

Autumn B

12<sup>th</sup> grade

My slumber comes and plunges

The walls were ivory-ivory!

My slumber comes and plunges, lurching around the corners are dreadful creatures, whispering in my ear in their attempt to make me lose my slumber.

Sleeping only makes them taunt me more like five-year-olds trying to get candy from their mothers but instead, they're trying to make me an insomniac.

"Those cacodemons"

The walls were once an ivory color but now we're an inky poison. Screams were increasing and so was my insomnia. I just wanted to sleep. If they stop tormenting me, maybe I could get some sleep. They always make me rock back and forth until I dare to scream back but I never do.

"Shut up, don't get any closer, I'll- I'll hurt you this time!"

I could only say it quietly or else they would enjoy it too much and taunt me further. Their goal is to always make me go insane in this ivory-colored room especially when the walls turn an inky poison. The footprints on the floor appeared again and every time that horrific thing walks it starts to sound like it's stepping on piles of bones. They feel no sympathy that's why they scream and laugh-laugh in my face and all around me.

That cacodemon appears after the screams and laughs. Those vermilion bumps, with scaly fingers, contorted fangs, and that breath that dreadful breath! I can always smell it miles away, its tongue was always lined with white flakes. The walls were once ivory-ivory colored now they are black with blood oozing out of the crack. Again? It's getting closer. Always closer.

"Go, Go back to hell you-you cacodemon!"

Most of the time that thing tries to talk back to me but it just sounds like a high-pitched scream and mumbles. I often wonder why they attack me, and what I do to get an inordinate amount of insomnia. While I rock in the corner of my bed it always stands on top of me looking down screaming, laughing, and taunting me. All I want to do is sleep but instead, that thing is trying to snatch my soul. If I look into its eyes then my soul is gone.

"Quiet be quiet!" .

Silence? Finally? It finally stopped after months of torturing me. Then, that cacodemon seized my forearm with its scaly fingers. Screams and laughs were getting louder-louder as I realized the cacodemon was pulling me forward. Again? That was a mistake. Tonight is the night that I will kill that cacodemon. Stab it in the heart with the fork I got to keep at breakfast, and bits of shards of glass I slowly collected and put together, I sharpened it into a knife a month ago. If I couldn't get it to stop taunting me then I would have to kill it with something sharp-sharp! I could only sharpen a fork so much with my nail file and put together small shards of glass.

As I picked up my loose hand I started stabbing the cacodemon. I knew I had to do it over and over again until I could feel its blood oozing down my makeshift knife.

“Die, Die, Die!”

The walls were once an ivory color! My insomnia was making me part ways with my sanity and so were the screams and laughs. All I could do was scream once the cacodemon was on the floor with the inky blood smothered on my hands. I felt joy as I played in it while the cacodemon lay lifeless on the floor.

“I finally dared to kill you, after making me lose my slumber.”

However, the screams were not stopping. Why! Was it my screams? If I were a cacodemon then I would have to kill myself to make the screams stop. Before I could pick up my DIY knife again to make my ending decision I heard the noise of something, like something was stepping on bones but instead, it sounded like they were falling down a pile of bones. There were more of those cacodemon and they grabbed me all at once making my skin crawl. At that moment I was in the air not able to move my legs or arms. Screams flushed my mind trying to make me deaf.

The room was gone, the walls were inky, not ivory. What happened to the ivory color!? Around every corner were cacodemon putting their scaly fingers on the walls and slithering behind me like they were all going to take my soul.

Screams got louder, My screams? No, it was theirs, the laughs and the taunting made me want to kill them all.

"I'll kill all of you demons, I'll make you regret all of the time you've opened your mouths!".

Another room? The walls were ivory, not black. It was a chair? Do they want to snatch my soul? The chair had straps on it, they were going to trap me. I was placed in the chair and my arms and legs were buckled. I could taste their coffee-like breath. I couldn't let this happen to me. The workers usually put me into the silent room at night but these cacodemons took me out and trapped me onto a chair with my arms and feet tied down. I felt a sharp pain go into my arm making my skin crawl and shiver.

The screams slowly got quieter. My soul? My eyes started slowly closing... fading into the darkness.

-----

"What are we going to do with her now? She's already in this psychiatric hospital so what more can we do? She just injured one of our workers, No! She tried to kill her." Daina said.

"I know, the ambulance is here and they will take care of Jena, don't be so surprised. I mean she did kill her brother because she thought he was a so-called cacodemon. We also restrained her in that chair and sedated her so she would calm down." Stephanie said.

"Yeah, it's terrifying, Jena was just trying to give her medicine, we should've paid more attention to her storytelling and her screams that keep the other patients awake at night". She pocketed all of her medications. Diana said.



"Well, she's schizophrenic and a psychopath so let's not be surprised.  
They're all crazy here! They don't have one rational thought in their head."

Stephanie said.

"Ha-ha, yeah". Diana said.

'Hmm, she doesn't think we have any rational thoughts, how stupid I  
guess I'll have to show her what so-called cacodemons can do'.

Dylan B

Acker

Creative Writing

17 October 2023

### Panicles Of God

A hot cloud of dust trails behind a white Chevy Suburban speeding down a lonely stretch of California desert highway, a tired weeping sun will be setting soon. The dusk horizon is littered with spiky protuberances of a magical tree that captivates the hearts of young and old that dare to behold its ethereal beauty, like a prickly beacon of resilience and miracles. A dusty insignia on the windshield of the Suburban reads "University of California Fullerton" and inside are three youngsters that choose to spend their spring semester observing the habitat and wildlife that calls Joshua Tree home. US Parks and Wildlife states this alluring desert attraction boasts over 3 million visitors yearly, which is up from years past. All of these visitors, and over 800,000 acres of undisturbed wicked desert landscapes. It takes an adventurous kind of student, an outlandish explorer of sorts, to choose this harsh and unforgiving landscape as their choice of schooling and study, but what possibly makes 3 million people travel to such a place? It's enticing imagery and mysterious allure that differs from anything else on planet earth, that's what. What most haven't realized is that this one of a kind beauty holds a dark secret.

Native American folklore dating back thousands of years recalls Joshua Tree as a spiritual epicenter, a hot ground of the unnatural. Calling Joshua Tree Park a place of natural beauty is a colossal misnomer, it is that a higher power must have forged such a special place. The native Serrano peoples burnt creosote and sang songs and performed rituals predicated on mystical powers of an unknown force, the same force that pulls millions to the hottest damn basin on earth. The same residual energy that consumes Manuel Ramirez, Sandi Fletcher, and Troy Avary. Manuel has his undergrad in Biological Science, Sandi studies Animal Husbandry, and Troy focuses more on football but studies business whenever he happens to show up to his lectures.

The group of students bring duffle bags and their backpacks of camera equipment to photograph and conduct their research project for desert life and history. Manuel tucks his assignment papers into a folder and glances out the window of the truck. Sandi puts her delicate hand on Manuel's shoulder who is sitting in the passenger seat tensely observing the scenery that is simultaneously consumed by a dust cloud, she tells him "We're almost there Manny, trust me you'll see why this spot is the best."

Manny untenses and looks at Sandi in the back, "Of course I trust you with this, I just need some shade for the camera equipment". Troy casually reaches over to turn the air conditioning on high and chimes in, "It's hotter than hell out here, I hope your maps are right cause I don't feel like being out here for more than a day."

The gas gauge reads a quarter tank and even as the sun sets under the San Bernardino Mountains the thermometer gauge glows 101 degrees. The crew put on nearly 120 miles that day from Zzyzx Desert Studies Center, their research facility for 2 months until they are supposed to return to UC Fullerton. The evening sky slowly recedes its maroon color and a dark leering mass consumes the desert speckled by thousands of night stars. The truck's headlights at last settle in front of a rocky outcropping and the truck rests sitting perched at an angle.

Three doors of the Suburban burst open at the same time, and all three step out and survey their surroundings. "I've never seen the sky this clear, I can see our entire galaxy!" says Manny. He opens the rear hatch and pulls out a large black bag and sets it on the ground. "Part of the study requires a demonstration of the ambient environment, I'll take a picture of a crystal clear night sky, Professor Hoffman outta like that."

