

K-3 Winner

Harrison W.

Age 8, 3rd grade

The Mystery Hole

On the day before Halloween I was walking down the neighborhood for a stretch. I saw all the scary decorations all put up already then I saw something weird like a piece of a cloud. It was a giant piece of sweet candy corn. I ran towards it not knowing there was a mysterious and dark hole in the ground with nothing in it. While I was running to the giant candy corn I fell in the hole and it was dark as the night sky. I was knocked out because of the hard and rocky ground. I hurt myself on my right leg and I heard weird and strange noises that were almost like talking but not quite and I don't know where I am.

I eventually woke up and looked around the hard to see place where I was at. It was very dark, so I could barely see at all but there were very bright finger prints as if they were as bright as the sun, so I followed them and I thought I was going somewhere. It was very hard due to my injured leg and I found something I don't know that looks weird. It looks kinda like something I would put on my body that would not go on my legs.

Then I got closer and closer to find out it was a very cool glove as if there were a dance party inside! I put it on and it was glowing very bright as all the stars combined. My leg felt a little bit better but it still hurt and a little bit of skin got back on. The voices I heard when I got here came back but now they were speaking real English! I heard something about a really bouncy trampoline that I could take back to my neighborhood.

The voices were not LYING. They said "follow the finger prints to find the really bouncy trampoline to get to the neighborhood. They told me where the trampoline was and the glove helped me see so I could find the trampoline. There were bandages so I tied them around my right leg. I saw a hole above the trampoline and my neighborhood was through it. I bounced and bounced and bounced but I couldn't get high enough to get through the hole. Then I bounced so hard that I bounced up to the height of the neighborhood's tallest building. Then I fell back down on where the hole should be but it wasn't there for some reason and I found out that I was in a cave.

I learned that I should pay attention to where I'm walking so I don't fall into a hole. I should also make sure that stuff is real so I don't get fake stuff and get scammed.



k-3 2nd place

The Day I Got Kidnapped

The day was Oct 27, 2025 . It was a dark and stormy night. Joe and his brother Mark were in their dark bedroom. They were under their blankets, commenting about how scared they were. Crash! " What was that?!" said Mark. "I don't know." replied Joe. There was a click. Bang! "That sounded like a vault!" said Joe. "We don't have a vault!", Said Mark, confused. "Maybe it's a burglar!" "Really?" said Joe with a smirk. *Creak!* It **WAS** a burglar. The boys jumped off their beds and tried to escape, but the burglar caught them by the ankles. The Burglar's name was Garret. Also, he was a kidnapper, not a burglar. Garret took them into his car, and locked the doors. Luckily, Joe was a very good engineer, and he built something that could get them out of Garret's car. Joe tried it, and sure enough, it worked! Joe and Mark ran down the sidewalk, and Almost got away, but Garret caught them with a net gun! It was a scary time for Joe and Mark. Garret took the to his hideout, and locked them in an empty room so Joe couldn't Build anything to help them get out. About a week later Garrett unlocked the room, and The two tired and hungry boys came out. They were held captive for **years**, and one day, Mark found a map of Garret's hideout. It included everything! From stashes to Fridges and bedrooms to a secret exit. "Wait! A secret exit! We can finally get out of here!" said Mark. So one night, they sneaked out of their room, and went to the exit. Sure enough, it worked! They ran down the sidewalk again, gasping and panting for Breath. The boys made it to the police station, and told the officers about Garret. The next day, Garret was found, and arrested. The boys got the reward for capturing Garret. Then, Joe and Mark lived happily ever after.

Name: Uriah Lr

Date: Oct. 31

Grade: Third Grade

Address: _

4th - 5th
Winner

Scared Batty

by

Max M

Age 10 / 5th Grade

Phone: (719) \

Adress: , Colorado Springs, CO

Once upon a time, there was a bat. When he flew around, he usually didn't get his fair share of bugs because his friends always ate them. One night, he flew into a neighborhood and hung upside down on the end of a roof.

