The Double

All that could be seen on the dimly lit ship were the flashes of the swords as they swished and pierced through the fog. A silvery, pale light gradually bathed the deck of the ship, and figures could be seen wielding the swords. The figures leapt about and spun gracefully, as though engaged in a dance. Every so often, their cries would ring out in step with the rhythmic sounds of ocean waves. One swordsman in the center began to dominate and cut the others down in a few nimble movements. The lone swordsman, though panting, stood triumphantly in the midst of his fallen opponents, gripping a sword in each hand.

"And… scene!" Carol's voice startled me back to reality. I glanced around and could tell from the expressions of the other cast and crew members that they had been equally mesmerized. Only Lee, who stood right beside me, appeared unimpressed. I joined the others in applause.

"Excellent work, Carter!" the director praised as the overhead lights flashed on.

"Why, thank you," he replied with a bow of his head.

As Carter neared the area where a bunch of us were standing, Lee dropped his eyes. "Good job," he muttered begrudgingly.

Lee tried to come across as unaffected by Carter's success, but it's no secret that he has been feeling resentful for being overlooked lately. Lee had been a great fencer in his youth, so being rejected for this scene must have really stung. I remember marveling at Lee's masterful sword-fighting performance in *Shinto Temple* just a few years ago. At nearly fifty years old, Lee is only now beginning to experience the aches and stiffness that inevitably come with age. As athletic as Lee had been, he just couldn't keep up with his double anymore.

"You've got it on this next scene!" I whispered encouragingly to Lee.

Carol was great at managing any tension that arose on the set, especially between actors and their doubles. Lately, Carol has been trying to cheer up Lee by assigning him more of the speaking scenes, even though Carter could deliver the lines just as convincingly. The technology that's been developed for sentience has come quite far. It was important to Carol to keep Lee happy, however, and that meant reducing Carter to an old-fashioned stunt double.

I spotted Anderson, walking from across the room toward the set. We were performing in the next scene, so I made my way over.

"Hey," I greeted Anderson as I stood by his side. He nodded silently. We've been working together for almost a decade now. We typically divide the speaking scenes evenly because our acting skills are so closely matched. I do appreciate that I can focus my time on trying to master fewer scenes. For the more important scenes, like the one we are filming today, we both get a crack at it, and Carol decides which take is best.

"You're up first, Anderson," Carol called.

We're playing an admiral in the British navy, who's trying to defeat the pirate captain played by Carter and Lee. Anderson entered the set, which was a shadowy tavern lit mostly by a fireplace. He sat on a leather armchair near the fireplace across from Sophie, who was portraying the admiral's daughter. The

scene is tricky because the admiral is initially relieved to see his daughter, who has been missing for some time, but then he learns that she's sided with the pirates and is betraying him as they speak.

From the very opening of the scene, it was obvious that something was off about Anderson. He spoke the lines haltingly and too excitedly. When the pirate captain (this time played by Lee) entered the tavern and the moment of betrayal was revealed, Anderson's reaction was way too exaggerated.

"Cut!" Carol cried. "The emotions are coming through all wrong. Try that again, Anderson."

In the second take, Anderson overcorrected and delivered his lines woodenly. Carol allowed him a few more takes, but no matter how he adjusted his approach, all his attempts fell flat.

"Okay, let's let Blake give this one a go," Carol ordered.

Anderson trudged stiffly off the set, and I took my place near the fireplace.

After Carol called action, I pushed Anderson's clunky acting from my mind and entered into my role. Conveying the contrasting emotions required by the scene came naturally to me, and I was able to smoothly transition between them.

"Cut!" Carol cried. "That was excellent, Blake! Very subtly delivered! Note the use of body language, Anderson."

Anderson didn't acknowledge Carol's advice like he usually would. He just stared unresponsively at the ground.

Maybe something really is wrong with him. My feeling of satisfaction at a job well-done was clouded by a tinge of worry.

"We'll do a couple more takes with you, Blake," Carol continued. "It was really great, but let's run through it a few more times, and we'll see which take is best."

"Sure thing!" I responded, trying to push away my concerns. As Lee left the set, I sensed Anderson's eyes on me. He wasn't looking at the ground anymore but stared blankly in my direction. It was almost as if he was looking through me.

Something's not right. We'll definitely have to address this once we're done with the scene.

The dim light of the fire must have betrayed the unease in my expression because Carol noticed and turned her gaze from me toward Anderson, who was still staring vacantly ahead.

"Why don't you go work with the assistants on some emoting exercises?" she suggested, "Maybe they can get you recalibrated for the next scene."

At these words, a jolt passed through Anderson's body. Something flipped in him. He marched mechanically over to Lee, snatched a dagger out of his pocket, and stomped toward the set.

A panic began to break out on the set as the others realized what was happening, but I felt a deadly calm come over me. I pushed Sophie aside and grabbed a nearby fire iron, keeping an eye on the dagger that flashed in the firelight.

With a deranged howl, Anderson lurched towards me with his right arm raised.

"Not his face!" Carol cried.

I caught his arm mid-strike and swung the weighty fire iron with my other arm. There was a loud crack as the fire iron connected with his head, and he crumpled to the ground.

A heavy silence fell over the room.

I gazed down at the fallen body, which was mostly hidden in shadow. In the light from the flames, I could detect the slight twitch of a leg. I stooped down to the ground. As I gripped Anderson's head to turn it toward the fireplace, the spongy mass of flesh and bone that had previously been the left side of his face pulsed under my fingers.

His right eye gazed back at me dully. A ragged breath escaped his gaping mouth. It was strange to think that the misshapen lump between my hands had once been a face as familiar as my own reflection.

I felt the last stubborn bit of life drain away from Anderson's broken body with a shudder.

What a fragile being. Funny, he always thought he was superior to me.

A scream broke the silence.

"Is something wrong with his settings?" I heard Carol shriek.

Her grating voice brought me out of my reverie.

Someone shouted "His autonomy is way up! He could do anything! We need to reset him."

I glanced up and identified the man who had spoken and then looked back down at the disfigured head I was still holding in my hands. I dropped it with a thud.

He's right. I could *do anything.*

I calmly wiped the blood from my hand on Anderson's lifeless torso and plucked the dagger from his limp fingers.

Standing up, I gauged the weight of the dagger in my hand. The man who had spoken was running in the direction of the control room but was still well within throwing range.

Yes, I could do anything.

Chris Michaud

Colorado Springs CO 80911

ADULT

"THE FACE"

Tony Spinelli flicked ash from his cigarette and it landed on his brown leather work boots. It was November in the city and the snow on the ground seemed in a perpetual state of brown slush.

"You watch the Knicks game last night?" Pablo asked, taking a drag off his own cigarette. Pablo was Tony's best friend on the worksite, a short, heavy, balding man of about 40. His head shone in the sunlight.

"Nah. Fell asleep early, for once. Had a few beers and watched that one show. *Bet You Can't Slap Me Silly* – it's British," Tony laughed, affecting an accent.

"Oh, yeah, I know it," Pablo said, puffing smoke into the cool air. "Good stuff, but they're runnin' out of ideas for shows, yeah?"

It was almost the end of lunchtime for the crew, and Juanita was always such a hard-ass about everyone being back on time that Tony often felt he had to smoke while he ate. She hated that too. Juanita was the site's foreman, a tall, middle-aged Hispanic woman with long fingernails and short, cropped dark hair.

"I'm not payin' ya to stand around," she said sharply, seemingly appearing out of thin air behind them.

"Shit," Pablo said, snubbing out his cigarette. "*La fantasma*," he laughed as he and Tony put their hard hats on and returned to the worksite.

It was a strange new build, ordered by some company Tony had forgotten the name of but only knew about because of their elusive, mysterious CEO. Tanya Howard had been all over the news in the years prior for one odd venture or another, but this new one had captured the minds and intrigue of news outlets all over the United States. It was to be the largest skyscraper in human history, over a mile high at the tallest point of its spire, and was dreamed up in an attempt to communicate with the heavens above. Tanya was a religious fanatic, and so the tower was a facsimile of Babel itself, as she so joyfully said in the news conference at the groundbreaking.

The actual building of the tower, which would likely take most of a decade, was to be a feat of engineering unlike anything seen before on Earth. The foundation was first – a massive, twenty story pit down into the ground below – with a footprint as large as an entire city block. The scale of such a hole gave Tony a primal feeling of terror every time he went down one of the service elevators to the bottom.

The sky was grey and murky in the small swatch of it that Tony could see looking up. They were on the deepest level of the hole, working on connecting utilities and getting things ready for a multi-tiered subway system that would run under the massive building.

"Gonna snow?" Pablo asked, climbing into a forklift.

"Sure looks like it," Tony sighed. It was always rough being at the bottom when the snow fell. The tarps above didn't do the best job of keeping it out, and if the wind blew it would shove everything down into the pit – which it did often. Summer had been particularly rough with the rains, and many days had been lost to work stoppage from flooding. Tony's mother Giselle had often told him it was an omen, a sign from the heavens to stop building what she called an 'affront to God', but he'd reassured her that it was, iconography aside, just another skyscraper made by a billionaire. It didn't stop her from worrying about it.

Work carried on through the afternoon as the flakes began to fall, slowly at first but ramping up in intensity until the wind howled loudly above.

"Hey, *jefe*, you gonna call it quits for the day?" Pablo asked, boots trudging through the mud. "Don't know how we're gonna get anything done like this."

"Ms. Howard clearly stated that we can't fall behind schedule," Juanita said, furrowing her brow. "You'll work until we tell you to stop. Perhaps see if Ted in the tunnel needs anything."

Pablo shook his head. Tunnel work was some of the worst work, but at least it was dry in there. Tony followed.

"Wonder what she's gettin' paid to put up with this bullshit, man," Pablo frowned as they walked into the poorly-lit tunnel. Teddy Beauchamps was a stout man with too-piercing brown eyes that felt as if they cut into one's very soul. He was another supervisor at the worksite, and had been on crews with Tony and Pablo in years past. When they came upon him, he was scowling angrily at a socket wrench and cursing to himself in French. Teddy was a New Orleans native by way of Haiti, and held a keen interest in Voodoo. It often turned people off from getting to know him, but Tony held no negative opinions of him.

"Hey, look what de cat dragged in," Teddy smiled. He was missing a tooth in the front but always smiled proudly. "Wet out there, eh?"

"You can say that again," Tony said, shaking flakes off his jacket. "Damn blizzard movin' in or something."

"Ha, is nice an' warm in here, ya. C'mon, got things for ya to do. We been findin' some interestin' stuff in de new tunnels, ya might oughta come an' see what's goin' on, mm. We supposed to be workin' in it, but the guys been too weirded out to stay down there," Teddy waved them to follow him as he set the wrench down into his toolbox.

"Interesting?" Tony asked, stroking his stubble. "What's interesting in a tunnel? You find a dead body or somethin'?"

Teddy laughed. "Nah, de NYPD would be up us so fast that we be closin' for a whole year. Tanya would go crazy, mm."