Troy points to a spot for the tripod to sit, "Right here should do, let me just make a mark with my foot." "Huh... the battery is completely dead, I swear I charged it this morning," Manny states.

Troy tells Sandi, "Go underneath the back seat. I brought a spare battery, that's our only chance." Sandi shrugs to the back seat and pulls out a worn yellow backpack that contained a battery pack and a frail book with a torn cover. The cover bears a title that is barely legible and appears to be written in a different language.

Sandi leaves the bag behind and approaches Troy, "Hey Troy, what is this?" He replies, "Damn, I was saving this for later as a little campfire surprise. It's a manuscript I pulled from the library vault at the DSC, it's some sort of Native American folklore enchantment spell book so put it back."

Sandis' face expresses anger and bewilderment. "Are you serious, we could get in so much trouble and be expelled from the program. Do they even know it's missing?" exclaims Sandi. "Relax, Manny and I will put it back when we drive back tomorrow evening, now come on, let's get some sleep, it's late and we're all tired." Without Troy knowing, the book is placed on the hood of the truck as they all climb back and fold the seats down and inflate an air mattress. As Troy and Manny lay drifting to sleep, the air settles to a cool and crisp sensation making it hard for Sandi to fall asleep. She tosses and turns all night rustling while the boys lay sound asleep. Sandi hears a slight rustle of wind blow seemingly out of nowhere outside the truck, so she decides to get some fresh air. Discreetly and quietly, she pulls the handle and nudges the door open. Carefully, she climbs over the mattress and exits the truck. She observes her surroundings intently and pans over to the hood of the truck.

That mysterious book she had pulled out earlier was wide open to a random page. Sandi shuffles slowly as her shoes crunch the red gravel below. Just as she takes a deep inhale before she reaches out to grab the book, Troy slams his fist on the horn and Sandi screams in fright. The truck echoes the boy's maniacal laughter, but as Sandi collects herself she realizes that the book is gone. It had disappeared in those few seconds, and there was nothing left of it.

Sandi pulls open the driver door and yells, "Troy, Troy I left that book right here and it was there just a second ago but it's gone, I don't know where—" Troy interrupts, "I told you to put that book back! Do you even understand what that book is capable of?"

Sandi looks appalled as she and Manuel stare at each other confused. "I was reading archives before we came out here for our project, it was written by the Serrano and Cahuilla Native American tribes in the 1800s to warn settlers of a strange energy that consumes this park and the Mojave."

The two boys exit the truck with the sound of squeaking hinges, and Manuel asks "Why in the world Troy, would you risk expulsion and theft to accompany us out to the middle of nowhere just to read us a stupid folk story around the campfire, are you really that stupid?"

Both Manuel and Troy become aggressive and combative, "Well Manny, maybe if you guys weren't such stuck up wusses, we could actually enjoy the time out of school to have some dang fun", Troy speaks with firm inflection.

"Yeah great idea nuthead, now we owe our school an explanation and god only knows how much money. You know what? We're going back." says Manuel.

"Oh yeah in the middle of the night, we haven't even finished our assignment yet. How are we supposed to just go?" says Troy.

"You're taking the blame Troy, not us" Manuel and Sandi both start packing up their equipment as the sky begins to lighten ever so slightly, and rain down with ash and soot. Troy looks up as the pitch black night sky was transformed in a few seconds to a fallout like atmospheric haze.

Sandi attempts to make out what caused the sky to change, and looks up with unease, "What the heck is going on? I feel like something isn't right"

Flames can be seen creeping in the distance as the pair become frantic and distraught. Troy climbs back into the Suburban and cranks the engine but it refuses to run and only tries to start. "It's not turning over, what are we supposed to even do, it's not even fire season!" Sandi rushed into the backseat and searched for the missing book. "This is not good, get us out of here!" Sandi screams.

The heat from the flames radiates inside the truck as the tires begin to melt. Sweat dribbles off of Troy's forehead as he fumbles with the ignition. Troy blurts out, " It's not starting I can't, we're gonna die I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry!"

"That's it we have to get out of here before we burn to death!" Manny and Sandi open the passenger door and abandon the engulfed truck. The two navigate through a small opening in between what seemed like 20 foot tall roaring flames, as the exposed flesh of their skin frays and their clothes ignite. Sandi screams in agony to Manny, "Follow my voice I'm over here take my hand!".

Manny reaches his arm out as his eyes begin to boil and dissolve, but he trips violently over a large rock and plummets to the desert floor as Sandi catches only a glimpse of a burning corpse. "Ahh! Manny! What have I done!" Sandi turns away and painfully stumbles forward as her blistered and frayed skin turns to a char. She hobbles out of the scorching inferno without her two colleagues.

Her face is far too charred and exfoliated to even produce a single tear over the death of her friends. The once midnight sky now glows a dark orange with plumes of raging flames burning patches of desert flora throughout the section of cursed desert. Confused and disheveled, Sandi gazes across the valley floor to a small mesa with contrasting Joshua trees and a monotone fiery orange sky in the background. The silhouette of an ornately decorated Native American chief can be seen looking down upon the flames and destruction. His headdress feathers pierce the air with no remorse, his stoic eyes make contact with a wretched looking Sandi. For what feels like an eternity the eye contact is broken and the chief lifts his hands up to the sky as Sandi lightly jolts and her stance freezes in an instant.

Sandi makes a blood curdling cry, "What is going on?! Help me!" Her body stands riddled with thousands of cactus spines and yucca needles poking outward from impaled flesh. "Ahhhhhh" She screams aloud. She lurches a few steps forward as her body resembles the quills of a porcupine, the excruciating pain runs through her veins but she pushes forward.

She stumbles down a rocky slope as she descends from the flames of the vista she had escaped from. She thinks to herself, "I'm not going to make it, this is where it ends. My family, friends, and classmates will never find my ashes." Just as her luck runs cold from her heated escape, she makes out an outline of a desert road with a set of headlights gleaming in the distance.

As the vehicle approaches, the sky returns to an imposing silent black. The raining ash adrift in the wind disappears from the sky and desert floor. She faintly elevates her bruised and burned arm to the old pickup, which screeches to a halt and an older hispanic man rolls the window down. "I-I need help." She barely utters.

"Well it looks like you got into some trouble eh? Hop in darling I getchu to the nearest hospital." The man says. As Sandi shuffles around the front of the truck, the man scratches his white hair and mumbles, "I know where that book went."

719-4

Nataly V

Phone number:

Grade and Age: 12th and 17years old

### **My Mothers Story**

I might have been around 8 or 10 when it happened... the water, the stars, the look on my mothers face as she stared looking at the night sky. I loved him. "Why'd we have to go home?" I asked myself over and over again. It was his fault, the gosh darn cheating son of a biscuit was at fault for my death so why was he alive and happy while she roams the edge of the rivers regretting his mistake. I loved him. He was my father. Never thought he could do us so wrong but here we are. Dead. Alone. Grieving.

They say my mother was blinded by rage, infused with jealousy. This isn't true. My mother was strong and kind. She would have never done such a thing, so why people had it twisted makes no sense. I questioned it too at first, why she had let us be taken by the water but after a while after she threw herself in too it all made sense. It wasn't her fault at all. This I've come to terms with.

I miss how we once were my siblings and, my mother but, not my dad. He was awful. He would come home reeking of cigarette smoke and alcohol. He wouldn't hit us but he did yell, throw things if he was really drunk. Anything he said, any point he just had to make had to be yelled. It was like we weren't going to get it unless he was yelling it at us.

I wish I could go back to that day my mom found out. Maybe then I could've helped her. Maybe I could've stopped him.

We were at the park and had already been there for more than 2 hours. Playing in the dirt, chasing my siblings was fun but I got hungry. God, why was I hungry? I had just eaten before we



left. I pleaded with my siblings to go back home otherwise mother wouldn't have taken us back since it was a majority rule decision. I prevailed. I wish I didn't but I did. They gave in, my relentless talking about how good some frescas con crema sounded made them hungry too. We walked home and when we got home that's when all went bad. "Who was she"? "Why was she there with our father"? And most importantly "What were they doing"?! All questions but no answers. I stopped there in the doorway with my mother confused as to what was happening.

