being watched. The sound of a breaking tree branch or any crunched leaf could be the hunters finding him. Panicking, he

ran to the far closet and thrust the door open. Inside were antiques given to him by his grandfather when he was just a kid. He reached for a quill and some ink, and rushed back to his rickety damp desk. He quickly dipped the pen into the ink, and scribbled once more.

...rough the glass the experiment being done. There was a group of scientists, all sat around a man laid on his back. I saw them...

He dipped the quill back into the ink.

...inserting something into his brain. It looked to be a chip, about an eighth the size of my credit card. When they were done, his eyes lit green, he s...

The cold breeze blew the pen right out of the author's hand. Shocked, he turned around to look for another utensil. He was quickly distracted by a peculiar red light sitting on the side of his chest, a beam coming from through his window. He knew what was about to happen to him. A muffled gunshot rang out in the distance, and the world went black. The public would never know. The government had won.

Josie Mr.

Mr. Acker

Creative Writing

17 Oct. 2023

Jester

"I was watching a marathon of my TV show. My mom was across from me on the other couch. It was dark outside already. My dad wasn't supposed to be home until 3 in the morning, we were alone. I was halfway through my episode when the doorbell rang. My mom and I both looked at one another, we weren't expecting someone, especially that late. My mom got up and made her way to the door. I lowered the volume to listen. The only sound was that of the ice machine in our fridge making more ice. I sat there for what felt like hours. Then I heard the door shut. My mom walked back holding this dark blue paper bag. It looked like a gift bag. She was angry, not only did she slam the door but as she walked past me in the living room and into the hallway her face was as red as a tomato. She disappeared in the hallway, my guess is her room. She didn't come back out after that. I continued watching my marathon until 8:45, that's when it ended. I turned off the TV and made my way to my room to head to bed, then I heard the yelling. My mom was on the phone. I peeked through the cracked door. Her room was lit up only by her bedside lamp, her cell phone against her ear. She was yelling at someone, telling them to leave her alone. She hung up and threw her phone down on the bed. I jumped back and silently ran down to the end of the hall where my room was. My mom was never that angry. Once I finished getting ready I got into bed. That's when my mom came in. She seemed upset. She told me she was fine and she just smiled. Smiled as if-as if that was the last time I would see her. She told me she loved me more than anything.....then she kissed me goodnight and left. I didn't know that would be the last time I would see my mom".

The sound of the clock on the wall ticking filled the room. A girl with brown hair sat on one side of a metal table. She was wearing a navy blue sweatshirt with gray sweatpants. On the right corner of the sweatshirt was the police logo. Her eyes were red and puffy, her hands bruised with blood stains. She stared down at her lap, numb, absolutely numb. Across from her sat a woman. She wore a black pantsuit, with her blonde hair up in a tightly made bun, military style. She had bright red nails perfectly curved and painted. She sat with a fine point pen in hand, the tip resting on the white lined paper. She stared at the girl silently. The girl who's world fell apart all in one night. This twelve-year-old girl would find herself being the hero to her mom's demise. She will get justice against the man responsible.

The girl sighed, her eyes never looking up. She began to pick at the skin on her nails. Her hands were filthy, she was filthy. A tear slid down her pink cheeks. Her lips began to crust due to dehydration. She was offered water but drank none. She sniffled her nose taking another breath in. This one was broken. As she sighed, it came out broken. The detective allowed her the time to compose herself, her pen ready to write again. Almost sensing the detective's curiosity, the girl lifted her arm and wiped her nose on the sleeve of the sweatshirt. Strands of her hair fell in her face. She closed her eyes, cutting the new tear off. She licked her lips and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"I don't know what time I woke up. I got up to use the restroom. I removed my bed sheets from on top of me and let my legs dangle off the bed as I forced myself to wake. I had a bathroom in my room so it was not that far of a walk. As my bare feet touched the tile a chill went up my leg. It was cold tonight. Tile is usually cold but this time, it felt like I was walking on a sheet of ice. I was only in the bathroom for about three minutes. I started walking to my bed but decided to go get a glass of water instead. It was silent in the house, usually, there was a small buzzing or the sound of crickets, but nothing. It was like I was the only one in the world. I left the lights off, I was used to my house in the dark. It was one floor and all of the rooms besides the bedrooms were open. I made my way to the kitchen. I grabbed a cup of water and filled it in the

fridge. There was an odd feeling. I felt like there was this cloud of darkness surrounding me. I filled my cup halfway just wanting to go to bed. The water was cold so the feeling of it going down my throat woke me up a bit more than the light from the bathroom did. I chugged down the cup and placed it in the sink, not wanting to make too much noise. As I was making my way back to the hallway there was a cold breeze. The house was cold, I know my mom turned on the heater so I wasn't sure why it was cold. The thermostat was by the front door so I made my way over and saw it was off. I didn't touch it, afraid that I would break it. When I turned my head to the right that's when I saw it. The back sliding door was open, not all the way but it was cracked open. My mom always shut the door so why was it open? I made my way to the door and shut it making sure that it was locked. I shouldn't have locked it".