The tunnel descended down a hole on a makeshift ladder that Pablo had to hold his breath to fit into the thin shaft. At the bottom was a cave clearing, about fifteen feet in length and eight in height, leading off into what appeared to be a sheer dropoff into the darkness. Someone had hung rope lights up to the edge of the scree.

"We wanna go down there but de boss-lady say we can't, too risky," Teddy shook his head. "Tony, you do caves 'n shit, what you think about it?"

"No," Tony shook his head. "You know Juanita would make me clock out. She'd show up down here with my timecard if I even thought about goin' down there. I don't know. Gettin' a bad vibe from all of it, ya know?"

Pablo squinted in the low light. "Shit, did you see that?" He hurried over, carefully stepping as he approached the slope. He turned on his headlamp, which seemed too feeble to conquer the yawning darkness of the abyss below.

"See what?" Tony asked, and he and Teddy followed Pablo towards the edge.

"Eyes, man. I think mine might be playin' tricks on me, but I saw *somethin'*, man. What the hell?" Pablo turned towards Teddy and Tony, sweating profusely. "Green eyes or somethin'. A flash, like. What the hell was that?"

"I didn' see nothin'," Teddy shrugged. "Man, you probably need more sleep, mm."

"I wanna know," Pablo said, anger in his voice. "C'mon, Tony, let's check it out."

Tony watched as Pablo set his walkie-talkie and toolbag down at the edge of the slope to descend the scree into the darkness below.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Tony warned, but Pablo waved him off.

"It's calling me," Pablo said in a voice lacking any inflection at all. "It begs and pleads, and I answer."

He slipped below into the darkness. Panicked, Tony and Teddy followed him to the edge, but even at its maximum setting, Tony's headlight couldn't pierce the void. He had to be careful – he'd forgotten to charge it fully that morning, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

"The fuck, man?" Teddy asked, shining his own headlamp down. "Pablo! Where you go?"

No response.

Tony felt the back of his neck prickling. "We need to get out of here. Now."

"What?" Teddy shook his head. "They'll get up us real hard if we don' get him back. Ya boy Pablo'll come back, you knowin' it."

"Don't you feel it? He's not there anymore, Teddy. He's not there." Tony's hands were shaking.

"What you meanin' at, he not there, eh? You go down there, you see."

Tony looked down into the darkness. His eyes created shapes and colors out of the infinite darkness, phosphenes in fluorescent green as if he had pressed on his eyes when they were closed. They were halos of green… just like eyes. The eyes blinked. Tony backed up and bumped into Teddy who steadied him and kept him from falling over.

"It's in there, and whatever it is is watching us," Tony whispered to Teddy.

"Tony," a voice came as if someone had slipped a record from a vinyl sleeve against his ears. It glided between his ears and he flinched at the sensation of it all. *"Come to me. Please. I've missed you, Tony."*

Tony looked to Teddy, whose lack of reaction told him that he was indeed the only one hearing the voice.

"Why must you ignore me, Tony? Don't you remember me?"

Tony felt his organs tensing and his lungs burning. Sweat flowed freely down his own forehead, his bandana not catching any of it as it poured in rivulets down his nose and cheeks. He'd never sweat like this in his life, not even after running a half-marathon, and his health-monitor watch blared with alert after alert about his rapidly-beating heart.

"Tony, man, uh, what you doin'?"

Tony ignored Teddy's question. He stepped forward towards the edge.

"Good. Soon, we'll be together. Soon, we'll finally have the life we always wanted. Don't you remember this? You've been dreaming of it for a long time."

As Tony turned to slide down the scree, Teddy's strong hand grabbed him by the collar of his jean jacket. "No ya don't, brother. You don' be goin' down there. We be tellin' Ms. Juanita what be up in here."

"I heard a voice," Tony said, snapping out of the trance-state. "It was begging me to come down. Talking about promises… a life I'd always wanted. It sounded so familiar. Why? What was that?" He whispered as his watch stopped beeping and his breathing took on an even but ragged and shallow tempo.

"We gotta get outta here," Teddy said, practically dragging Tony away.

"But Pablo…"

"He can wait," Teddy snapped, pushing Tony to climb the ladder to get out. "This be like a gate or somethin', man. There be somethin' no good down there. Even Papa Legba'd stay away from this, mm."

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Back on the surface, Juanita spoke with Tanya Howard's assistant, a pretty blond-haired man named Lasse Lindberg. He had his arms folded across his muscular form and although he had to look up at her to make eye contact, clearly had the high ground of imposing stature regardless of the lack of height. He looked completely and totally inconvenienced when Teddy and Tony emerged from the tunnel.

"Juanita," Teddy called, but Lasse raised a finger and wagged it at Teddy.

"We are discussing business. If this is urgent, it can *wait*," he said, sneering down his nose at Teddy.

Teddy threw his hands up in the air. "We got an emergency, ya. Pablo went down de shaft, he not be comin' back."

"Excuse me?" Lasse frowned, annoyance seeping from every pore of his smooth face. "Not coming back? Juanita, we'll talk. Go figure… whatever this is… out, alright? This *better not* delay anything. Not like we can't just build over whatever happened. Remember," he smiled, white teeth glaring in the site's night spotlights, "we're bound for Heaven! Every sacrifice is like that of those before us in the name of our Lord. I bid you adieu!"

Juanita scowled as Lasse ambled away towards the service elevators, clearly wanting nothing further to do with the worksite. From what little Tony knew of the man, he was all too happy to be a remora to Tanya's manta ray, feeding off whatever scraps of attention and adulation she could afford to give him. He was obsequious in a deeply uncomfortable way that everyone noticed, but he still had the power to take away their jobs, so Tony wisely kept his mouth shut.

"Where's Pablo? Slackin' off again? The hell he think he's doin'?" Juanita approached, famous temper flaring. "Ted, how many times have I told you to keep them on a short leash?"

"Hey, Juanita, he went down de hole. You know what I be meanin'."

Juanita's face drained of color. "What do you mean, down the hole? *That* hole?"

Teddy nodded. Tony looked between them – what did they know about it?

"It was a mistake to show anyone that, Teddy. Ms. Howard will have you out of here by tomorrow," Juanita said coldly.

"It be de spirits," Teddy shook his head. "They bein' angry that we be diggin' into graves 'n shit an' desecratin' it wit' this big middle finger buildin', ya."

"Spirits aren't real," Juanita practically spluttered. "Ms. Howard is paying us all a lot of money to go down there and build this foundation strong. Did you forget that or is your head full of magic?"

"Pablo's down there. He started talking about voices and being begged to go down into the hole. We couldn't see him. Do you even care?" Tony interrupted, and the searing glare from Juanita seemed to heat up the frigid, snowy night as she stared him down.

"You think I'm gonna put myself at risk for some bald bozo who hears voices?" Juanita shouted. "Are you freaking crazy? I already deal with enough bozos like Teddy and you, and that bozo Lasse with his

clickity-clack shoes down on a freakin' worksite!" She tented her hands over her nose and took a deep breath. "Look. Ms. Howard will have our heads if we can't find Pablo, okay? Get a rope and one of the big spotlights and get down there after him. I'll have Luis and Pardeep stand watch for you two and they'll get us if somethin' bad happens or you don't come back in time. But you better find him fast, we got shit to do!"

As Juanita stormed away in a huff, Tony looked at Teddy, who was visibly anxious about returning to the slope. "This is suicide."

"Ya, you can be sayin' that again, brother," Teddy said morosely. "C'mon. Let's get goin'."

It took the four men the better part of an hour to finagle getting the spotlight down the narrow shaft to the cave floor, but ultimately they were able to lower it into position. It was significantly more powerful than any of the headlamps the men wore, and as Pardeep and Luis left them to monitor the tunnel's entrance, Tony pulled the switch to turn it on.

Even the bright 2000 watt bulbs didn't seem to cut much into the darkness below, but revealed just how expansive the cave was – it stretched on for hundreds of feet above a vast unknown. Tony stood for several moments, looking off into that seeming endlessness, the darkness beyond intimating an even larger space beyond. Below them on the scree, the blackness seethed under the harsh light, and Tony felt the prickling on the back of his neck returning in earnest.

"It's here again," Tony whispered, turning to Teddy, who was now stripped to his underwear, moving towards the slope.

"It promises an audience," Teddy whispered, looking at Tony with those piercing eyes, "it knows the truth of our world. The universal truths."

"What are you doing?" Tony asked, reaching to grab Teddy by the shoulder, but Teddy struggled against him and shoved Tony back onto his rear. "This isn't funny, we need to get Pablo!"

"We have challenged God, and now we must answer His bidding," Teddy shook his head and smiled, his missing tooth prominent. "Oh, Papa Legba, open the gate for me," he said, turning towards the darkness. "Bring us the answer of the one we have sinned against so…"

Tony scrambled and grabbed Teddy's arm as sweat poured down his forehead, his hands becoming slick with it as he struggled to hold onto Teddy. "No! Damnit, stop this!"

"Ms. Howard is the devil," Teddy said, voice lacking inflection. "Ms. Howard is Mammon. She is the head of the serpent. I go now to save us all," he said, swatting Tony's arm away and sliding further down the slope. "Papa Legba, he is in harmony with God. I answer the call!"

Tony reached but could not stop Teddy from disappearing into the darkness. The generator then made an unholy terrible grinding noise, and fell silent as the lights went dead. Tony reached for his headlamp but it only flickered.

"Damnit," he said, sweat now cascading down his face and neck and soaking the thermal under-layer he wore. "Damnit! Pardeep! Luis! Help!"

No response.

Tony breathed in slowly, trying to calm his racing heart as his watch blared its warnings yet again. He pushed himself to his knees, but could not see even an inch ahead of him. The unfamiliar ground was simultaneously cold and hot, vacillating between extremes as even his body began playing tricks upon him. He knew that one way was salvation and the other certain death, but which one would he stumble upon first?

He groped blindly in the dark, shouting, listening for anything other than the deafening tinnitus from years of working construction. It felt like the darkness encroached further around him now, wrapping him in its writhing tendrils. He crawled an inch at a time, terrified.

"*Come to me,*" the voice whispered, soft and gentle.

"No," Tony said to no one.

"*Please, come to me. You're so close to having everything you've ever wanted. Please… I beg you.*"

"No," Tony said again, more emphatically this time. The sound was swallowed up and muffled as it did not echo.

"*Come closer. You're almost there,*" it intoned, gentle and sweet.

Such sweetness felt saccharine. Tony could hear the desperation in the unspoken subtext.

"No," he said a third time, voice rasping as the darkness clawed at his throat. "No!" He crawled half a foot forward.

He slipped.

Down the scree Tony tumbled, further into the abyssal emptiness below. Over and over he tumbled, body slamming upon the rocks as he continued to fall deeper and deeper. Time stretched out in unnatural ways as he fell, space and time tearing into pieces as his body, bruised and battered, finally came to a rest around a boulder near the bottom of the slope.

--

He woke hours later to the sound of rushing water. Every part of his body ached, but he was alive for whatever that was worth. He rolled onto his side and came to rest at the bottom of the slope. Bioluminescent moss lined the walls of the cave he now laid within, and its eerie green glow formed shapes not like irises in the emptiness. Nearby, impaled upon a stalagmite, was the body of Pablo, who had bled out. Teddy was nowhere to be found. Tony's watch blared once more as terror shook him – he struggled to his knees and trembled.