My siblings ran past us to the fridge ignoring the awkward tensions that had obviously arisen. My father, the man MY mother married, was with another woman and they looked guilty. So guilty that you could name them the guiltiest people in the world and they would stay in 1st place forever. My mother walked towards him. She struck him. I didn't think she ever would have the courage to do that. Then he hit her back. He threw a glass cup that was on our makeshift wooden coffee table. Then the arguing. This caught my sibling's attention. They stopped in their tracks and I ushered them to the next room which was ours. Before I closed the door I saw that lady who was with my father run out. She was fleeing?! Now? She was the cause of all this so why did she get away? I close the door and try to calm down Mia and Joseph, hushing them so we wouldn't anger our father with nonsense crying as he called it.

It was only 10 minutes before the arguing stopped and it became screams, crying, pleading, gasping. I ran out of the room to see my mother being held by her long black hair. My father was dragging her now. Out the door they went; I followed. Next, Mia and Joseph. I think they were scared to be alone and that's why they followed.

Tadpoles, frogs, worms, rolie pollies. Sticks leaves, dirt, mud, rocks. It was the river by our house. We loved playing there and we loved the shallowness of the water so we could play in the water, but it had been a while since we played at the river.

It's been pouring for days. The water was high and strong and my mother didn't want to risk us getting hurt so we stayed away from there. Not tonight though. Tonight there wasn't a cloud in the sky, still the water rose high and carried any small animal who fell victim to its stream down into the far away ocean. I ran as fast as I could to stop him but I wasn't fast enough. He was already dunking her head in the water. Exclaiming that she hadn't had enough and needed to be taught a lesson. Me and my sibling tried to get him off of her. We tugged his arms, pulled his hair, and jumped on him. With every ounce of strength in our child bodies we mustered up that night. Our father got agitated. He threw Mia off him, launching her to a rock that cracked her head making it bleed. I then stopped tugging and Joseph went to mias aid. She was silent. Eyes close. No more crying, no more screaming, she was silent. But before me and Joseph could process Mia and her silence we heard our mother. He was back to dunking her head. I tell Joseph to stay with Mia and he does. I run off to grab a branch, a rock, and a frog? Something, anything, I looked around. The rain must have washed everything away. I panicked now I didn't have anything to use against him but this didn't matter anymore because as I checked on my mother in the corner of my eye there was Joseph. How'd he get there? The water was pulling him. And the dirt besides mia had vanished. The ground broke before him. I ran back to help Joseph up, but the water was too strong. It pulled him and me in, we fought and tried to hold onto anything but there was nothing we were gone. Soon my mother was after us. Her face blue and looking up, we washed past her.

They call her la llorona -the weeping woman- but, that night she wasn't weeping in the end. They say her vengeful spirits and horrid hums and whistles echo the night air looking for her lost children. They say that if you hear her you better run because she'll throw you in the river too. This isn't true she isnt weeping she's yelling, searching for her lost children wondering

where the river leads us. Her soul I think it's tied here, tethered to the remorse and guilt that she couldn't save us, but it wasn't her fault it was his. She's not vengeful either, she's a warning, a warning to people that what happened to her can happen to anyone that we should protect our own.

I miss her. My mother. Her story. His rage. May she not be remembered that way as a jealous filled spirit but one that carried more love for anyone and one who tries to protect others.

JAVANNA T.  
grade 12  
email in spt

## The Skinwalker

I went to my brother-in-law's house for the first and only time two weeks ago. Even though we weren't inside the house yet, the atmosphere gave me a seedy feeling I couldn't shake. It was at the end of a desolate dirt road in the middle of a forest. The house itself was run-down, and the electricity for the residence came from a generator around the side, its sound penetrating the otherwise peaceful sounds of the surrounding wood.

I could hear his dog barking through the curtained window as my wife knocked on the door, and her brother answered the door. He himself looked like he needed a shower. With industrial dish soap. I couldn't believe this redneck was my wife's own flesh and blood. But that wasn't the only one of my senses that was affected. As soon as I took in the sight of this greasy-haired, teeth-missing, scruffy hillbilly, the smell of cigarettes and wet dog punched my nostrils. As my nose hairs were singed, her brother motioned for us to go inside.

The house looked a lot bigger from the outside, but inside, there was one room for everything this household needed to function. One room had the couch, the TV, the mattress on the floor, the stove, the table, and enough beer cans and cigarette butts to run a gas station rich. My wife sat down on one of the dining room chairs, and her brother pulled out another for me to sit down, but I politely declined.

He walked away to warm something up on the stove, and I whispered to my wife that I wanted to leave. She quietly told me off, with the whole "this is family" and "he's just financially challenged"

nonsense. I didn't press the matter any further, as I didn't want any arguments.

I looked over at the yellow-and-gray stained couch to find his dog staring at me. I didn't believe for a second that whatever that *thing* was, it wasn't a dog. I had the body of a dog, the head of a dog, the fur of a dog, but those eyes were not. Those were human eyes.

My brother-in-law tapped me on the shoulder, breaking my trance with the dog, to tell me that our dinner was ready. He placed an old potholder on the table, and proceeded to place one, miserable pot on top. He was serving us his "ol' special": Pork n' Beans. I didn't mind; I can fancy myself to a can every once in a while. Three mismatched plates were sat at the table, and he served us each one scoop of the stuff.

Before she started eating, my wife got up and asked where she could wash her hands. Her brother said "the washing jug" was outside, near the outhouse. My wife opened the door and left the trailer, and the dog followed. I immediately got an uneasy feeling, more than everything I've experienced so far.

I then heard some scuffling outside, which sent chills down my spine. My Brother-in-law told me it was nothing to worry about, as that might be his dog just being friendly. I knew this wasn't true, as that dog was nowhere near big enough to produce that noise, but I didn't question it further.

The door opened again with a squeak of the hinges, and a long shadow stood in the frame: my wife. She crossed the room and sat next to me, placing her hand on mine, and facing away from me, towards her brother. I noticed something odd as her ring was

not on her finger. I asked her about it, and she said she took it off when she was washing her hands and forgot it. I believed her, as she can be rather clumsy. Then she looked at me.

Those were not her eyes. Those were the dog's eyes. Those amber rings pierced my soul with fear. I excused myself from the table to "wash my hands", but a voice stopped me as I placed my hand on the door handle.

My wife spoke, but not in her voice. It sounded as if another entity was crawling itself under her own, creating a sound that made my teeth clench. She stopped me, and I turned around to see the amber eyes of the dog and her brother face down on his plate, no longer breathing.

I bolted from the house, and I'm glad I was the one driving, as the keys were in my pocket. The thing that was taking my wife's shape grabbed my ankle as I tripped on the patio of the house. I was face to face with an ever-moving amalgamation of different faces of creatures and people. It looked like clay moving under a plastic bag. But, the one thing that was consistent was the amber eyes that shone more than ever. I caught a glimpse of something off to the side as the Thing tried to bite and attack me. I saw a hand, blood-stained, stretched out. It had the pink nails and ring of my wife.

My suspicions were unfortunately confirmed. That thing killed my wife and took her place. As tears welled up in my eyes, adrenaline rushed through my veins and I was able to knee the Thing in what I thought was the jaw and push it off. I continued hauling it back to my car. I got in and locked the door with such speed that I'd never done before.

The Thing tried to make one last attempt at ensnaring me in its jaws by jumping on my car. I had already been moving by then, and the force of impact was too great for it to handle. It jumped, hit my windshield, and bounced off, unconscious. I wanted vengeance for what that creature did to my wife, so I put my car in reverse, and hit the gas until I heard the noise of organs and bones squishing. I wanted that thing to suffer and die. I drove over it backwards, then put it in forward and ran it over again.

I drove off, not knowing when, or if, I was ever going to stop. I eventually did, when my car ran out of gas, in the next town over. I told this story to the clerk, and he told me that the area my brother-in-law lived in was infamous for skinwalker sightings. I wish I knew that before my wife dragged me to that forsaken house.

Autumn B  
12th grade.

All the things skeptics say because unless you've died, you are not *really* a victim:

"You should've known he was a weirdo--"

"The signs were there--"

"How did you not see something coming?"