The girl paused her recollection of the night as there was a knock at the door. The woman across from her held her finger up and stood to get the door. Standing outside of it was an officer. "What is it?" the detective asked in a hushed voice blocking the girl's view just in case. She didn't want her to get distracted. "The father is here Detective, what would you have me do?". The woman looked back at the girl. She was now staring at the black glass reflecting her face back to her. A broken face. A face that no child should ever own. The detective exhaled heavily and turned back to the officer. "Take him to room five, but take his phone, make sure we have his records checked". The officer nodded and walked off disappearing around the corner.

The detective shut the door, catching the attention of the young girl. She smiled apologetically and sat back down. "I do apologize for the interruption, there was a matter I needed to handle". The officer fixed herself and returned to her previous position, with pen in hand. "Is my dad here?" the young girl asked. For the first time, the detective saw hope in that little girl's eyes. Her father was all she had left. "Yes, but you have to finish your statement then once we question him, we can let you see him". A small smile crept on the girl's face. It was barely visible but visible enough.

The girl sat up taller and looked right at the detective. "Once I heard the lock click I turned to go back to sleep. That's when I-that's when I saw it. Someone was sitting on the couch, their back to me. It was too dark to see their reflection on the TV. I remember the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I didn't scream or make any sound. I moved away as swiftly and calmly as I could. I made my way to the entry to the hallway when I decided to look at the person again. They were staring at me. Their hands were on their lap as they sat there calmly. A white face was all I saw, that and a funny hat. I walked behind the protection of the wall and ran to my mom's room. I ran up and pushed the slightly open door. I then turned and quickly shut the door behind me as quietly as I could. I walked up to my mom and placed my hand on her back to wake her. I felt a liquid, too thick to be water. I shook her but she just faintly moved. That's when I turned on the lamp light. My mom lay there, covered in-she was covered in blood. I wanted to scream, but nothing came out. My stomach dropped. She was dead, I knew she was. There was a puddle of blood forming where she lay. I heard the sound of a bell in the hallway. I snapped myself out of it and turned off the light. I ran to my parent's bathroom and shut the door behind me. I quickly ran into the shower. I knew whoever was on the couch killed her-I knew it! I heard their door creak open....he was inside. I reached up for the shower head and sat on my knees and placed my hand on the handle. He was coming for me and I knew I couldn't let him get me, I just couldn't". The girl's voice began to break as her eyes welled up with tears.

The detective looked at her sadly but continued to write down details, beside the detective on the table was a small recording device. The girl closed her eyes tightly and hid her hands between her thighs, continuing her story. "I turned the shower head to that really powerful setting, it wasn't too strong but maybe enough. I always had more of a fight reaction, my dad told me it was a good thing. I never thought I would have to use it. I remember wanting my dad. I guess it is good he wasn't there since.....he would probably be dead too. My heart pounded in my chest and I tried to keep my breathing quiet. Any moment he would come in and try to get

me and I had to be ready. Then that moment came. The door to the restroom opened and I saw his figure through the shower door. My parents' shower has frosted glass I think is what it's called. He stood there, staring at me. If I saw his shadow I know he saw me. He slowly approached the shower. He was tall, like really tall. He was as tall as the door. I took a breath in as he approached the door. I gripped the handle and pointed the shower head in his direction. As soon as the door was open enough where we were face to face I turned the knob and water came pouring out at him. He flinched back, but I knew it wasn't strong so I did what I could think of. I used as much strength as I could and took the head, slamming it against his face. It wasn't his face that I hit though, it was his mask. I didn't get a good glance at it at the moment since as soon as I hit him I threw the head at him and jumped out of the shower".

"I ran out of the bathroom and into my mom's room. I heard him groan in frustration. But I kept running. I sprinted into the hallway and turned right. I heard him behind me but I kept running to the back door. I reached for the handle to slide it open but the lock stopped me. I struggled to unlock it because my hands were shaking. That's when he grabbed me. I couldn't process it but before I knew it, he grabbed my shoulder and flung me backward and away from the door. I landed on my back pretty hard but I was fine. I tried to sit up quickly as he stood there staring at me. He was breathing heavily as water dripped off the mask. He walked over and tried to grab me but I kicked and hit him as much as I could. I know he was a man not only by his build but I hit him between the legs and that's what got him off of me, just enough time to get up. I ran to the kitchen and reached for the knife stand....he took them all. I turned and he was standing on the other side of the island from me, he was laughing. I reached into the sink and grabbed my cup, throwing it at him. It brushed against his arm and fell to the ground. The glass shattered loudly. We stood there staring at each other. I got a good look at him. He was wearing this body suit, it looked like a clown suit. It was a dark purple or maybe red, the lighting wasn't the best. It had black stripes and he had white gloves. They were stained with.....they were stained with her blood".