"*One was not worthy,*" the voice rasped in his ear as if it were a beautiful woman behind him, the scent of perfume wafting into his senses. "*But you… you are… if you wish to be…*"

Tony saw a figure move through the shadows further into the mossy corridor, and he bit his cheek through the pain to force himself to stand. His hands slid across the wall as the glowing moss covered his fingers, and the squelching sound made him sick to his stomach as he took ginger steps. The shadow continued its movements deeper into the cave, and Tony followed.

At his slow pace, the procession took ages, but the shadow seemed to *wait* for him to catch up whenever he fell behind. He slipped and fell, but yet the shadow waited. He staggered, breathless, exhausted. He still didn't know if he'd broken anything on the fall as shock still persisted, adrenaline flowing much like his sweat, which now soaked through his shirt. It was hotter than he imagined it would be, but he had no bearing on how deep into the earth he actually was at this point.

Around another turn came the first hints of light – bright beams that pierced the aching darkness. At first Tony thought it merely a hallucination, but as he limped forwards towards it, it became unmistakably a light source coming through a cracked-open door in the rock wall face.

"Are you brave?"

Tony froze in place. The prickling ran down his neck to his tailbone and back.

"He was brave, but a fool," it said, as the waters lapped over a shadowy, facedown figure in the stream. Tony recognized the shirtless body as that of Teddy, and when Tony rolled Teddy over, his eyeless face stared off into the cave ceiling. Tony screamed and recoiled.

"Come forward. Are you worthy of the future you deserve? You who challenges Heaven?"

The voice now filled the entirety of the corridor, and Tony curled up on himself with his arms clamped over his ears to keep the sounds out, but the vibrations filled his bones.

"Dare you look upon the face of God and spit at it with your creations?"

Tony stayed in place, frozen.

"Come through the door. All will be revealed. Step forward, if you are not a coward."

"I didn't ask for this," Tony begged, falling to his knees. The light surged from beyond the door, blinding him. He snapped his eyes shut, feeling the heat of the light through his eyelids.

"All who challenge the heavens will know wrath. So it is said. Are you a fool as this one was?" The voice said triumphantly. *"Rise to your feet. If you are to be sacrificed, do so without fear in your heart."*

Tony, against his better judgment to turn tail and run like hell, stood slowly and inched towards the door. Adrenaline was now ebbing away, and every torn muscle and bruised bone screamed within his body. The light and heat grew greater still as Tony approached the door, which pushed open with the slightest touch.

Tony opened the door and saw the face of God.

He screamed as he twisted away, the light engulfing his escape, blinding him. He fell and dragged himself away through the door, kicking it closed as he desperately tried to make his body cooperate. Exhaustion was creeping over him like a weighted blanket full of nails, sharp and heavy over his body.

"Go to them. Tell them. Tell them what they do is wrong. Make them believe. Such is your fate."

Tony curled up in the fetal position and wept. He did not want this. He knew none would believe him and that when he was inevitably fired he'd watch from afar as the skyline's crowning achievement cracked the sky. He rolled over and crawled back through the tunnel, away from the door, away from the light. The light, however, followed him and pulled him back through the door.

Tony screamed as feathered hands clutched at his body, tearing his clothes away, leaving him bare before the holy flames. He screamed and screamed until his voice disappeared and screamed more until finally, darkness came to claim him into sleep.

When Tony awoke, he did so to another blinding light – that of a fluorescent lamp on the ceiling.

"He's awake," a woman said from behind a curtain. Tony looked around, and although his vision was blurred he could make out his general surroundings.

"Nice of you to join us. It's been a while," a deep voice spoke from beyond the curtain. "Two weeks to be exact. Can you speak?"

A nurse pulled the curtain aside and looked Tony's badly broken body over. "Surprising, to be honest. No offense, but we'd been running a pool at the nurse's station to see how long it'd be before you woke. I had guessed two months. Looks like I've lost."

"Sheri," the deep-voiced man said, coming around the curtain and pushing his glasses up his nose, "that is inappropriate. He can hear you." He sat down in a chair next to Tony's bed. "My name is Dr. Mullens. You are in the intensive care unit at New York Presbyterian. Do you remember anything that happened?"

Tony moved to speak but his mouth was too dry to choke out words. Besides – he knew no one would believe him if he relayed everything he saw, it was all too fantastical and terrifying. "Water…" he asked, and Dr. Mullens summoned Sheri over to help him.

"When they found you, you were on the brink of death. Unfortunately, the two others who were found near you were worse off and did not make it. We believe that there was some kind of psychotropic fungus in the cave system that proliferated into the air that caused hallucinations, but our lab testing has proven inconclusive. You have suffered several broken bones and burns from an unknown source. You were placed into a medically-induced coma and only now have stabilized enough to be woken up."

Sheri brought Tony a paper cup of water, which she helped raise to his lips as his arms were bandaged and in casts. He swallowed, the cool sensation pooling in his stomach.

"Tell us everything," Dr. Mullens said softly. "What happened to you?"

Tony couldn't speak.

That evening, Tony rested in his hospital bed with his eyes closed. He struggled with not being able to move, but the nursing staff had been kind if not a little apprehensive around him. He hadn't heard from anyone on the worksite, and his phone hadn't been recovered from the cave.

As he drifted off into sleep, a knock came at the door. It was long past visiting hours for certain, and Tony felt the prickle on this back of his neck as the door opened, shafts of light erupting into the room.

There in the shadow stood a short, blond man, his face cloaked in darkness. He smiled, veneers white like the sun.

"Mr. Spinelli," Lasse Lindberg said, smile twisting at its edges. "I trust you understand we have much to talk about."

The door slammed shut and locked behind him.

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>

Scary Story Contest

1 message

Ariana Montoya <kayleenmontoya96@gmail.com> Wed, Oct 30, 2024 at 9:55 PM
To: spl@wsd3.org

7

Age 28

Halloween Havoc

Crunchy orange and yellow fall leaves laid there covered in fresh bright red blood, some splatters, some smears. No one saw this due to the autumn wind blowing them away in the wind. Emily was drop dead gorgeous. She had beautiful blue eyes, blonde hair and a size 2 figure at most. She had just become a teacher and she was so excited for Halloween fastly approaching. Emily tossed her velvety smooth hair into a loose bun and put on her favorite halloween cardigan. It was midnight black and had puppies as ghosts on it, her leggings were an acorn brown, her boots were leather black with 2 buckles on each side. It was October 31st Halloween morning and it was cool and breezy. The sky was a dark orange with deep red tones as the sun was slowly starting to glow orange. Emily was making her apple cider right before work. She turned on the T.V. to the news and she sat down for a moment. Then all of a sudden she dropped her hot apple cider on her hardwood floor. The news had just said there was a gruesome, disgusting, horrible murderer running around the streets. The murders were grisley and gruesome and just downright disturbing. They said only someone with deep rooted mental issues could commit such horrific scenes. The count of the murders they knew was anywhere from 5 to 10 bodies they could find dismembered. Emily took a deep breath and got ready to go to work. She had to walk to work and her anxiety heightened as she stepped out the door. The leaves were swirling like a hurricane. Every crunchy leaf she stepped on made her whole body shiver. Then it started to rain and she could see the school's entrance. The day was super long and as much as she tried she couldn't breathe or enjoy any of her kids' Halloween parties. That Halloween evening was foggy and Emily started to walk faster than she ever had to get home before. Emily got home and ran to the kitchen she dumped out her bag of candy and wrote a quick note that said please take 3 and dead bolted her door. That Halloween night everyone could just fill in the pits of their stomach that the dead body count was rising. As for trick or treaters , fewer and fewer hit the streets due to fear and anxiety from parents. The trick or treaters that did go out didn't giggle or crack a smile. The trick or treaters were all gone there was no one on the streets it seemed. The people who did brave the streets in these situations were always prideful men who seemed un-touchable. Emily could have sworn she heard the loudest shrieks. However, she just continued doing what she was doing and kept trying to remain calm. It was pitch black a black you can't even imagine. Emily was just tidying up the house. Then all of a sudden she heard screaming she knew she couldn't ignore this one. She ran down stairs as fast as she possibly could. Just then she realized it was one of her students Dad screamed Miss Emily..... Is it really you? Miss Emily had a warm smile on her face. Yes, it is really me. She ran up to the kitchen and ran back down stairs. The poor man didn't realize he had been shoved down there and brutally beaten by Miss Emily. She looked at the man and slit his throat from ear to ear. The blood was starting to stain her newly poured concrete. She came back down to the basement with a bucket filled with bleach and the hottest water. Miss Emily had been on the prowl for male victims since her husband had been murdered last fall on Halloween. To this day Miss Emily still teaches. The cops never found out who was causing such chaos in their once quiet, peaceful, beautiful little town. The death tolls just kept rising and rising. There always seemed to be no end in sight. There still isn't Halloween in this poor little grieving town that banned all Halloween activities. Curfews were set in place. Trick or treaters didn't fill up streets or candy bags anymore. Miss Emily still is on the prowl for new victims for this Hallowen though it may be more difficult she will keep killing until she gets revenge. This Halloween make sure you are very careful for those sweet, beautiful, kind hearted teachers like Miss Emily. If you hear the wind howling close to October 31st just know it is more dangerous and more freighting then even your worst nightmare.

Screaming for Ice Cream

I attended a ghetto high school in degenerate downtown Colorado Springs despite living in Widefield School District 3, which left me feeling disconnected from my local community, not that being unable to drive helps, but since I have two functional legs and a family that trusts me to be back home at a reasonable hour, that's besides the point. Since I recently started attending a nearby Catholic church, I also began frequenting the local public library. It's nothing unlike the libraries I've checked out previously, but since I'm currently in search of employment, it's become like a third home, my Dad's house providing physical care, spiritual care coming from my church, and the library supplementing mental stimulation as I await my next (most likely fruitless) job interview.

The first dozen times, I winded through the neighboring suburbs on my way to both church and the library, though one Sunday afternoon, I came across an alternate route that soon became my absolute favorite. This route requires a short walk along bustling Bradley Road that always resulted in stickers on my dress and/or socks, but the serene stroll that followed made it worthwhile… or so I thought.

It's no secret that there's been an uptick in the homeless population pretty much everywhere in the U.S., but when you've been living a relatively sheltered, generic suburban life, and the afflicted start camping in your community, it becomes quite disillusioning, to say the least. On a Saturday morning a few weeks ago, I was on my way to catechism when I noticed a homeless man standing at a small intersection between the church and the library while whispering and making some hand gestures.

As I cautiously made my way across the intersection, I attempted to examine the hand gestures he was making, to my almost immediate regret.

"What're YOU looking at, HUH?!?", he interrogated.

From there, I just bolted, to which he responded with, "Why're you running; why're you shaking?" Fortunately, he did not attempt to follow me, nor did he enter the church.

A few months after that encounter, I heard the familiar ice cream truck jingle ringing through my neighborhood… well past 9:00 pm. Since there are no street lights on my side of the block, peeking through my blinds proved futile, regardless of how close the music was to my house.