Just a week ago I was probably among them, defending someone I knew nothing about simply because I didn't know the situation. Just less than a week ago, I realized just how awful the people of Springfield are. Everyone and their mothers knew about how common kidnappings and murder are in this town, so my usual morning walk to the cafe down 6 blocks from my apartment never made me bat an eye. I decided to stick out of the usual routine and go to a new coffee shop not too far from my usual cafe. The weather was just starting to get chilly and dry, but I chose to keep my legs exposed to the elements. Walking past my usual shop and to the new one didn't feel any special, but once I walked into a small shop on the corner, "Socialite Cafe Bar", I met him.

He really was tall, even for a guy. We locked eye contact for a moment and I can't even say after all this time, that he was bad looking. He was just unique looking, if that makes sense. The tall frame, the dark hair and high cheekbones- the everything about him made him look like the kind of barista you'd see in a "Twilight" movie. I took a quick peek at the silver name tag stuck to his shirt, *Jack*. Idiot of me to believe in fate because I go by Jill. Soft jazz music filled the silence in the lobby area, while also covering some of the barista's conversations. After making initial eye contact from the doorway to the counter, I noticed a constant eye on me as I stood behind the



line of customers. By the time it was my turn to order I don't even think he noticed anything really about me besides my frame as he put his number on my cup. He was definitely unique. The first few dates were unique like that, too. Compliments, talking topics, and general small talk all somehow came back to my bone structure. He'd say things like, "You must run or something, haha." "You know, you have really toned calves." and one time he asked, "Have you seen those videos of those strong girls breaking open fruit with their legs? I bet you could do that, too".

I really thought that was just his thing. Guys' all have their thing they find attractive, and I assumed a good calf to ankle ratio was all it took for Jack. We'd spend hours at the park, the bar, or even just by the lake talking for hours. Nothing ever really seemed off besides the weird comments about my lower limbs. I would go so far as to say I was really falling for him too, we just had too much in common. He quite literally finished my sentences. Jack was pretty reserved, but he knew just how to match my energy.

After spending the evening at a local arcade downtown, we ended up being caught in the rain. Almost like it was planned, Jack asked, "So what if we went back to my place?" My car was already at my house after getting a ride from Jack, and the way he looked at me made it impossible to say no. Afterall, I wanted to know more about him anyway. That day, I found out why such a catch wasn't already in a relationship.

That day we came back to his apartment, my guts were already squelching around my stomach that something was wrong. His house was oddly *musty* like it got flooded by a fog machine, with warm and oddly thick air filling the empty and minimalist home. He told me to make myself at home, but I was still taking in the environment. "You've got a very nice home," I started, peering

into the kitchen and letting shock take my words. Taxidermied rodents of all sizes stood at the tops of all the highest shelves where spices would go.

"I like to hunt small game." Jack said after noticing my discomfort.

"Poor guys..." I started once more, but this time choosing to stop my phrasing so as to not upset Jack about his "art". It didn't feel like the time to talk about the morality of taxidermy.

"How about I make us something to eat? You've got to be starving, haha." Jack offered very sheepishly. Of course in order to change the topic, I took him up on that offer.

A simple meatloaf and mashed potatoes stood on top of a paper plate with plastic cutlery. Jack explained to me how he moved in not too long ago and doesn't have too much of his own things yet. I understood, of course, but he had to have known that I knew the food he "made" was just a freezer meal. In no position to ask for something less frozen in the middle, I ate the meal as we laughed and made fun of corny sitcom shows. Before I had even made it halfway through my dinner, my body suddenly felt hot. Hot and cold at the same time, and the overstimulation caused me to shiver and shake in my seat. I look over to Jack and see that he was already watching me, observing my condition, and doing nothing about it. Before I knew it, my blood felt so hot in my face, and I slumped on the couch right there.

That's when I woke up in what appeared to be a basement or storage area beneath the apartment complex, and that's only because I was able to read the police report. Everything happened so fast, the only way I could comprehend what was happening to me was when Jack came back to find me after what felt like hours after I awoke.

"...Jack..?" My voice was hoarse and dry, like I had already been screaming for hours. My eyes searched the dark room using the light from the staircase of the basement, seeing only the

concrete that kept me shivering on the floor with my legs and arms bound together by literal chains. Upon seeing the only exit, and the man blocking it off, I knew I was a goner.

“Couldn’t possibly be anyone else.” Jack responded to my dazed call for him. When he spoke it was like he had a completely different voice. His tone low and raspy, he was meaning to do something serious. He spoke with no trace of humanity behind him, and his words were enough to make my throat swell shut as I choked back subtle tears. He made his way down the stairs and flicked on the light. A dim, yellow glow sparks to life from the ceiling and although it hurt my eyes, I couldn’t shake my gaze from Jack’s.

“Awe...Jill...don’t give me that face.” He looked down solemnly with dishonesty. He looked fake in every sense of the word. He no longer looked in my eyes, just my body. He did not feel remorse in the slightest no matter what he said. He sat down next to me, as I tried aggressively to crawl my way nowhere near him but to no avail. He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back to my old position, hunched up against the wall.

“So you just do this to all your girlfriends?” I sarcastically questioned as the grip on my forearm tightened.

“*Those* aren’t girlfriends.” He snapped. He got up from his position next to me to walk to the center of the room. Getting a better look around the place, it was definitely used for storage. Jack moved to what appeared to be some sort of science project under a black blanket. Towards the bottom I noticed chair legs and instantly felt queasy. Almost immediately, the blanket was removed and a grotesque amalgamation of corpses strung together by thick string lay sitting in the chair across from me. It was a woman- or at least trying to be. What used to be one poor girl, was now a horrific blend of different skins, all of different textures, all rotting at different times. Her eyes were pale gray and visibly rotting out of a face seemingly coated in a wax to keep the

skin from falling apart. She had no legs, but the girl who's torso Jack took was definitely struggling to keep them on, as the femur bone and thigh muscle were so jagged at the stump that I worried it was more the method he used instead. She had two different arms, as one was rotting to the point of just melting through the stitches at her shoulder's socket. I was petrified from just one look, but I couldn't look away.

"*This* was my girlfriend." Jack said lovingly as he caressed the stitching holding the beings together.

"You're sick." I shouted. My fear was reaching its peak. I knew what Jack wanted me for, and now I was right where he wanted me to be.

"Once I get her a better set of eyes, I'll dip them in resin this time...the legs are perfect though, so maybe wood varnish instead..?" Jack trailed off in his thoughts before he shot a look back at me.

Jack could obviously see me hyperventilating and knew he wasn't going to turn back now. He walked further away into the darkness and out of the dim lights only to return moments later with a large saw. I screamed bloody murder, but Jack just laughed. "Clearly, you don't see how you're going to be something better."

"Don't you touch me, DON'T YOU TOUCH ME JACK!" My whole body shook with terror as Jack inched his way towards me with a grin.

"Jill, I need your legs-" Jack started.

I screamed even louder as I made more attempts to wrestle with the chains around me.

I screamed. I begged. I cried. I did it all to make even the slightest dent in Jack's moral code. To no avail, I was dragged from my position on the wall and taken into the darker end of the room. I kicked and scratched at his forearms as we headed to a small rickety wooden table meant for

tools and supplies. Jack forced my person on the table and tried to further restrain me with thick leather cuffs attached to the table. I squirm and move as much as I can to make it as difficult as I can for him, and when he got closer to tighten the restraint on my left wrist, I leaned up and bit as hard as I could onto whatever part of him I could. With a nasty bite to his right arm, Jack flung himself back and I could tell I just made him more mad.

“JILL YOU ARE GOING TO BE PERFECT!” Jack exclaimed through the blood now dripping off of his wound. He didn’t try again to restrain my other arm, instead, he bound my legs quicker than I could have thought possible and left into the dark.

This time he returned with an assortment of tools: knives, saws, hooks, scalpels, and basic tools used for skinning a hunted animal. Fear grabbed my soul by the throat, and left me speechless.

“You’re gonna regret doing that, Jill. I didn’t want to be difficult, but my girlfriend said she wants your nose, too.” Jack spoke mildly, almost joking.

I was petrified in my position. I had nowhere to run. Jack started with a large saw with wide, almost dull razors that could’ve been used for amputation in the 1800s. Tears flowed down my face as he made an incision on the midsection of my left thigh. My only option was to accept my fate.