She took another deep breath as the tears fell from her eyes and glided on her soft cheeks. "He had this white theater mask on with a painted black smile from end to end. He had a hat identical to his outfit, and three jingle bells on the points. He was a jester. That was all I was able to get from him before I ran around the right side of the island to avoid the glass and tried to run for the front door. He ran after me and I quickly turned back to the living room. As he struggled to stop himself. I made a run for the door once again. I don't know how but he was fast. He tackled me but not very well. We both fell against the tile, I was able to stop myself from hitting my face on the ground by the blood on my hand caused me to slip. He was getting up so I acted quickly. The closest weapon to me was this vase that sat on the side table to the couch. I sat up on my knees and reached for it. As strong as I could I threw the vase at him. That one hit him pretty hard on the side as it shattered, it even caused him to fall back down. I took the opportunity to run around the front of the couch and to the glass door. I immediately unlocked the door and ripped it open, a cold breeze met me".

"I ran out onto the back porch, and as I turned my head back he was just barely getting up. I then ran as fast as I could away from the door. I jumped off of the edge of the porch and my bare feet were met with the prickling feeling of the grass. I lost my balance though and fell onto my knees. Without even trying to get up I started crawling on my knees getting myself a head start. I needed to get away. I stood trying to gain my balance as I ran around the side of the house. I struggled to run but my legs finally caught up once again. As I turned around the corner he ran out onto the porch. He had an advantage since he had shoes, they were jester shoes but still better coverage than me. My backyard was open so I didn't have to worry about a gate thankfully. I ran up the small hill as I tried to get to the front of the house. I had left my bike there and I knew I could use that to get to my neighbors. I kept running, but it was hard. I was solely running on adrenaline at this point. I made it up the small hill and ran for my bike. Suddenly I was grabbed and thrown against my mom's car. I guess he got up quicker than I since he had shoes and his legs were longer. He threw me pretty hard. The window didn't break

but a slight crack appeared. My right hand caused it as there was a small scratch on the side of my palm starting to turn red with blood. The impact made me gasp for air. I slid down onto the cement floor of the driveway as he stared at me. Seeing how out of breath I was he took the opportunity to walk to the mailbox. There were bricks surrounding the bottom that he could use. He was limping as he held his side”.

“I used all the strength I could to quickly run around to the other side of the car as his back was to me. My palm burned as blood slid down my wrist. My shoulder was in agonizing pain and my head began to pound as strongly as my heart. I leaned onto the car leaning on the side to give me balance. I screamed as the window above me shattered. The brick landed not too far from me as shards of glass fell on my hair. A few pieces managed to scratch my left cheek, and a bit of my left foot. Then the window in front of me shattered as well with another brick landing on the hard cement. I tried to cover my face with my arms...my mistake. A small shard of glass fell onto the cut of my palm, enlarging the size of it. I refrained from collapsing. At that moment I just stood up and ran. I ran over the glass and to my bike which was placed not too far from me. I did not look for him, I just ran and picked up my bike dragging it on the street. I ran beside it and collected momentum. That's when I saw him limping towards me. Without another thought, I jumped onto the seat of my bike and struggled to peddle. The bike shifted a bit but I gained my balance as I just pushed my legs to move. I heard him let out a cry, he was angry. I knew that. I didn't look back, I just kept going. I kept going until I saw my neighbor's house. I was so relieved that I had not paid attention to where I was going. My bike started turning to the right heading for their house but the front tire collided with the sidewalk and I was thrown forward onto the grass”.

“The feeling of the dirt sliding into my cut was repulsing, but I stood again. I struggled as my legs began to give out on me. My adrenaline was dying out. I screamed for Fred, he was the husband. I screamed for him and his wife Lauren. I screamed and screamed. The door suddenly opened as I approached their front porch. Fred walked out in his robe and looked

around until he saw me. I felt relief knowing I was safe. I fell onto the ground as Fred ran to me clearly seeing I needed help. He shouted to Lauren who stood by the door and called you guys. Then he took me inside and they sat with me until the officers arrived, and now, we are here".

The detective shut off the recording and set her pen down. "Thank you, Emma, I know that must have been hard for you but I promise you I will do everything that I can to get this man found". The girl nodded quickly as she stared uncomfortably at the table. "Emma" the detective spoke again, grabbing her attention. "I am going to go speak to your dad now, I will let them know when I finish alright?" Emma nodded once again as the detective smiled softly and walked out of the room. She took in a deep breath and made her way to where the father was being held. As she opened the door a man was sitting on the chair. His dark black hair was a mess, he was wearing a white button-up shirt with black dressing pants. He looked very similar to Emma. "Mr Price?" the detective asked as she shut the door. The man looked at her and moved his head slightly to clarify, without saying a word. She walked to her seat and removed the yellow envelope from it. She sat and set her things on the table.