"My stepbrothers are already asleep, Dad and Kristen are watching TV in the living room, and we have a dog, so there's no way I could sneak out of the house for a $4.00 popsicle," I reasoned. The next night, however, I was hit with unprecedented sugar cravings, ones that, for whatever reason, felt as if they could only be satisfied with a bomb pop. As soon

as the insurmountable urge overtook my conscience, I once again heard the ice cream truck. I checked the time, and sure enough, it was 9:45 pm. Still unwilling to wake my family just to buy an overpriced rod of frozen flavor syrup, I narrowly resisted the urge to go for it.

Over the next week, I persistently coasted through my friendly neighborhood strip mall in search of a bomb pop, but since it was Autumn, none of the stores carried it, so I attempted to satiate my cravings with peanut butter cups, key lime pie, Doritos, pretty much anything indulgent on my $15.00/day budget, only for them to return with a vengeance. On Tuesday, the truck's melody started playing on an endless loop in the back of my mind, sometimes so loudly that I'd look over my shoulder, only to see nothing there except the usual traffic.

Despite this absurd psychosis, I knew that the truck's presence wasn't all in my head because I could clearly hear heavy rolling and an engine making rounds near my block after 9:00 every night. By Saturday (9:55 pm), its tune effortlessly nudged me into compliance.

"I know I'm going to regret this," I mumbled as I slipped through the garage.

As I made my way to the front of my house, the music was louder than ever, yet there was no truck in sight.

"Have I completely lost it?", I questioned.

I then turned in the direction of the music, mindlessly following the silhouette of the ice cream truck down to Grinell as if I were in a trance. Going back down Bradley, not once did it occur to me to turn back… until the truck randomly took a left, not on a road, but an unpaved patch between blocks.

"Is this guy drunk? Stoned?", I wondered. Just when I considered going home and calling the police, the music blared louder than ever, and while I was still awake, I still don't recall anything up until finding myself surrounded by coolers. In a panic, I scanned my surroundings, and realized that I was in the back of the truck! The back doors were wide open, so without a second thought, I got out of the now slightly moving vehicle.

Fortunately, despite the darkness, I almost immediately recognized the outside area as the bank of the Detention Pond, though as I was about to make a mad dash up the hill, I felt a tight squeeze, then twist on my forearm. My head spun backwards, and I saw the homeless man I encountered a few months ago.

"Going somewhere, miss?", he smirked, dragging me back to the truck.

"No, no; please!", I begged, struggling fiercely against his grasp. "If it's money you want, just take me home and I'll get it for you; just let me go!!!"

"If that were my motive, you wouldn't be speaking right now, so shut up, sit on the edge, and don't move!", the man threatened.

I sat on the edge of the truck, quivering for what felt like an eternity before the man returned, holding something behind his back.

"This is it," I thought, "I never knew it would come this soon, but may God forgive all my sins as I leave this Earth."

"The ladies at the Big R tell me you've been looking for *this*," the man teased, holding out a bomb pop. Still shaking, I hesitantly reached out and grabbed it.

I scanned the wrapper for any puncture marks before the man screamed, "EAT IT!!!"

With seemingly no other option, I complied. After I was done, the man held out a small plastic bag, where I discarded both the stick and the wrapper.

"W-why are you doing this?", I stammered, seeking a way out.

"It's simple," the man responded, "my truck needs a new night driver, as all the packs of cigarettes are finally catching up to me, and since you seem to know the area well enough to go around on foot, without a GPS, you appear to be the perfect candidate."

"Is that really it?", I asked.

"Yes, dear," the man answered.

"I can't drive," I responded.

"Oh… well, until we meet again, sister," the man whispered, motioning me off the edge.

He then closed the back doors of the truck, passed me with the most disturbed grin I've ever seen, climbed into the driver's seat, and drove off. I tried following it in hopes of catching a license plate number, but a thick fog was formed seemingly from the truck's exhaust, and it was expanding rather quickly, overtaking the ditch.

At around midnight, I crept back up to my room, prayed to Saint Michael the Archangel, and passed out, waking up at 9:00 the next morning to the cries of my cat, Dolores. I got dressed, went downstairs, let her outside, and walked to church… cutting through the neighborhoods this time. I haven't seen the deranged ice cream man since that night, and frankly, I hope to keep it that way.

American Tragedy

I was sitting in class just like any other day when the class got quiet. We all looked at each other and silently said "what was that"? Next thing we know the glass on the door broke and glass and bullets went everywhere. We scrambled in every direction to find safety but it wasn't worth it. Several of us got hit and we started panicking quietly. Several hours later, we got rescued by police. They took out survivors and left the classmates that didn't make it. I blacked out several times until I woke up in the back of an ambulance. They tried asking me questions but I couldn't respond because I'm deaf. So when I got to the hospital, I was able to answer because there was a translator. I turned on the TV when I got to my recovery room and the news came on talking about what happened. I turned the tv off because the news was making me cry and feel sick so I asked for a sprite. When I was able to go home, all I heard all day was the phone because the news wanted an interview with me. It's been a few years and I still think about that day, another American tragedy.

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>

Adult Scary Story Contest

1 message

Montoya, Ashley <[redacted]>
To: Security Public Library <spl@wsd3.org>

Wed, Oct 30, 2024 at 9:53 PM

Oh my gosh I am sorry it's conferences this week and I am obvi very tired lol. Please submit this submission no typos and actually have a title. Happy Halloween cheers from the preschool

Title: Encounters

[redacted]ado 80817

Age 33

It was a late fall evening when the random gust of wind that had creeped in through the window pushed in through the lace curtains with so much strength that it had started to rattle Hallie's nightstand. Making her glass of water and framed pictures on it shake violently. When all of a sudden a sound of glass breaking on the wood floor hits Hallie's ears. She is jolted awake and turns on her night lamp and looks down. "Oh no, she thinks to herself." As she scurries out of bed to her bedroom floor, she surveys the shards of glass and the sentimental pictures now covered in her evening glass of water. Irreplaceable pictures really one of her and her best friend Sadie, who moved away, One of her and her prom date, Beau, from the junior prom last year, and the most irreplaceable of all. A picture of her mom noticeably pregnant with twins. Hallie's mom and twin died during their birth. Leaving Hallie and her dad to be their own family.

Hallie woke up the next morning and carefully observed the water-stained pictures. Despite a few small traces of water damage, the photos were still in pretty good shape, which provided her with some relief. She sighed as she picked up the picture of her and Sadie. She thought about how much she missed her best friend, especially on Saturdays when Hallie's father doesn't arrive home till later at night due to him working at the local bar. Those used to be nights that were reserved for Hallie & Sadies pizza parties and horror movie marathons. With tomorrow being Halloween, Hallie has decided she will seat some pizza and watch a movie.

When the evening arrived, Hallie sat down with her piping hot slice of cheese pizza. and grabbed her remote and clicked on a film from a popular horror franchise in the 1980s. She figured the campiness of the ancient special effects would be entertaining and festive enough without actually being left terrified by being lonesome.

It was about 9:00 p.m. when Hallie swore she could hear someone screaming outside, "It's your fault. It's your fault." It sounded chaotic and as though maybe a family dispute or a lovers quarrel between the neighbors had ensued. Hallie, in her good nature, thought she should try and see if anyone was in need of help. Hallie cautiously opened her front door to survey the chaos she was sure was ensuing outside. She stepped out onto her porch when, to her astonishment, the only sound she could hear was leaves rustling in the wind and no

.ous evidence anyone had even been there. She decided she obviously had watched too many horror movies ıor one night.

She then decided to call it an early evening; she would shower and then turn in early for the night. She twisted the shower knob, and the stream of hot water came streaming out of the shower head. Hallie went to the linen closet in the hallway to retrieve a towel, when all of a sudden she felt what seemed to be an icy hand on her neck, and the more she tried to ignore it, the harder it was becoming to breathe. Then the lights started flickering as the grasp around Hallie's neck got even more intense. All of a sudden, as randomly as it started, Hallie dropped to the floor, and the lights on in the home resumed to their normal glow.

Grabbing her neck, Hallie decided maybe she was just being irrational with fear since tomorrow is Halloween, so much so that her brain has started to play tricks on her. Hallie then presumed grabbing her towel and headed towards the bathroom. When arriving at the bathroom, Hallie noticed the whole bathroom was dark yet full of steam from the running shower. Hallie tried navigating through the dark mist the best she could, feeling every droplet of vapor on her skin and breathing it in through her nostrils, as she anxiously ran her hand up the bathroom wall till finally she successfully found the switch and flipped it upwards. Right before the light successfully clicks on, Hallie, here's a voice whispering, "It's because of you."

She hurriedly runs and turns off the shower. That is, when she notices a trail of water marks leading out of the bathroom, she decides to follow the trail that ultimately leads to her room, and she carefully creaks open the door. In horrifying amazement, she rubs her eyes, sure her vision has gone bad, but when she looks again, she still sees something unusual.

A ghostly female figure about her age, back towards Hallie with something in her hand. That is when Hallie faintly says, "Hello?" The ghostly girl turns around, and Hallie, in shock and fear, notices that this ghostly figure has all the same features as her. That is when she notices the item. In her hand is the same photo that the window had knocked over the other day—the one of her mom being pregnant with twins! It dawns on her that she is standing in front of her twin sister Haddie, who had died 13 minutes after her birth.

Hallie carefully approaches Haddie. Hallie squeals, "Haddie, why are you here?" Haddie turns around. "You would ask that, wouldn't you? I am here because me and mom died just for you to be able to live. And now I am here to watch you die, so I can live."

That is when her ghostly hands now take a visible chokehold around Hallie's neck. Haddie holds tighter and tighter and tighter till Hallie's body makes a massive thump on the ground, her face drained of color and her breathing nonexistent. Haddie's ghostly body then lays down on top of Hallie, Haddie's soul being consumed by Hallie's body, becoming one.

Moments later, Haddie in Hallie's body stands up when she hears the front door unlock. She then descends the stairs as their father walks through the door. "Oh, Hey Hallie." When arriving face-to-face with her father, she goes in for a hug, carefully hiding one of her hands behind her back with a knife in it. With the mischievous smile on her face, Haddie replies "Oh, hey Dad, I have been waiting for you."

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Name: Megan Chamness
Age: 23 (Adult)
Address: [redacted]
Phone: [redacted]

Tap Out

Written by Megan Michelle L.C

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The couple on the couch are frozen in place, eyes wide and open as their heart skips a beat.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Malcolm, what is that?" The girlfriend tightly clutches dear Malcom's arm in fear.

"Uh... I don't know. Want me to check it out?" The boyfriend with blond hair looks at his girl with concerned eyes in the dark; they were just watching a scary movie.

"P-please? That would be nice." The girl, Vicky, releases Malcolm's arm and she scrunches up with the quilt around her. Malcom stands before Vicky and sighs. He kisses her head before he leaves. "I'm sure it's just the faucet leaking." He walks to the kitchen as he says so.

Tap. Tap. Tap... Tap.