The timing couldn’t have been better for the police. As I layed on the table bound, crying, and screaming a large crash came in close by. The sounds of wood breaking and the footsteps of dozens of feet grew louder and louder until the searing pain running through my left leg was eased. A man wearing all black threw Jack from off of me and into the concrete walls that surround us. Voices and shouting were strung all around the room, but I couldn’t comprehend what they were saying. I remember being freed from the bloody table as another man in all black told me, “We’ve been looking for this guy for months in New York, we had no idea he was in

Massachusetts. I'm so glad we made it in time." He left soon after as I was escorted to a hospital and needed nine stitches horizontally placed on my mid thigh. In less than a week, I almost lost my life to a sadistic stranger with a pretty face.

## Symphony of Souls

I can't breathe.

All I see is darkness. All I hear is darkness. All I know is darkness. There is soil around me, cool to the touch. The rich earthy smell fills my lungs and is strangely calming. I hear music like a soft flute ringing in my head

Great, I've been buried alive. But why don't I remember how I got here? Ughh this cannot be happening. I'm a teenage girl for crying out loud. I'm supposed to be gossiping with my friends and worrying about school, not suffocating in some stupid hole in the ground.

Wait, I remember something. A bright light, lots of people around me. I smell something fruity, like some sort of juice. It's loud, the music fast and overpowering. It overwhelms all of my senses. A party? Ok, a party. Have I been to a party recently? I...I can't remember. Hold on a minute, I don't remember anything. I don't even remember my name. How old I am. Who my parents are. Do I even have parents? Yes, duh, of course I have parents. Ok, this is no time to spiral. I have to focus, I have to remember who I am. Although, this soil is awfully comfy once you get used to it. Maybe I'll just rest my eyes for a moment.

There's a beautiful woman in a cream-colored robe, running along the beach. A smooth, jazzy saxophone tune is being played. The lady seems so peaceful, so happy. I can't see her face, yet somehow I know her. There's a little boy next to her now, with soft brown hair that needs to be trimmed. He's holding the woman's hand. She turns around, but something's not right. She has no eyes, only black holes where her sockets should be. She opens her mouth, and a ribbon of darkness comes cascading out. She screams. "ABIGAIL!"

I wake up in a sweat, hyperventilating as I come down from the dream. The music is fast and frantic, panicky. Abigail. Is that my name? It must be. And that woman, she must've been my mother, which I suppose makes the little boy my brother? Well, if nothing else at least I have a name. Abigail. Abby. I like the sound of it. It feels right.

Hours later, I'm running out of air. I have to get out of here. Suddenly, I feel a slight breeze. I breathe in crisp, fresh air. Just on the edge of my vision, there is a fragment of cool blue light. I dig, desperately attempting to make the small pocket of moonlight grow. Finally I scrape up into the night, taking a deep breath.

I can finally see my surroundings. Now I can figure out how I got into that hole. I'm in the woods, typical place to bury someone alive. The leaves on the trees are yellow and frail, about to fall to the forest floor. They contrast a single black rose placed beside me. A trumpet solo plays a romantic melody that is perfectly charming. I lean back to look at the night sky that I've missed dearly.

Ouch! I hit my head on something cold, sharp. A clarinet lets out an awful squeak, interrupting the soothing music from before. I turn around and feel a feeling of dread. Tubas and trombones slowly rise in a dramatic, tension-filled tune. Is that a gravestone? It reads:

*Abigail Hart*  
1964-1981





What? Is that me? Am-am I...dead? What year is it? How long have I been down here? How did I come back? Is this even real? So many sounds, so many melodies. I can't keep them straight. Woodwind, no brass. Wait no, strings, now a guitar and a base drum.

My head continues reeling with questions, and suddenly I become aware of my own appearance. Dark, dried blood glistens in the moonlight on my arms, the source seemed to be my open wrists at one time. I reach up to my neck, there is a slit in my throat. I pull my hand away, and it shimmers with the same dark red stain. Silence follows. No music. Overwhelming, intense, ear-crushing quiet.

Studying the blood on my fingertips, a sense of calm washes over me, like it was hypnotizing me. Sweet violins are painting the air with sweet music. I was transfixed, and I felt strangely safe, like a child being comforted by its parent. I heard a soft, heavenly voice calling me. "Abby. You don't belong here, sweetie, let's get you back."

I laid back in my grave sleepy, a music box now playing a sweet melody as if for an infant. Adjusting to get comfortable, like a bear for hibernation, I prepare for sleep. I swept the cool soil back over what was left of my body like a blanket, and slowly drifted back into a never ending sleep, the lullaby getting softer and softer until it disappears as eerily as it came.

12th

Grace

Si

719-1-11111111

Alexius Mæ

Age: 17 (Senior)

### Imposter

The lights were flickering on and off, except we were in a power outage. I didn't know why, or how, but the lights kept coming on and off. There had been a storm earlier today, and it managed to cause a power outage in the whole neighborhood. The weather reporter said that it was the worst storm he's seen in Nevada since the storm of 2018. We were smack dab in the middle of winter, and with the power being out, it was colder than the arctic winds. My mom had just gotten home from work and was telling me how cold it was. "Go get some blankets from the basement so we can warm up," my mom said.

"It's scary down there mom, I don't wanna go down there by myself," I replied. Seriously, it is way too creepy for me to go down there by myself. Plus, I'm not even over five feet, so if something were to grab me down there, there was nothing I could do about it.

"You'll be fine, stop being so dramatic," Ugh she makes me so mad sometimes. Reluctantly, I headed toward the basement door. I hated this door, everytime you open it, it squeaks like in scary movies. Right as I reached for the door knob, I heard something up in the attic fall. "Was that you honey?" she asked.

"Uhhh no. What was that?" I answered. I could've sworn that her voice changed to someone else when she replied.

“You don’t wanna play with us?” Her voice almost sounded like a little girl’s and she looked at me with big black eyes that were almost glazed over. I shuddered.

“What?” I said. I was scared to move or even breathe.

“Sweetie, are you okay, you zoned out for a second,” she said in her normal voice.

“Um, yeah. Sorry.” I replied.

“Anyway, can you go check out what that noise was?” she said. What was going on? Why was I hearing voices and seeing things? All of a sudden I heard humming, from what sounded like it was coming from the attic. It sounded familiar, I had heard it before. My mom used to sing it to me every night before bed when I was little. She stopped when my little sister got sick and passed away. Ever since then strange things have been happening in the house. Nobody knows what she got sick from. One day she stayed home from school and when I got home my mom told me that she had over a 103 degree fever. She wasn’t acting like herself and was saying that “they” were coming for her. I don’t know, it was definitely weird. Anyway, I was kind of curious what the noise was coming from, so I started to make my way toward the attic ladder. I slowly began to lower it, and as soon as I did, moths flew out.

“*Gross!*” I said. I then began to climb the ladder into the pitch black. I couldn’t see anything around me. I pulled out my phone and turned on the flashlight. I could see dust floating past the beam of light. There was nothing but boxes and old stuff from my grandparents. I started to walk around when something caught the corner of my eye. Somebody had just walked past the mirror. It almost looked like my little sister. She had long blonde hair that was matted, and pale white skin. Her eyes were sunken in and her nails were yellow. I stood there, almost paralyzed. All of a sudden I heard a little girl’s voice.

“Help me.” It said.

“Hello?” I said. I waited for a second for someone to reply, but nobody answered. I kept looking around for a little bit longer, only to find nothing. I eventually gave up, despite being absolutely terrified to ever go up in my attic again. I headed back to the main floor and went to tell my mom what happened. I walked down the hallway, and I began to talk to her.

“Hey mom, I am never going up there again.” I sternly said. She didn’t reply. I finally made it to the living room and she was gone from the couch. I assumed she had just gone into her room so I went down to the basement to get the blankets.

“I’ll be back. How many blankets do you need mom?” I asked. She still didn’t reply, so I went down to the basement anyway. I kept hearing things, this was creeping me out. I couldn’t figure out where it was coming from. I kept looking around but I couldn’t find anything when suddenly, I saw something move at my feet. It almost looked like a hand. I darted back upstairs as fast as I could.