She sat up straight as she turned on the recorder. "Mr Price I know you are grieving but-". She was stopped in shock by the man. "I am not grieving". She stared at him not believing what had come out of his mouth. "Excuse me? Sir your wife is dead and your daughter was attacked, how could you not be". Once again she was interrupted by the calm man. This time he raised his voice just a bit. "Oh I am upset about what happened to my daughter but my wife's death was because of her actions! She died because she refused to listen to me and because of that my daughter was almost killed in the process! So I am sorry detective but no I am not grieving I am upset and I want to see my daughter!".

The detective leaned forward now curious. "What do you mean your wife's actions caused her death, do you know who is responsible?" The man scoffed. "Yes, which is what I have been trying to tell all of the officers here!". The detective held up her hand. "Sir I understand you are upset but I am here to help you! Now calm yourself and tell me what you

know". The man closed his eyes and took a breath in. "My wife has this cousin, his name is Jeremy Hall. He has been a troubled man his whole life. Recently he got in touch with my wife asking for money. He is a drug addict. My wife however decided that since he was 'family', then that gave her every right to use our money for that lunatic! She kept that from me because she knew I would not allow it which I didn't. That man came to the house one day and told me everything when he came to ask for his new payment. We got in a fight but I ended it by telling her not to send him anymore and so she didn't". The detective cleared her throat before speaking and put her hands together. "I guess that he wasn't so happy about that was he?".

"No he wasn't, he started sending her messages, spam calling her and even came to the house shouting for his money. He was a lunatic so one day I confronted him and told him that if he were to come to our house again or if he were to harass us at all, I would file a restraining order against him". The detective thought for a moment before reaching into the large yellow envelope. She pulled out a Ziploc bag, in it was a deck of cards. She slid the bag in front of the man. "Your wife received a bag moments before her death. In that bag was this deck of cards but all of them are Joker cards. Tell me Mr. Price, what is Mr. Hall's fascination with jesters?". The man looked at her confused. "He was dressed as a jester to hide his identity". The man shook his head in disgust. "I don't know much about him other than the fact that he is a wack, I don't know she refused to tell me anything about the guy. No one in her family either, it was like he was one big secret or something I don't know. But I do know that he is our guy, and I swear to you that is all I know about anything to do with this".

The detective nodded her head as she put the cards away. "Mr. Price I believe you just gave us our suspect. This man had the intention to harm your whole family and not just your wife so until we have the man in custody you do understand we will have to put you in protective custody". The man nodded as he breathed in deeply. "Yes, yes I understand". The detective stood and walked to the door placing her hand on the handle. "We will keep in touch, Mr. Price. You and your daughter have given us enough for tonight to start this investigation. We will still

need to get some prints from the both of you and do some exams on your daughter but once we are finished you will be escorted to a hotel, you will be safe there". The man sighed and looked down "Yes I understand, thank you". The woman smiled and opened the door. Emma stood on the other side standing with an officer.

For the few hours that the officer had known Emma, all she saw was this everlasting sadness. This child was broken down physically and mentally. The moment the door had opened and Emma looked in, a glimpse of light appeared in her sad eyes. Just like that tears glossed over her eyes as her bottom lip quivered. "Daddy!" she said out loud her voice cracking just a bit. The man looked up, a sign of relief washing over his face. The person he had been waiting to see was right in front of him. She was alive. He stared at his daughter who had small cuts on her face and a bandage on her palm. He could just see the things she had to go through and his heart broke. Without hesitation, she ran into his open arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her cries were muffled by her face pressed into his shoulder.

Just hours earlier the poor girl not only witnessed the death of her mother but had to fight for her life against an opponent stronger than she. She clung to his shirt so much that her knuckles turned white. He held her tightly holding onto his world. His poor shattered world. The detective watched as the two held onto each other. She refrained from getting emotional. She had a job to do and that job was to find Jeremy Hall, or according to Emma, the Jester. She wasn't sure where he was but she knew a man could only run so much until reaching insanity. She knew even monsters had their weakness. A Jester's mask hides more than their face, and she was going to find what this Jester had to hide. She left the two alone in the room as she walked down the hallway repeating to herself Emma's statement.

A co-worker approached her at her desk as the detective was reading her notes. "Got anything," he asked. She looked up at her partner, "something I don't understand is why not just kill Emma right away after the mother?". Her partner shrugged and moved to his desk. "That is for us to find out isn't it". The detective opened a folder, "Time to find you, Jeremy Hall".

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