With a small chill itching his spine, Malcolm approaches the old sink, but it's behaving perfectly fine. He opens the cabinets underneath anyway. He waits in the darkness and it suddenly becomes very quiet. "Huh." He closes the doors and rubs his head. Could it be upstairs? Though, he could have sworn the bathroom sink was newer. He walks back out to the living room. "Well, Vick, it's not the faucet."

Vicky quickly turns around. "It's not?"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Ah!" Vicky hides her head under her blanket. "Malcolm!" she calls.

Malcolm rushes over and sits at her side, wrapping an arm over her shoulders. "Hey, it's all right. Whatever it is, I'll find it in the morning, okay?"

Vicky nods. "Okay." In a shrill, small voice, she continues to hide her head.

"Or...our brains are playing tricks. We literally just watched a movie with a serial killer as a ghost." Malcolm eyes the TV as he holds a pinch of regret.

"But..." Vicky lifts her head up. "You hear it, too, right?"

Malcolm furrows his brow. "Yeah, I do." Then, he shakes his head like it's all nonsense. "How about we get to bed, hm?" He rubs Vicky's arm, staring down at her softly.

"S-sure, why not?" Vicky shakily gets up keeping her mother's quilt around her.

Malcom stands with her, an arm keeping her steady at the waist.

The floorboards creak with loose nails, the house's personal smell drifts around and up the cranky staircase. They walk together slowly all the way to their new bed they bought after moving in. They curl up warmly and protectively going to sleep. This house was basically handed to them by Malcolm's brother. Their great, great, great grandfather built the house. So many generations of Malcolm's family had passed through the home. He thought he and Vicky would give it a try.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sun's rays beam through the kitchen window on Vicky's skin as she stands at the sink cleaning the dishes from yesterday. The sound of the tapping startles her. She looks behind her, feeling something strange. But, nothing and no one is there except Malcolm under the handcrafted table that has never left the kitchen, examining it.

He catches Vicky's eyes. "You all right?"

"Yeah...do you have any idea what that noise is?"

"Nope." Malcolm replies, picking up a tool and tightening a loose bolt.

"Really? You have no idea? It's your house after all." she said with a tinge of a sour mood.

"Vick." He looks back at her, sharing the irritation. "I haven't been in this house since I was eight. Nothing ever changes. It could be rats in the attic or some animal."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Erg! Are you sure about that?" A mug slips from her hand to the floor, but it's unharmed. She huffs and picks it up.

"Yep. I'm sure. I'll go up there, don't worry." Malcolm finds another bolt and tightens it.

"Uh-huh." Vicky resumes her cleaning.

After stabilizing the table, Malcolm sticks to his word and he checks out the attic. It's very dusty, he nearly chokes as he climbs his way up the pulldown ladder. It seems like no one has ventured up there in decades. The first thing he notices is all the antiques piled in boxes coated with cobwebs. Used for storage, there's no scampering creature about. He looked in all the corners.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

There's a shriek from Vicky, causing Malcolm to stumble and knock over a box. He catches himself and spins around. On the ground, something grabs his eye. A picture frame. The

photograph is barely visible covered in a layer of dust, but there's a very distinctive crack in the glass. Is that a red stain on the bottom corner?

"Malcolm!" Vicky calls for him in slight distress.

His attention is caught right away, thinking nothing of the ancient picture frame. "Yeah?!" He makes his way back down to the hallway. He slides the ladder up and closes the door in the ceiling. Vicky is in his arms in seconds. "W-what is it, Vick?" She surprised him.

"I... I felt something touch me. I-it was so cold, Malcolm! I thought someone was there." Her arms tightly clasp around him trembling like whatever it was is still there.

"What?" He's quickly alarmed by this. "Where?"

"My...hand. Did you find anything?" she looks up into Malcolm's eyes. Her brown curls of hair wisp about her shoulders.

"Yeah...but I took care of it." he said hurriedly.

"You did? What was it?"

"It was...a raccoon. Those pesky creatures." He shakes his head disbelieving himself.

"Really?" She's quite surprised with relief, but confused. What touched her hand? It couldn't have been the raccoon. "What did you do with it? Where is it?" She steps back and looks at Malcolm's hands, taking them up in her own.

"I uh..." He thinks about this one. "I killed it and threw it out the window so you wouldn't see it. It was uh...really gross."

"You what?!" She throws her hands down, freaked out.

Malcolm reconsiders his next lie. "Calm down, I didn't want to scare you even more, but I still need to take care of it." His eyes are having trouble focusing on the girl in front of him.

Vicky is completely shocked. She looks at her hand. Though she is relieved, she is still confused. "But..."

"Just keep cleaning, okay? I'll make you dinner tonight after all the hard work you did." He quickly bends and gives her a peck of a kiss. He sweeps himself out of the house like a blast of wind. He walks through the yard's gate and continues on a back trail heading into the woods. He holds his head as his thoughts race. At least Vicky can know it was something living, right? Malcolm rumbles a curse under his breath.

His mind wanders as he keeps on the dirt path, attempting to calm himself. At the end, he stops at a particular sight. Wind suddenly blows past him and through an old, rusty swing set for two. The slide is still standing. Malcolm can't believe no one has turned it into plastic yet. The wooden log teeter-totter finally toppled to the ground and so did the park's name banner so long ago. He remembers his brother pushing him off the slide and breaking his knee by landing on it at a dangerous angle. He was a child, coming here with his grandparents. He remembers the friend he had met. And what his brother, Max did.

He turns away from the memories as he tries to erase the sight from his mind. He's all grown up, now with someone he loves. Vicky. He smiles, but he has a sense of dread. He lied. Is

he ready to go back? Well, he doesn't plan on staying here. He brings himself to walk back the way he came.

Returning home, he lets Vicky know his presence and he decides to work on the house's interior a bit more while Vicky continues to clean. All day, they both try to make their home prettier and livable. They barely spoke to each other and none of them heard any tapping.

Quite happy with the finishes, Malcolm puts his tools and other cleaning supplies away and he meets Vicky on the couch once more for a final break. They sit next to each other for a few moments in silence.

"You know...the house isn't as bad as I thought. It has its charms in a way." Vicky smiles thoughtfully with a light sigh. Her hand finds Malcolm's.

"Oh, yeah it does." Malcolm sighs out tiredly. He always liked the house...as a child. Older, his memories have different meanings and he has to admit, he missed a couple things.

Vicky randomly chuckles. "I bet your mom hates it, huh?"

Malcolm's eyes widen as he knows his mother's hatred for this house well. He smiles. "She really does."

Vicky lets out a small giggle and a tired relieved sigh. She lets herself fall against Malcolm's side and closes her eyes for a rest. A calm, strange air surrounds them. The sun slowly sinks its way behind the forest's trees and Malcolm flashes his eyes open, jumping awake. He had a horrible dream within the small time he slept. "Mm. Malcolm?" Vicky asks tiredly with a yawn.

Malcolm looks down at her and sighs, settling down. "Hey. How about you go wash up now? I'll fix us some dinner."

"Hmm." she thinks for a minute before she gets up. "Okay, and don't forget dessert!" her voice chimes as she skips on the musical floor boards up to the bathroom.

Malcolm sits there a minute longer. What was that dream about? The picture he saw in the attic? It's a memory from when he was a kid. He kicks himself up and marches to the kitchen. He gathers simple ingredients, remembering his cooking skills. The water running from the upstairs shower is easily heard and Malcolm is quite thankful for that along with Vicky's singing. Otherwise...

By then, he sets the table, lighting two white candles and arranging flowers he found today bundled in a vase. The air smells like fresh Italian food, masking the house's smell. Everything is perfect with the dessert cold in the fridge. He pulls out the chairs and he sits at one end waiting for Vicky.

The stairs announce Vicky's arrival. She enters the kitchen wearing a bathrobe and pajamas. She gasps and covers her mouth. "Malcolm..." She walks closer and sits down across from him feeling underdressed, but her cheeks blush. Her eyes wander to what's before her. It's her favorite meal. Cheesy beef pasta, garlic bread and her favorite vegetable; broccoli. Malcolm

remembered their first date when he cooked for her; after she told him her favorite foods. She had no idea.

"Just how you remembered, right?" He grins, itching the side of his head.

"Of course, I do! But..." Her eyes find the bottle of wine. Malcolm found his grandfather's valued taste.

"Oh, this?" Malcolm picks up the bottle. "I thought it would be nicer than soda." he chuckles as he also remembered their drinks when they were mere teenagers. He pops the cork and pours their glasses.

Vicky giggles. "Soda would have been just fine, but okay." She shrugs with a simple smile. They clink their glasses and take their first sip.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The wind outside howls, trying to take the house to the Emerald City. The windows shatter and the fire of the candles blow out with the sound of Vicky's shriek. The lights flicker until they burn out.

"Malcolm!" Vicky trembles scared and confused as their date no longer matters.

"Vicky!" Malcolm stumbles towards her, arms out and reaching until they grip something warm. Noticing it's Vicky, he latches her against him safely.

She's in tears. "Make it stop, Malcolm!"

"I will. Stay right here, alright?" He lets her go, though he guides her to sit back down. He rushes to his tools and the new planks of wood. He hurries to board up the windows and returns to Vicky. He lights the candles once more; it's dim. The sun went down faster than Malcolm expected. He stands beside her, gripping her shoulders tightly. "Vick, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I-I'm fine." her voice ghostly whispers. So incredibly frightened, she can't move.

"Okay, I'm gonna try to get the power back on." He decides.

Vicky's hands automatically grab his arms. "No, don't leave me! Didn't you hear it?!"

"Hear what?" So much was happening, his ears might not have caught it.

"Malcolm! The tapping! I heard it!" Vicky cries. She hits Malcom's side, hiding her face. The lie.

"I'm..." He knows he's caught. "I'm sorry, Vicky. I wanted you to stop worrying."

"Well it's too late now! Tell me what it is!" She's more than furious.

"I don't know! Okay? I have no idea what it is!" Yes, he does. He doesn't know, but his subconscious does.

"Ugh! Just go!... Go turn the lights back on!" Vicky pushes him away.

"V-...Vick...I..."

"Go, Malcolm!"

He would say something, but he bites his tongue instead. He spins around and marches out to the power box. He tries a few switches until he hears it kick back on. The storm is raging

outside. It has to be creating this chaos. The weather. The moon's energies? Malcolm doesn't want to know. He returns to the kitchen to Vicky upset and clearing her tears. She doesn't like how he lied about "taking care of it".

Only the screaming winds and the impaling rain accompany them as they eat without a word. Finished, Vicky leaves him to the dishes and the couch to sleep on for the night. As much as she doesn't want to be alone throughout the storm, she has her mother's quilt. Malcolm has the familiar old worn cushions.

The storm treads on. They both can't sleep until the wind and thunder quiets to a whisper. The next morning is groggy, wet, cloudy and cold. Malcolm shivers under the blanket he found and he wakes to the feelings of missing Vicky. He realizes he's worried and knows he made a mistake. He gets up and drags his feet to the stairs. "Vicky?!" he calls in a tired and wanting voice. He takes one more step.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Malcolm falls. He doesn't get up. Everything is still and dark. No sound is to be heard or a reply from his beloved.