“Mom, something weird is going on.” I said. *Still* no reply. I looked around for her everywhere, but I couldn’t find her. This was so weird. I didn’t like what was going on, this was way too creepy to be happening right now, especially at night. I kept calling out for my mom,

“Mom! I got the blankets. Where are you?” *Again*, no reply. I’m secretly afraid of the dark, but I act like I’m not, so I went into the kitchen to go find a candle. Mom keeps them as decoration on the table during the holidays. As I was looking around for the candles, I heard the door open. I assumed it was my dad since he usually works late anyway.

“Hey sweetie, it’s mom. I was stuck at the office doing some paperwork and finally got the chance to come home. I also brought you some food since nothing is working.” she said. Wait. What?



“What do you mean mom you’ve been here all night.” I replied as I walked out of the kitchen.

“Umm. No I haven’t. This is the first time I’ve been home all day. Why are you acting weird?” She said.

If she wasn’t home earlier, then who was I home alone with? Where were the voices coming from?





Name: Xoie S.

Address:

Phone number:

Age: 17

Grade: 12th

### Salem

Just after she had closed her eyes, a voice echoed within the reflective surface. Jazel was the girl's name. She had finally been upgraded to a big girl bed in her own room. She had just turned nine and her parents thought it was time for the young girl to have her own space, where she could expand her curiosity and imagination. She was the type of girl to isolate herself. She had no personal connections with anyone and was afraid of growing up and being alone. Jazel never looked forward to sleeping on her own. She always said she had a tingling feeling whenever she was by herself in her room. "He'll watch me at night!" She cried to her mom. "He'll whisper things in my ear."

"Who will Jazel?" her mom questioned. "Who will watch you and whisper in your ear?" Jazel gazed.

"The boy in the mirror, he's in the mirror" she replied.

She didn't know how else to answer, she didn't know who it was, no idea whatsoever, the only thing she could focus on was the chilling tingle that ran through her body every night. The pressure of her heart pounding against her soft chest. Every night she would lay in bed directly across from a seven foot tall antique mirror that had been there longer than she could remember. It was framed with dark brown mahogany and embellished with intricate carvings. Jazel couldn't make out what the designs were, but they gave her the heebie jeebies. The mirror had a sort of

strange and unknown lure on Jazel. It kept her awake at night, leaving her terrified to sleep in her room. Her body would tremble when it was just her and the mirror, nothing else.

One deceiving night, as the moonlight cast eerie shadows through the window, Jazel stared into the mirror, her reflection growing hazy. A faint voice called to her, which seemed to emerge from within the glass. "Jazel," it whispered, "come closer, Jazel." She couldn't fight the urge to resist. She moved closer, one step at a time. As she became near, the glass liquified, and she felt a strong pull as if she was being yanked by the arm. Only a few moments later she was no longer standing in her bedroom. She was standing in an unusual, mirrored dimension.

Within this dimension it was nothing but an unearthly reflection of her room. There was her exact bed frame with the same flower sheets. There was her dresser with the same accents and the same antique mirror, but instead it was all covered in what looked like black char and cobwebs. She went to cry for help, but her voice went unheard. No matter how loud she screamed, this realm that had consumed her was soundless. She began to panic as she pounded on the glass that connected both worlds.

Out of nowhere, a young boy with pale, porcelain like skin appeared before her. Dark green eyes with perfectly combed hair. "Hello there," the boy said, with a haunting tone. "I'm so delighted to finally see you here, my name is Salem. I've been keeping an eye on you lately." When the boy said his name Jazel instantly knew who he was. Salem was the boy who went missing two years ago. Everyone assumed he was dead since he had attempted to sneak out of his bedroom window from the second floor. For months his name remained on the newspaper, *Parents still awaiting word on the missing boy, Salem Lee Burton, whereabouts.* "You're Salem?!" Jazel said with confusion. "You used to live here, didn't you, before you disappeared?"

"Yes..." he replied in a trapped and sad voice. "I've been stuck in this world of mirrors,

I'm not the only one. There are other souls here too. Every two years someone else joins us. The same way you just got here. Salem walked away and Jazel had followed. As she walked through the darkness there were at least a dozen mirrors on each side of her. Each one held a different torment that the children went through, including hers that portrayed her fear of being alone for the first time. But she couldn't see Salem's mirror. *Where was his mirror*, she thought to herself. The further she walked, Salem became silent. Jazel was feeling a strange and misleading vibe from him, and that was when she saw a picture of his family on the wall. They were all smiling, but Salem was fading from the picture.

Jazel realized that Salem was a spirit apart from the mirror realm, he hadn't been trapped. He created the mirror realm and obtained the power to draw other young and fearful children. Salem was trying to fool her because he needed a new child every two years to keep his powers thriving. It was as if he would feed on their fear and weaknesses. Five hours had gone by, or what seemed like five hours to Jazel, but in reality had been five days. The hours turned into days and the days turned into weeks. Jazel was desperate to escape her misery of being alone and controlled by a motivating force that Salem had placed on her. All she thought of was ways to sneak out of this nightmare without getting caught by Salem. She snuck over to one of the other children that had been trapped longer than her. She didn't know the child's name, but together they devised a plan to break free. They had come to the conclusion that they needed to put Salem to sleep. They were going to put melatonin in his cup that he would sip out of every two minutes. Together Jazel and the child agreed to do it before the next moonlight peered through the window of the room.

As the time came Jazel had thoroughly stirred the melatonin that she found in the old dresser drawer, in Salem's cup and moments later he took a ginormous gulp. Hopeful thoughts

ran through Jazel's mind, but miraculously nothing had happened. He had not fallen asleep.

"Why didn't it work?!" Jazel cried. Salem saw it coming from the start, and he immediately turned around to face Jazel and all his other victims. He rose in the air causing a blinding light to fill the room. The light had been so powerful that it shattered all the mirrors that held the children's stories...

Dylan D. \_\_\_\_\_

12th Grade Senior

### Gathering in the Square

The sun shone perfectly, and the crowd all bared witness to the shimmer of his tears. Gathered in mass, the townsfolk were here for justice and entertainment, as one comes with the other. Atop the podium, gallantly strung, stood Clay Jones: barber and homebody, but too a convicted murderer of three young girls. It was this day of calm air and clear skies he would be hanged till death.

Clay Jones's complexion was dark, but it hid nothing in its shadow; tears as blue as the clear sky streamed down his face, and a stifled cry was heard.

Twelve days beforehand, Jones had been wrestled and brought down just before the path to the ridge. The law said he was trying to escape, running from his crimes, and he did not make it out of the pueblo.

Two days before that, the Petersons girls were found slaughtered in the barn, gored from head to toe. The father had stumbled into the scene late in the night. He was bringing home a town dame, sneaking her to the barn, hushing and giggling as they went. This part was left out of the papers, and the headline read:

*"THREE GIRLS FOUND DEAD; FATHER MET WITH SCENE!"*

When Mr. Peterson was asked for a comment, he swore justice, mourning the irreversible damage done to his family. The Mrs. was just too struck with grief to give a message at this point. Perhaps if Mr. Peterson had come home from work as he finished his daughters may have



survived that night, but so it was. They were dead and an angry town hungered for someone to sink their teeth into.

Upon crashing through the barn doors, drunk as a buzzard, Mr. Peterson witnessed a "dark figure" scrambling out the barn's back window. The lantern inside had been smashed and he could not get a great look, but the word dark stuck.

Dark was every black person of the pueblo, and so a witch hunt began. The Mason's, Green's, and every other black family was rounded up and herded to the county jail. After a day of intense deliberation, it was determined that a conspiracy of Africans was at large, and the whole lot was to be hanged. This changed when the kind Judge Harrow stepped in, reducing their sentences to six months for the men, and three each for the women. However, the lot numbered one short: Clay Jones.

A recluse black who went mad in his isolated insanity was the new verdict, and the law-bringers and hungry men alike took to their horses to search. Scouring up and down the range, through and out of every crevice they found Clay Jones nearing the ridge and had brought him down.

Now, with the trial completed, for which the guilty was absent from, Clay Jones was to be hanged till death that very afternoon. He was dragged and beaten as they pulled him to his craning cross. Standing atop the wooden platform, Clay Jones' eyes scanned the crowd looking for something, anything to save him or bring reason to the madness, but he was found fruitless.

In Clay Jones' final moments the calm had returned to the air, and the world had put itself still.