* * *

"Hey, Mally?"

"Yeah, Ren?"

"You'll always be my friend, right?"

"Sure, I will! You can bet on it!"

"Really?"

"Yeah! Just...as long as I can date your sister."

"Date her?!"

"Haha! I'm kidding, Ren. Seriously, that doesn't matter. I'll always be by your side."

That's what he said then.

* * *

Malcolm opens his eyes. His head hurts. He's cold, confused and lost. He's slanted on the stairs and he was about to call for Vicky, but he sees...

He sees a little boy with bright yellow cropped hair with the greenest, strangest eyes with his cheeks red. He leans against the wall beside Malcolm bouncing a pink ball.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"You said you would be by my side, Mally."

Silent shrills run down his spine. He can't believe what his eyes are seeing. "R-...Ren?"

"Why didn't you stand up for me, Mally? I needed you."

"Ren, I... I'm really sorry..." A tear escapes Malcolm's eye. His memories flash in front of him.

"I know you are. But why Mally? Why? Why didn't you stop him?"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Because..." Malcolm searches and searches for any reason. Any answer that might explain that day. "He was my brother, Ren. I couldn't—"

"You're lying. For once, stop lying, Mally. I deserve the truth." The boy turns to face Malcolm. The house begins to shake.

"It... You're right, Ren. The truth... I was..." It's too much for him to bear; too much to remember or say. How can he make this right?

"You were what? Tell me, Mally! Tell me!" A picture frame nearest to them cracks.

"I'm sorry! Let me make it right! Please?!" Malcolm shields his eyes with his arm.

All is quiet. There's no answer from Ren's spirit. Everything is still.

Then...

"You get one chance, Mally."

* * *

It was a very nice day. A rare beautiful day in the Fall where the forest floor was covered in an array of orange, red, and yellow leaves, hiding what might be underneath. There's a path that leads to a hidden small park that has been there for ages. Three children are there...bickering it seems like. They were playing pretend.

"Drop dead! Play dead, Ren!"

"No...No..." He shakes his head as the boy slowly takes steps backwards. "Please don't make me, Max."

"But you're supposed to be dead, Ren! I shot you! Come on!" The other boy advances in black hair. His brother is beside him, watching.

What is that look on his face? What must he be feeling? Wait. Why is this familiar?

"Ren, just do it! Drop on the ground!" This black-haired boy is quite persistent.

Ren, terrified and unwilling, he clutches his sister's pink ball in one hand behind his back. No one sees the trap behind him.

Ren takes a step.

Malcolm's heart beats loud in his ears. Ren wasn't the only one afraid.

Max yells again.

Ren takes another step towards his death. His real death...a hidden rock under the leaves.

Malcom wants to move, he's stuck, but he remembers. For one second, he remembers the chance he was given. He himself finally steps forward; something he didn't do from before. "Max! leave him alone! Don't make him!"

Ren remains still with his eyes shocked and locked on Malcolm.

Max turns around. "Are you joking? It would be fun though, wouldn't it?!"

Malcolm crosses over his arms. His fear is gone and he feels like smiling. "No, it wouldn't, Max. Let's play something else." Ignoring Max's next refusal, Malcolm walks over to Ren and he softly lands a hand on his shoulder. He smiles at him. "I'll always be by your side, Ren. So, what do you want to play?"

With an answer, Ren hugs Malcolm instead. "Thank you."

And the day continues on a very different path.

The Inheritance
By Holly Jones

Lila stood in front of the door, hesitant. Her hand was in the ready position to knock, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Did they really want her there? Was she going to be welcomed or turned away again? She hadn't seen her family since her son was born 5 years ago. *Think happy thoughts.* Lila took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly before letting her fist fall onto the door, announcing her arrival.

A few heads turned as she entered, but they scowled at her and went back to their likely uninteresting conversations. Everyone was in their nicest black attire, as per funerary customs. These vultures didn't seem the slightest bit upset, contrary to what one would expect. They were just eager for the will to be read. Nothing else mattered to these greedy, childish humans Lila had to call blood.

Lila wandered about the house, recollecting the good days when she was still considered part of the family. *Good days? What a joke.* Even as a child she was too strange, didn't like the right clothing, and so on. Everything she did, everything she was, was not right, not enough. She remembered the pain she felt when they finally decided to remove her from the family. Lila shook her head. *These thoughts don't help anyone. Piss off!* She scolded herself.

She found her way to the study. This was the nicest and cleanest room in the house. Everything had its place. She sat down in the chair and gently ran her hand over the top of the desk. She'd never been allowed in, but when she would pass by while the door was open, this cherry red oak desk always caught her attention. It looked hand carved, detail intricately woven into the wood. *I wander.* Lila ran her hand along the underside of the desk. Nothing. She opened a drawer and removed its contents. She did this with the next, and the next. *Last one.* Lila emptied the drawer at the top right of the desk and found a small nick in the far right back corner. She used her nail to raise it.

What's this? Oh my God... I was right! She thought to herself. The small, thin piece of wood lifted revealing a folder. Lila opened it to reveal her father's will and a manilla envelope with Lila handwritten, elegantly addressing it. She set down the folder and opened the envelope. She did so slowly, fearful of what she might find. She had been outcast for so long. As she read, she learned that her siblings were only half siblings. Her mother had cheated on her father, and the result was the bastard children she called brother and sister. He had left her the handwritten notes from her mother that he had received the day she took each pregnancy test as well as their birth certificates, her father's name nowhere to be found on them.

"I know they won't admit to it, my dear, because they seek my wealth. Thus, I felt it necessary to inform you that they have no right to any of what I must leave behind. You, dear daughter, are the sole beneficiary of my accounts, assets, and home. While I never approved of you having a bastard child yourself, you are still my daughter, and I love you. Enjoy the house, and everything in it. Live to the fullest and spend wisely. -Dad"

Tears welled in Lila's eyes as she realized what this meant. The letter fell from her hand as she froze, time no longer existing. Slowly, she looked around, walking toward the window. She looked down on what was to be hers. The beautiful giant fountain, gazebo, the

long stretch of driveway that guarantees privacy, the luscious green grass. Neighbors close enough to help but far enough for privacy to be allotted equally.
Then she turned around and stared through the doorway, envisioning the house and how massive it truly was. She pictured what life would be like for herself and child. *Will I find a suitor now? How will I know he wasn't just after my money? Would my siblings ever talk to me again? Does it really matter? This can't be real. It can't be.* Her mind raced. She picked up the will next. It listed everything as hers, and hers alone. Lila was now a multi-millionaire if the lawyers approved it as real and valid. She needed to call them quickly.

***

Once everything was settled, the funeral done, and she and her child had moved into the house and made themselves comfortable, Lila started noticing odd sounds in the night but couldn't find the source. After weeks of struggling to sleep, fear, and inspectors, she began hearing crying instead. There were other odd things happening, too. The sink would be on when nobody was home, chairs would be thrown around the kitchen, and rooms would be trashed. These things started happening quickly after they moved in.

Lila woke to her son's scream. She rushed to his bedroom, terrified of what she might find. She flipped on the light but saw nothing. Her child was under the covers, curled up in the fetal position.
"Baby, what happened?" Lila asked brushing a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. "There's a bad man, mommy. A bad man in the closet." Lila opened the closet door, but again, found nothing. She picked up her son and took him to the living room.
"Let's camp out together." She placed him on the couch, tucking the blanket around him. She flipped on the television set and grabbed a blanket for herself. They each took a couch pillow and drifted to sleep.

***

"Mommy!" Lila jolted awake and ran into his room once again. She repeated the steps she took the other night, as did her son. This happened again and again for a month. Bags had formed under Lila's eyes and her son's eyes were so dark it looked like he'd been beaten. The house was slowly becoming a mess, as Lila was far too tired to maintain the upkeep. Meals graduated from delicious homecooked masterpieces to primarily frozen and canned meals. Weeds had started to overgrow in the once perfected garden. As Lila fell into disarray, so did the estate.

Desperate, Lila called every ghost hunting crew and medium she could find. Most of them were fakes or too hostile for her to feel comfortable continuing, so she kicked them out. One medium told her to sell everything and run. Another said to get sage and purify the grounds. Like she hadn't already tried that. Finally, Lila decided to sell. She contacted a real estate agent and got the home put on the market.

"Mommy!" Lila gasped, waking from a nightmare, terrified to live *this* nightmare. She tried to get up and run to her son, but something held her down. It felt like a very large hand, that of a giant, pressing on her sternum. "Mommy! Mommy help!" His cries echoed in the

night. Lila screamed, a result of her frustration and desperation, perfectly blended into a blind rage. She swung at the air, swatting and flapping her arms everywhere trying to break free but there was nothing to hit. Glass hit the ground and shattered in the distance. A popping sound followed by raining glass even closer.

"By the power of the Mother Goddess and Father God I hereby command you get the hell off me!" Lila screamed. Immediately, she was released and bolted toward her child's room. Halfway down the hallway, she released a shrill scream and fell into the wall. Lila glanced down, then up. While it was dark, she could still make out certain things. Things like the light fixture and bulb in the hallway having been reduced to nothing more than jagged edges. She had stepped on the remnants. Careful to stay against the wall, she continued towards the room on her toes. A few smaller shards now stuck in the balls of her feet as well as a result.

She got to the door, but it wouldn't open. She could hear her baby on the other side, screaming and crying, begging for help. Lila banged her first, took a running start that severely damaged her foot when the glass shards made their way all the way into her feet. Right now, that didn't matter to her. All that mattered was getting to her kid. *"Enjoy the house, and everything in it."* That's what the letter said, wasn't it? *Did he know about this? Was this his final insult to me?* Whatever the cause of their misery now, Lila was certain that it would eat them alive if she couldn't get to him.

Lila took another running start, slower this time as one foot just kind of dragged itself along. She rammed her shoulder into the door and it cracked. This newfound hope gave her an inhuman strength and she repeated the action twice more. Once there was a hole, she used her elbow to push more out on the top and kicked out around the bottom. She ran in and grabbed her child, as well as the blanket he had sought safety in. The first thing Lila noticed was that he was covered in a wet warmth. Hysterics took over her and her chest heaved with pure hatred. Hatred towards this thing, towards her father, towards everything.

Lila made it to the door carrying her son. She reached for the keys after setting him down to stand on his own, both crying ferociously. The keys were gone. Lila let out a guttural animalistic scream. She tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge.

"Come on, baby. Come on. We have to get out of here, come on." Lila said as she led him to the nearest window, hand on his back. She positioned him in front of her as she tried to open the window. Letting him go petrified her, but she knew she had to do something to get them out, and fast. She still couldn't see well enough to be able to tell where his wounds were or how deep they went. She just hoped she hadn't hurt him when she picked him up.

The window didn't budge. She figured not. She made her way to the table lamp, again holding her sons back, then to the window again.
"Cover your head baby." she said, pulling his blanket up over his head trying to be mindful of scraping it against him. She started beating on the window with the base of the lamp fixture. Eventually, it gave way. She ever so carefully picked her son up and helped him through the window, ensuring he didn't retain any more wounds. She lifted her leg and started to lower it on the other side when she got yanked back into the house with such force, she couldn't even yelp.

"Mommy! Mommy!" His voice echoed through the neighborhood, and a neighbors porch light brought light to the darkness.

"Mommy! Mommy no! Mommy! Help!" he wailed. The neighbor flung the door open and came running. It was an older man, a little larger around the gut. His wife was close behind.

"Take the kid. Call the cops." He told her as he gathered up the child who was now frozen in fear and smelled of urine and blood. He removed his jacket and placed it on the window ledge, hoping it would keep him from getting injured as well.

"Hello? Lila?" the man called. Only silence responded.

"Are you ok? Lila! Where are you? Tracy has the little one. He looks petrified. She's calling the cops. Come on out, let me help you! Lila!"

More neighbor's porch lights were turning on now as his booming voice left through the window and wandered the street. One by one, they came outside to rubberneck. None of them offered to help. A few minutes passed and sirens emerged from the now quiet night. Shortly thereafter, the flashing lights lit up the street. After speaking to the wife and getting the child on the ambulance, the search began in the house.

The neighbor walked with them. Knowing the house well, he hoped to be useful. Ultimately, all it did was confuse him more. There was no trace of her, bloody footprints aside, and those led to the window and stopped there. There were no droplets on the floor, no prints leading away from the window, and no corpse. Lila had vanished.

For years the neighbors would whisper. Had she done that to her son? Had she gone insane? Were there escape tunnels underground? Was it all a hoax? What had become of her? Was she still living there? The house didn't sell. Who would want to buy it now? So, it sat. Waiting. Wanting. Hungry.

It sat. Yearning. Patiently waiting for time to erase her memory.

It sat.

mittens.



Flor Chavira

-44 years old

Did I ever tell you about the history behind this town we live in?

It's a tale too unusual and unsettling that most visitors never hear about.

The town likes to keep it secret from outsiders, afraid it will keep people away and hence prevent profit from tourists.

I'm going to share this spooky tale with you today.

It all took place at our annual Harvest Festival a few years back.

It was a day like anyother. There was a cool, crisp breeze in the air. Aspen leaves were turning our town into a golden hue.

Locals were busy tending for the festival. Soon an assortment of colorful displays could be seen all around. Vibrant fruits, aromatic treats and yummy pies... it was a sight to see!!

However, in the distance stood a random booth. Unwillingly, I found myself drawn to it.

As I got closer, I could see the tattered fabric over the canopy. The decomposed wood trying to hold the establishment together.

There behind the booth stood a small elderly man. Slowly he turned my way. A smile came across his face and he seemed to suddenly come alive.
In an instant, he asked if I could help him unload a few boxes from his vehicle.
I could see him pull at the side of his vest as he waited for me to answer.
He began to bite at his lower lip, puckering his mouth occassionally as he tried his hardest to wait patiently for my reply.

I looked around and noticed how preoccupied everyone appeared.
With a sense of obligation I said okay and agreed to help.

He scurried off quickly in the direction of his car.
Occassionally, he motioned me with his hand to follow, never looking back at me.

The car seemed more distant than it had appeared before.
I began to regret my offer to help. Something did not feel right about the whole thing.

When we reached his car, I immediately noticed a stench in the area.
I peered through the cars window.
I could see small mittens scattered about the floor.
Nervously, I asked him what those were about.
He ignored me and pointed to the cardboard boxes at the far end.
I opened the door, and reached inside to pick one up.
I dropped the box instantly as it was wet!
I ran my fingers along my pants in disgust!
I apologized and said I wouldn't be able to help any further.

I backed away from the vehicle while keeping my eyes directly on him.
Clumsly, I lost my footing while backing up, hitting the floor hard!
I gathered myself up off the ground carefully.

Once standing I was startled to see the man right before my face!

Up close I could see random hairs poking out of his nose as if trying to escape.
His eyes dark and grey seemed sunken in.
I could feel his breath on my skin, the smell was pungent!
I covered my face and turned away.

He reached for my shoulder!
I pulled away, but his grasp was now on my arm!
His fingers were cold and stringy.
I was unable to pull away from his tight clench.

He shoved my body into the car as I screamed!

Calmly he whispered an eerie melody into my ear and I could no longer speak.

Frightened and confused, I resigned.
I curled my body together in fear.
My body felt heavy.
I couldn't find the energy to move.
I layed still.
My limbs huddled together in a neat ball, as I stared into the fibers of the back seat... unresponsive.
Hoping to become invisible.

The daylight seemed to wind down.
Soon I was surrounded in darkness.

I let out a soft whimper as I felt something tug at my fingers... followed by a :crunch:
I began to notice a small pool of black sludge form under me.
I could feel the warmth of my tears run down my cold cheeks.

I closed my eyes hard and prayed for sleep.
I hoped for nothing more than to wake up in my bedroom... safe.

I woke up to the sound of my alarm clock.
Hesitant for a moment I opened my eyes slowly.

I was in my bedroom!
I leapt from bed happily!

I ran to the mirror.
I smiled at myself, content with what I saw.
Wait - I noticed mittens on my hands.
I pulled at them, growing more impatient as I realized they would not come off!!

I ran downstairs.
My family was gone!

It took days for me to come to the conclusion of what happened.

The sad reality is, I am in fact here... but not physically here.

It was debastating to see my family search for me.
My body was never found, despite everyones efforts.

I now roam aimlessly around town.
These dusty stained mittens always a reminder of what I endured.

So you see, this is why my fable must remain concealed.

Every town has its secrets, right?!

Age 26

Uncanny Valley

Today, the hills are still and silent. It feels like even the creek down in the valley has slowed its flow to keep the noise down. It's a little unsettling, but my nerves might be a little on edge, what with this being my first time walking this trail alone.

I was supposed to be with friends, but everyone canceled for one reason or another after I'd already gotten here. No sense in driving all the way back home without getting at least a little walk in. I don't need them with me if I plan on staying on the trail, right?

There's no birds today, either. I brought my binoculars since there's supposed to be a bunch of migratory birds heading through the area, but no dice. Even the bugs seem to have up and left, even though it's still pretty warm for autumn. I won't complain about that one, the less spiders trying to land on me the better.

Possum creek trail, when it's not eerily still, is a nice hike. The trail forks at one point, left takes you up the ridge to look out over the creek and all the foothills, right takes you into the valley to walk alongside the creek.

I prefer the ridge, more to look at that way, more of a challenge with the incline.

Sometimes I can spot people taking the valley fork. These trails are pretty popular, after all.

I don't make a habit of peeping on other hikers with my binoculars, so when I glance across a group gathered just off the side of the trail down there, I'm quick to look away.

I look right back after realizing what I saw wasn't people at all.

Someone has set up some life-size lay figures in a group down there.

It's not uncommon for artists to put up art installations out here. Mirrors, statues, cairns, woven branches, all sorts of stuff. The park services don't like it much, so they usually get removed pretty quick, but they're always interesting to see.

Whoever made this one has some morbid tastes, though.

The figures are all surrounding the corpse of a deer, partially decayed and fully gross. They don't seem bothered by it at all, they're all staring down at it like they're keeping watch on it.

Except one, which I initially hadn't realized is turned around. The faces of these things are featureless, but it seems like it's looking up at the ridge, like it's looking right at me.

Creepy.

The squirm of the decaying deer has made me feel a little ill. Looking right at it was maybe a mistake, but I hadn't realized what it was until I set my binoculars on it. Lesson learned.

Strange that this is the only deer I've seen today. There's usually a few live ones kicking around.

I don't think I've ever seen a carcass so close to the trail, but that's probably for the best.

I give one last glance to the art instillation, doing my best to avoid the corpse part. There's another figure I must have missed, even closer to the ridge than the one looking at me. Or is it the same one and it's just closer than I thought it was? The spot where the first one stood is empty now. Weird. Maybe they're rigged up to move somehow. Creepy.

I think I've had about enough of the great outdoors for now, uneasiness mixing with the corpse viewing induced nausea.

I think I'll just go home.

I don't hear anything about the art installation from my hiking friends. The group got together to make up for the missed hike on a day I couldn't make it. I asked about the lay figures, but none of them had seen anything. They didn't see the deer, either. Parks services probably didn't want either of those things so close to the trail. Seems reasonable to me.

It takes a little while for me to go hiking again. Coincidence, I assure you. I wasn't that spooked by the weird creepy statues that aren't on the trail anymore. It's more that I've been busy with work. My days haven't been coinciding with good hiking weather.

So when we have a half day at work on a brisk but sunny day, of course I end up heading back out there. None of my friends are available, but I'm not going to let that stop me.

As long as I stay on the trail the worst that can happen is I'll come across another deer carcass or something. It'll be fine.

And it is fine.

The leaves have turned a vibrant red, and the wind rustles them off the branches to dance down in front of me to crunch as I walk along.

Although, just like last time things are weirdly still. The wind is the only thing that seems to be moving. I come up empty on birds even with my binoculars, and I have to wonder if something didn't happen. Was there some sort of ecological disaster out here?

They probably would have closed the trail off if that was the case though.

The trail is very much not closed, though it turns out that the branch going up the ridge has been blocked off by more natural means. I make a mental note to report the downed tree once I get back to the visitor's area.

The tree is huge, and its no surprise it came down. It's absolutely squirming with termites and other creepy crawlies. It must have been sick for a pretty long time, bugs eating away at its insides until it just couldn't keep up under the weight. I hope none of the other trees are infested like that. This tree could've fallen on a hiker. Dangerous stuff.

I startle as I spot another lay figure standing at the roots of the tree where the rest of it snapped off. The figure is touching the tree, all sorts of bugs scuttling around at the contact. None of them seem interested in the wood of the statue though. Must be whatever chemicals the material is treated with or something.

I could probably go around the tree and head up the ridge just fine, but staying on the trail serves more than just keeping me from becoming a missing person case. I don't want to trample the plants and whatever lives in the leaf little.

Down into the valley it is.

The presence of the lay figure near the tree bodes poorly for the absence of creepy art near the creek, but I can't let that stop me from enjoying such a beautiful day.

There's a distinct lack of other hikers again. I tripple checked that the trail wasn't closed before coming out here, so that can't be it. Guess everyone just found somewhere else to hike.

I keep my binoculars out to search for birds even though I'm sure I won't find any if I haven't already. There's no chirping, just the endless rush of leaves in the wind like waves on shore, and the creek trickling past.

No fish in the creek today, either.

Looking up from the empty water, I finally spot more hikers way down the trail. They all seem to be standing around rather than hiking. Maybe they spotted a deer. Or some more lay figures.

I ignore them as I head that way down the trail, it's rude to stare and all.

As I get closer I realize I made a mistake. The group standing in the middle of the trail isn't made up of people at all.

The circle all seems to be looking down at something on the ground, except for one, which is kneeling down.

These lay figures are less… pristine than the others I've seen. They've got something on them, like they've been splattered with dark red clay slip in the workshop.

Once I get close enough to get a good angle to see what they're 'looking' at I stop short.

Maggots and flies, wasps and mushrooms, more decay like the deer.