Melany C ...

Grade 12 Mesa Ridge Highschool

October 31st 2023

## Love Kills

Some say there are no lies that time doesn't reveal. It's true, one way or another, lies have a way of finding the surface. I remember my last day at home so clearly, it was September twenty-first and I had just gotten the call. It was almost October, my neighborhood was compiled of blown up ghosts and witches sitting on front lawns and the air smelt of freshly roasted marshmallows from campfires and pine trees in the woods behind my house. I sat on an old rocking chair on my front porch. The chair made a small creaking noise everytime I moved which made the quietness on my street seem so incredibly loud. My short hair blowing the wind, and goosebumps gently kissing my arms and cheeks. I sat there thinking about what my life would be like behind bars, I'd never know. I guess I should tell the full story, my story. The true one. My name is Blake Samara and in two hours, it'll be the end of the road for me. So I'll tell the story, about me, the girl nextdoor and a secret. Juni and I were inseparable since the second grade, ever since the infamous shoe tying tale. It goes like this, I never knew how to tie my shoes at the time, so I always wore a pair of bright sky blue Skechers with a velcro strap. My mother, Cybil, decided to buy me an awesome pair of red canvas Chucks that had actual laces. I was so excited to show my new shoes off to all my friends and classmates, but when my shoes came untied I'd have to ask someone else to tie them for me. Eventually, I guess Juni was done helping me with my shoes and instead made me spend as much time as it took during recess to truly learn the graceful art of twisting and plucking at shoes laces until they formed a perfect bow.

Ever since, we never did anything unless it was together. Juni and I were always there for each other. Then, eighth grade came along, and we became interested in different things, or people. I realized I didn't just love Juni as my best friend. Things were changing, from my emotions to my body and my likes to dislikes. I liked her, loved her even, as much as you possibly can in middle school at least. She started dating guys, and yeah, we were only friends, but a part of me always felt jealous.



She only ever saw me as a brother, and it was fine, for a while. Things change though, and we started drifting. Although our separation was a bitter sweet one, I think it was important for us to branch out. We still kept in touch from time to time but I never expected I'd be some large figure in her life anymore. Two years ago, in our Sophomore year of highschool I had heard a rumor from a girl named Jessica that by the way was known to spread false information around school for her own amusement, that Juni was caught stealing our semester test answers for every single class that year from a faculty members desk. At first, I was completely surprised, but then I realized that it couldn't be true, until I turned to my left. Stepping out of the principals office looking down at the ground was Juni. Only she wasn't alone. She wore a long vintage jean skirt with a slit to her knees on the right with black mary-jane shoes and a pink form fitting blouse with lace on the edges. She had little black bows in her blonde hair and her large grey eyes looked as though they were filled with tears. She was beautiful, even when she cried.

Two large white men in officer uniforms and badges held her by the arms as her hands were cuffed together behind her. One man had a bigger stomach that made you wonder if his belt was going to unclasp and a gold tinted mustache that looked frayed and rugged, he looked unamused as if, this was something they did on a daily basis. His large feet looked unproportional to his body and he dragged them a bit when he walked. The other cop was slender and lanky, he walked with a slouch and had a clean short haircut accompanied by an odd crooked smile. He looked too happy to have done this for a while. They walked all the way to the end of the hallway. They practically dragged her out of the school. There was a lot of commotion, a "Ooh, good girl gone bad" on my right and a "Dude! What did she do?" to my left. To say the least, I was startled. The Juni I knew all my life couldn't have possibly gotten into this much trouble, after all, she had a picture perfect family with two wealthy politicians as parents and a prominent older brother in the soccer world, she had everything. Her family was well known and they craved good publicity. Maybe even too much. I remember once, Juni once was accused of plagiarism on an english assignment in middle school. Junis father was able to sway the english teacher to overlook the "coincidence." I don't know how, but I can assume, It wasn't because there was actual proof that Juni didn't cheat. Ever since though, I never heard of her getting into any kind of trouble at school, until now. Honestly, its such a small town that Junis police escort out of the building was all people could talk about for the following week. It got old, fast. But soon enough, Juni returned to school. She was quiet and always alone. She walked quickly, probably



to avoid numerous questions about that day. and people whispered about her in the hallway, she mustve felt uncomfortable and embarrassed. I felt bad. We hadnt talked in so long, but still, I felt some type of obligation to go ask her how she was doing. She stood by her locker, sliding her hand over the lock.

I tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey."

"Oh," she paused for a second, "Hi."

"Hey, look, I dont know what happened, and I know we arent as close as we used to be, but I just want you to know, Im here" I paused too, "If you need anything."

She sheepishly nodded and said "Thanks."

I smiled and started to walk away, until I heard my name.

"Blake?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you- can we talk? My house, after school."

"Uh yeah, sure" I said.

I dont know if she was really taking me up on my offer to talk with her, or if maybe she thought the idea of us hanging out would be humorous or something, you know, I was just the boy who fell in love with a girl nextdoor, but I went anyway. Her house looked the exact same as I remember, from the newly cut lawn to the sweet little tire swing in the front of the house hanging on the willow tree. I rang the doorbell, and I have to admit, I didnt know if I really *wanted* to talk. I know I offered, so its really my fault, but after middle school, I went through some pretty rough patches from my parents getting divorced to my brother going off to college, and Juni wasnt there for me. I guess I still kind of blame her for that, I shouldnt but a part of me cant stand the fact that I wouldve never wouldve given up on her, yet It was easy for *her* to ditch *me* completely. We went from being best friends to not evening looking eachothers way in the hallway. She opened the door, without hesitation. She looked surprised, like I invited myself. She told me to come in and so I did, her house smelt like lavender, and the house felt, I dont know. It just felt empty and dull, I remember it being such a welcoming and warm place for us to talk and hangout, but now it was just any other old house. She quickly shut the door, she mustve been scared someone would see us. I didnt think much of it, I was too focused on how much I missed this. The warm light and coziness of her family furniture, even the way her dog still recognized me. Her parents werent home, It was just us and her dog, Chloe. That was probably for the best, I



think her parents were always comfortable with use being friends because in their eyes, I was still a little boy who she met on the playground, and it always made me feel *inadequate*. I sat down, without saying anything. She followed. I didnt know what was about to happen was going to forever change my life.

“Okay, what Im about to say is gonna sound crazy, I- I know, but before I tell you, Im sorry. Im sorry that we stopped being best friends, and Im sorry I never tried to talk to you earlier.”

I stared at her with a poker face. I was a bit surprised, I dont know what I was expecting this ominous meeting at her house to be, but it wasnt an apology.

“Rowan, were good, we’ll always be friends. I dont blame you for anything, Weve been through a lot together, so lets put everything behind us.”

I lied straight to her face. She smiled back at me. There was an understanding between us again. We talked for a while, you know, just about our lives. I told her about my parents divorce and my brother and even how I bought a car. She told me something though that now, I wish she had never said. Right now, I wish I had never went to her house at all.

“I wanted to tell you that” she paused, “look this isnt easy for me, Ive thought about this for a while, but I have to do it.”

My eyebrows curled up and I waited for her to continue, I was worried.

“My parents, no, my family. Theyre corrupt and everyone knows it. They lie and cheat and bribe anyone they can, just to get what they want. Its not right. And yeah, I stole those test answers, I also stole a few other things from Mrs. Romeros desk. I know I shouldnt have, but honestly I wanted to get in trouble, just to upset my parents. I know they wouldnt want to tarnish their name, and god, it upsets me. Everyone thinks were this perfect family” It was clear, that this was weighing on her and she had to tell someone.

“They bribed the two officers that took me out of school, they told everyone It was a mistake, that I didnt do anything. When we got home, they didnt even look at me. Blake-” She grabbed my hand. I felt warm all of the sudden, like I was coming down with something, but the only thing I was sick with was nostalgia. She squeezed my fingers firmly and stared at me.

“Youve always been my bestfriend, Itll always be like that, right? No matter what.”

I stared back, “yeah, always.”

“Im running away.”

I opened my mouth but before the vowels and consonants started to form in my mouth she said,



"Don't say anything, not yet. Look, you know me, you know my family. I trust you. Which is why I have to tell you. I can't do this anymore. I can't live knowing I'm a fraud." She waived her hands in the air.