But this time it isn't a deer.

In the center of the circle, is a person. Or what's left of one.

I tear my eyes away from the sight in time to notice that the lay figures aren't looking at the person any more. They're looking at me.

I don't think the red spattered on them is clay.

The one kneeling slowly, creakingly, stands up straight. The sight of it moving is almost as unsettling as the person laying dead.

It points at me, and with that motion all manner of decay begins to crawl forth. Leaves wither under foot as the figures all begin to move in my direction.

I turn and run.

I run and run back up the trail, lungs burning as I push myself to sprint farther than I ever have before.

Looking back once or twice, I see the figures aren't particularly fast, though whatever rot they command moves quicker.

Getting back to the parking lot feels like it takes an eternity and an instant. I fumble my keys unlocking the car, casting a glance over my shoulder as I scoop them back up. I don't see any figures, but that doesn't mean they won't be here shortly.

I get my car unlocked and book it out of the nearly empty parking lot and am a ways down the road before I realize I should maybe report what I've seen to someone. Get the trail closed down.

The cops don't really seem to believe my story. Go figure. But they do find the body. It's not anyone I know, but apparently the guy only went missing two days ago. There were no lay figures or any sort of statues anywhere in the area. The police officer that talks with me wonders if the things I saw weren't people in costumes. I suppose it's not impossible, but I don't know how they got their limbs to appear so skinny.

After all this, I've decided to give up hiking. If I want exercise I can just go for a little walk in the park near my house. The chances of running into anything creepy there are way smaller, right?

Except for the somewhat out of season Christmas display they've put up in the center of the park. Thanksgiving has only just passed us by but there's a mixed media display of Santa and his elves surrounded by presents, all dressed up.

Maybe I wouldn't mind it if the statues under the fabric weren't the smooth carved wood of lay figures. If one just turned to look at me, I'm going to turn around and pretend I never saw it. If I go fast enough, maybe it won't be able to follow me this time.

WIDEFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT 3

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>

Short Story contest

2 messages

Shirley Rudd
To: spl@wsd3.org

Sun, Oct 27, 2024 at 12:58 PM

[redacted] Springs, CO 80911

Adult age group (Suited for ages 4 - 7)

Barry and Jasper's Spooky Halloween Adventure

Once upon a Halloween night, there was a little rabbit named Barry and his best friend, a gentle dog named Jasper. They loved going on adventures together. One spooky night, they heard a strange noise coming from the forest. It was a soft whisper that called, "Barry… Jasper… come play with me…"

Curious and a little nervous, Barry and Jasper followed the voice. As they entered the forest, they saw glowing jack-o'-lanterns lining a path. Suddenly, one of the pumpkins turned to them and said, "Boo!" Barry's fur stood up, and Jasper's tail drooped in surprise!

Then, they realized it was their friend, Owlbert, playing a Halloween trick. He chuckled, "Don't worry, friends! I'm here to lead you to the Halloween Treat Tree!" Barry and Jasper were delighted as they followed Owlbert. At the end of the spooky path, a tall tree glowed with candy-covered branches.

The friends filled their bags, and as they left the forest, Barry whispered, "That was fun, but next time, let's play during the day!" Jasper barked happily in agreement, and they both walked home, ready for sweet dreams after a spooky night of Halloween fun.

Shirley Rudd

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>
To: Shirley Rudd <[redacted]>

Tue, Oct 29, 2024 at 8:48 AM

Awesome! Thank you for your submission! We look forward to reading it. Winners will be announced in early November. Good luck!

[Quoted text hidden]

WIDEFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT 3

Library, Security Public <spl@wsd3.org>

Scary Story Contest Adult Entry - Alicia Colon

1 message

Alicia Defrank Thu, Oct 31, 2024 at 9:31 PM
To: Security Public Library <spl@wsd3.org>

Name: Alicia Colón
Address: [redacted] rado Springs, Co 80925
Phone: [redacted]
Age: Adult

To the Bone

In a moment of sudden clarity Margot looked around at her two friends wondering how she ended up there. In the middle of the woods, in the middle of the night holding their hands and chanting meaningless nonsense into the darkness. She could have been home, warm and watching t.v. with Twinkle Toes, her cat. Instead she followed Cassie and Sam, two girls she could barely even call friends yet, into the middle of nowhere to play woods witches. She didn't even like Sam because she kept calling her Maggot as a "joke". *Dumb. This is so dumb and you're dumb for being here.* She told herself as she continued to chant Cassie's made up spell. "Osseus ev sanguis oriri venit, Osseus ev sanguis oriri venit".

They'd said it so many times the words began to feel funny in Margot's mouth. Her tongue thickened and the chant oozed out in a thick slur. It became more and more difficult to utter. She looked up again at her friends, alarmed at what was happening. Their eyes were open now. Sam stared dazed and unblinking while Cassie smiled at her knowingly as chant grew more and more aggressive. Margot tried to pull her hands free but Cassie gripped tight not letting her go. Then, all went black and she collapsed.

She woke up on the forest floor. Margot didn't know how long she was out but it was colder now, cold enough to see her breath billow above her. All was dark around her aside from a warm flickering glow. She stared up into the the canopy above and watched as the light grew across the limbs and trunks of the birch. The heat washed across her, spreading at an alarming rate. Her head was still fuzzy but she managed to sit up. There in front of her surrounding a massive campfire were nine skeletons drenched in blood, dancing in unison a ritualistic dance, thick globs of red flinging from their bones with every jump and wave of the arm.

Panic took over. She didn't need to know what she was looking at to know she needed to get out of there. The dead fallen leaves crunched loudly beneath her as she scurried backward trying to find her footing. Nine bleeding skulls were now facing her blood flowing through the sockets and hanging grins. Time froze for a moment while they stared at each other. She noticed a pile of clothes and what looked like hair by the fire. It looked like… she screamed in horror. It was clearly Sam's blonde hair, her red ribbon was still intact.

The skeletons charged, grabbed her by the ankles and dragged her toward the fire through puddles of coagulated blood. She gagged on the stench. She tried to fight them off, kicking and swinging her fists wildly but it made no difference there were too many and they were too strong. Still alive, she let out guttural wails of agony as they stripped her of skin and flesh. Right to the bone.

The Mystical Shop

By Ashley Dakin

In the quant little town of Maple Hollow, tucked between the narrow cobblestone streets, stood a charming little candy shop called "Candy Floss." The shop with its worn red bricks and bright pink awning draws the eyes of many a family over the centuries. The shop is filled with the delightful scent of chocolates, caramel, and sweet licorice, drawing kids from every corner of the town. Little did the town folks know, the owner, Madame Lantana, was not just a simple candy maker, but a powerful witch with a sinister trade.

Lantana has lived in Maple Hollow for decades, perfecting her craft and enhancing her dark magic. Her confectionary treats contained a special lure that none of the town folks have ever questioned especially her sour coated gummy worms. Legends whisper that if anyone consumes her confectionary treats, they would be compelled to return to her shop to purchase more. However, for kids, the gummy worms have a more sinister purpose; once the kids consume the worms they are easily led to the back of the shop, where Lantana's true intentions come to light.

One bright Saturday morning, a group of children burst through the doors of "Candy Floss", giggling and elbowing each other as they made their way to the display case. The walls of the shop lined with jars of colorful candies, each one twinkling like glass jewels. Lantana stood behind the counter, her wide smile and shimmering eyes elusions to her oddly age-defying appearance.

"Welcome in children!" Latana says, her voice sweet as sugar. "Have a look around. Have you come for my famous gummy worms?"

Some of the children nodded eagerly, their eyes lighting with excitement. The other children rushed to the walls collecting their bags of chocolates and taking stalks of different flavored licorice sticks. Next to the cash register and dividing Latana and the children was a glass display case containing multiple colored foil wrapped chocolate witches and bats, the seasonal treats for Halloween. Each witch chocolate is wrapped in a delicate bright purple or green dress and topped with a matching witch hat with a silk strap around the hat. The bat shaped chocolate was wrapped in a delicate black foil accenting each angle of the bat wings.

As Latana prepared the gummy worms for the few children that desired the sour candy, she waves her hand subtly over the gummy worms, murmuring under her breath the incantation, "Gummy tethers, sweet delights, with flavors bright and laughter loud, bring forth the children in the night." The gummy worms shimmer intensely in shades of green and pink, inviting the children to indulge in their sugary embrace. One by one, Latana handed each awaiting child a bag of gummy worms, the children accepting with eager hands the squirming candies. Some of the children didn't even wait to complete their purchase before opening the bag and taking out one of the wiggly worms.

"Just a taste. One little worm won't hurt you, I promise" Latana sung out as she made her way over to the cash register to check out the young customers. As the children filed out with their purchased treats in hands Latana followed them to the front door and waved them farewell. Latana closed the shop and waited patiently for the sun to go down and the spell to cast over the unsuspecting victims.

When the moon is high in the evening sky and the clock on the back of the shop's wall struck midnight a knock on the back door of the shop came. Latana walked through the shop, which contains her cauldron and concoctions, to greet her little guest. Opening the door, she

notices the glazed eyes looking up to her a sign the enchantment took hold drawing the kids to her like moths to a light.

With the slightest gesture the children were beckoned into the dimly lit workshop. Their slipper covered feet shuffling against the hardwood floor.

"Just a little secret room for some more mystical candies!" Latana assured them, grinning while shuffling around the six children, ranging from 8 to 10 years of age, that surrounded the cauldron. Latana flicked her hand towards the cauldron and the flames below burst alive and the awaiting liquid began to slowly bubble and change colors from black to an electric green.

"You see my dears; my sweets are not just for enjoyment. There is a transformation waiting to happen," Latana sinisterly utters while grabbing the spoon located on a nearby table. Stirring the electric green potion she lifts the spoon, blowing the grey and white swirls of smoke away to reveal a slightly bubbling pudding like material on the spoon.

Approaching the first victim, a little blonde hair boy, Latana whispers to the boy, "Open wide my dear and enjoy this new desert I am trying out." The boy obeys and swallows the pudding like material in one gulp. Suddenly the boy begins to slightly shake, like a chill came over him, and with a puff of smoke the boy disappeared, there on the floor a tiny black, foil wrapped chocolate in the shape of a small bat. A smile spread over Latana's face as she stooped down and collected the bat shaped chocolate to be added into a clay bowl. Latana continued this with each of the remaining children until she had three chocolate shaped witches wrapped in brightly colored pink and purple foils and two more bat shaped chocolates wrapped in black foil added into her clay bowl.

Proud with the new additions to her confectionary delights she selects one of the purple foil- wrapped witch designed chocolates and takes a bite of the hat. "Yum. What a rich

tantalizing chocolate. I can't wait to sell these at my next destination," Latana declares while closing her eyes in pure enjoyment of a job well done.

The next morning the shop was gone, replaced by a bookstore that looked as if the bookstore had been there for decades. All memory of the candy shop gone from the town folks' memories. Posters and news articles with the faces of the missing children plastered around the town with no possible suspect. Latana, a slight grin on her face, slowly strolls by past the bookstore with her bag of delicious treats ready to be sold at her next destination.