"Knowing that WE are frauds. This town, I have to get out. I can't stay here. There's no life for me here, not with the psychos I have to call family. If I leave now, it'll be easy. If I don't, I'll never get out." She sighed reluctantly.

"Wait. Slow down." I was lost for words. *This is crazy.* It all sounded too scripted like we came out of a movie.

"You can't run from your problems, Juni. I've known you all your life, you confront your fears." She seemed upset, like I was crazy, like I was the one suggesting some elaborate escape plan.

"There are some problems you *can't* fight." Slowing down, she took a deep breath. She continued, "I'm sorry, okay, I shouldn't have expected you to do anything, not after so long. I know we aren't the same people. I'm sorry. I just figured I'd tell you. For what it's worth. It meant a lot, you coming up to me in the hallway." She got up and started walking towards the door. I felt bad, like accidentally eating a brown soft spot in a banana type of bad. This whole encounter left a bitter taste in my mouth. I followed to the door. I looked at her, but still I didn't know what to say. I just left. Like a coward, I left. I left her alone, to deal with everything by herself.

I was selfish that day, and I thought about it ever since. She must've left the town that weekend. I went back to school on Monday and she wasn't there. I remember hearing about her disappearance that morning on the radio. It was raining that day, I left the house in a pair of dark wash jeans and black converse, paired with some random green T-shirt that my mom bought me covered by a black jacket. I started the ignition to my car and quickly took a seat in the driver's. I got to school quickly and the mud covering the ground around my car made a swishing noise when I parked in front of the school. It was cold and dark that morning. I sat for a minute in the parking lot, checking my bag for my Chemistry work. The radio was on. That's when I heard it. "*City Representatives Daughter Missing!*" A woman on the radio said.

My heart sank. I didn't think she'd actually do it.

For weeks everyone was talking about her disappearance. There were so many theories, some thought she ran off with a boyfriend that her parents didn't approve of, others say she was kidnapped for ransom, and me, well I know the truth. *I know the truth. I'm liable.* I felt guilty.





I shouldve talked her out of leaving, shouldve been there for her. Days went on at school where I just felt like my insides were ripping apart from each other. Even worse, sometimes I wish they actually were, just so this small town nightmare would vanish. I was never questioned, never interrogated, and as far as im concerned, never thought of. Afterall, no one knew I was at her house prior to her leaving, I wasnt connected at all. But my mind, my morals, nothing made sense anymore. I knew everything, and nothing all at once. *Why was I keeping this secret?* I loved her. I always have.

It became easier, withholding information from authorities. It started to be a game to me, every whisper I heard in the hallways filled with theories about Juni became amusing. I felt as though I was important. With knowledge comes power. I became obsessed. Obsessed with lying, obsessed with listening to new updates on Junis case through the radio and I especially became obsessed with the idea of Juni needing me, needing me to keep her secret. Out secret. Two can keep a secret if one of them is dead, and really, Juni basically was. But to keep this little secret of ours, I had to go to extreme lengths. Thats why I did it. I killed Sophia Levitt four and a half weeks after Juni left. Then, Lina Burlowe three days later. Then more and more. Its thrilling, or at least it was. I killed so many girls, I had lost count. They meant nothing to me. I hunted for fun, for the thrill, just like anyone else. Id create a new case for the police to focus on, and eventually I didnt even need to kill anymore. It was a hobby now, I was hooked. The look on my victims faces before the end gave me satisfaction. It reminded me of how much Juni needed me. Everyone had forgotten about Juni, but I continued. I kept going and going and going until It wasnt enough. Its not the same for me anymore. Im just like everyone else, Ive lived a normal life, but love makes you do crazy things. Shes like a drug. I dont know what Junis doing right now, but maybe one day Juni will read this, or read about it. Maybe one day, Juni will not just need me, but want me. Shell realize how much I really loved her, because Id do anything for her, and after this, she will finally know it. She will what about my death and shell see what I did for her. Im ending my life to save hers.

7207

Name: Michael Kr ""  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
Age/Grade: 17 y/o / Senior

The barrel was still smoking when I found it. It was a Remington bolt action rifle laying in the muddy marsh. Next to it was a 2004 Sony Camcorder, with the recording light still flashing and the aftermarket flashlight attachment shining in the darkness of night. I had heard the sound of a shot ring out in the wooded area, and had most likely found where the source of the shot came from. I started calling out asking if anyone was there, yelling that they had dropped their camcorder and rifle. There was no response, other than the echoes off the water from the nearby coast. I studied the area to see if there were any clues of where whoever dropped their valuables went. I saw a pair of boot prints that weren't my own lead to the scene, but none leaving it. I was wary at first, but my instinct was to stop the recording. It was a mysterious scene, that was a fact, but my closest chance at finding some type of answer was most likely on that camcorder, so I turned it off, and took the camcorder and rifle to my cabin.

I was on a hunting trip on the coast of the Apostle Islands in Wisconsin. It was a remote wooded area with a few cabins scattered about and an abandoned lighthouse located on the Southern coast. I was unsure if there was anybody else on the island, but the rifle was the smoking gun that there indeed has been at least one other person on the island. As much as I was intrigued by the mystery, I knew that no logical person simply loses their rifle, so I figured this situation could be serious. I called the local police, and was able to get through to a dispatcher. Due to my seclusion on the islands, I was told that the earliest they could get a boat out to the islands would be mid afternoon the following day. They told me to sit tight in my cabin until then. Fine by me. The crossword puzzles I packed would keep me entertained. I started on an old

edition of the NY Times crosswords when I got an overwhelming urge to see what was on that camcorder. I was told not to tamper with any type of evidence, but how bad could the tampering be if I just simply rewound the tape? There was an old analog television set with av cords in my cabin used to review trail cams. I plugged it into the set and rewound it.

When I pressed resume, it started in the hands of what I presumed was a man walking. The camera wasn't really focused on anything in particular, so I assumed that whoever was holding it was most likely using the flashlight attachment to light the way on the trail. The only sounds audible were the person's footsteps and breathing. Every now and then the barrel of a rifle would bob into view. After about three minutes, there was the blood curdling scream of a woman. The person looked backwards towards the scream, and began sprinting towards the source. I watched the screen in a confused horror as the camera swayed from the horizon to the ground back to the horizon. Then the person stopped dead in their tracks. They dropped the camcorder and the bare feet of another person came into view. The feet resembled those of the cadaver's I used to work with in college, but these feet's tendons were still flexed as they floated an inch off the ground. The voice of a man then yelled for the figure to stay back before a shot rang out and a bullet casing fell in front of the camera's lens. It was unclear where the shot landed, but the cadaver-like feet began to lift off the ground until only the big toe was visible in the frame. Then the video faded into static. I jumped out of my seat to see that the camcorder ran on tape, which I discovered as the tape began spewing out of the camcorder like an aortic puncture. I tried my best to recover it and rewind it with a pencil, but the tape had passed in front of the magnetic lock of the cabinet on the television set and wiped the tape.

Before I could think of any remedy, I heard a knock on the door. I was perplexed as for the entirety of my stay, I had no other interaction with anyone. I cautiously approached the door with the camcorder slinged across my chest. I reached for the Remington rifle that I placed in the umbrella holder, and opened the door. There was nothing, only the sound of the nearby waves flopping onto the shores. I took a step out to investigate and the door slammed behind me. As I stumbled back after being started, the butt of the rifle knocked over the oil lamp hanging from the overhang, falling into the pile of kinder I just gathered. The porch became ablaze as I started to run for the nearby shore to gather water. That's when I heard the scream of a man from the woods. It must have been the man from the tape. I started to jog towards the sound in desperation to get help and put out the fire. As I grew further from the cabin, I had to start filming on the camcorder in order to use the flashlight to illuminate the way. A second scream filled the woods, and I ran faster. I sprinted deeper and deeper into the woods when I finally found the man. I pleaded for help but he gave no answer. That was when I noticed that his feet were touching the ground. Without hesitation I fired the rifle and hit the man directly into his sternum. He stayed standing and began elevating off the ground. I dropped the camcorder and rifle in my last attempt to run. Before I could take a step, my body locked up, and a black smog leaked out of the man's mouth and shot for mine. I could not move. Only observe. Only scream.