Then, all of a sudden -- “bwahahahahahaha!” It was the grim reaper! The bat was so scared that he fell off his perch, landing hard on the ground – flump! After catching his breath, he flew as fast as he could toward the next house, where he saw... another bat? It was frozen in place and making a most unusual face. He thought that was odd. Suddenly, he heard a devilish cackle - “ah-hah-hah-hahhhhhh!” “Time to go,” he thought. He flew off towards the house across the street, searching rapidly for any monsters. Sure enough, there was a zombie. “What should I do,” he wondered. He had an idea that surprised even himself. “Break it!” The bat flapped over to the middle of the street to get a flying start and then zoomed *toward* the zombie. “CRACKALACKACRACK!” The zombie went toppling over. In a little bowl at the center of the porch, there were snacks of all kinds. He gobbled down two little candies and then he was full, because he’s a bat. Feeling a little reassured, he pelted toward the next house. There weren’t any monsters or such at that house, so he wasn’t scared. The bat hung upside down there. Then, “TRICK-OR-TREAT!” It was an army of monsters marching up the steps! A ghost and a goblin, both holding pumpkins full of candy. Behind them was a skeleton that was bigger than the ghost and the goblin put

together! It wasn't holding a pumpkin. Then out of the door came a clown, a really big and scary one.

"Aaaahhhhh," the bat flew as fast as he could away from the pack of monsters. He flew and flew and flew until he got to a house clear of opponents. He perched on the roof and spied for any more passing monsters. Soon, along came another ghost. "The zombie crash went well," he thought. Speeding toward it and squealing, he flew straight into its face. It screamed, dropped its pumpkin, and ran away. "Mommy, Mommy," it shouted as it ran. He found that quite fun – so fun that he followed it to the part of the neighborhood with more trick-or-treaters. He looked down on the neighborhood in search of the best monster to attack. "Target detected," he said in the most muffled voice he could. He swooped down toward a witch that was sitting down and eating a candy pumpkin. The bat dove, squealing. He pulled up and circled the witch in a spiral until he was close enough to beat his wings at it then, BAM! In a flash of candy and pumpkin, he was sent flying up in the air and landed on the street. When he returned to his conscious state, he found himself inside the pumpkin with a few pieces of candy. The pumpkin was moving. All around him, he would hear a "hahahahahahaha" here and "rawr, rawr!" there. Soon, it

all went bright, and he heard a door close. He was indoors. A hand then grabbed him, and he was put on a table. Suddenly he burst out flapping and flew around the house. "I told you it wasn't good to put a bat in the house, dearie!" he heard a woman say. "Open the door, quick," she said. the door opened and he flew out. "Alright," he thought, "this might be a little more exciting than I thought." He landed and stood on his wings on the sidewalk. "Here it comes," he said as Frankenstein started coming right towards him. He sprung up and squealed, swooping right past his stitch-covered green head. "Aaaahh!" he heard. Just then, he crashed into a ghoul. "YIKES," it shouted. He went back up into the sky after that, and just then felt something quite hard on his stomach. He looked down and saw a blue foam stick with an orange cap and noticed he was losing altitude. He landed on a skeleton dog, "CRASH!" it went flying to pieces. Femur here and skull there, rib in the air and neck into the street. "That is one dead skeleton," the bat thought. He looked across the street and saw the fake bat from earlier. He also saw the grim reaper on the porch next to it, and the zombie that he had knocked over, and the candy basket. "Well, this was a strange night," he said to himself, "or at least a strange neighborhood. Let's

check and see if other neighborhoods have these weird monsters. I've heard of human holidays... maybe this is one."

The End

4th - 5th
2nd place

LOCKER #13

BY: LILAN WALKER

Lilan Walker
7/9 -
9 yrs / 4th grade

I asked to switch lockers, I asked to move schools, I even asked to not have a locker. I was desperate because this locker gave me awful luck.

By the way my name is Mary. I have straight blonde hair, blue eyes and I'm 17 years old. I love to read and write. I live in Savannah, Georgia. I am also on the soccer team soon to be kicked out.

Some of the things my locker does to me are I get really bad grades, I am now really clumsy, I don't have any friends, and when I'm there it just doesn't feel right. I hate this locker.

You're probably thinking well why can't you just wait until you get a different locker assigned? Well every year I get that locker assigned to me. You're probably thinking, well why can't you just wait until you're out of school and don't have a locker? No, no I can't, I'm in an endless time loop. What do I mean by that well I mean that every time I graduate I go back to my first day of 6th grade. You're probably thinking, are you going to die like this? Well I don't know, I think I get younger when I loop but I'm not quite sure.

Tomorrow is graduation day and I know I'm going to get flowers that my cat is going to eat. It was the day of my loop back in time. I wouldn't say it hurt but it felt really uncomfortable when I looped. I knew I had to do something.

I often wondered if everyone was in a time loop because of me. No time to wonder. I had to think of what to do and fast. The last things I saw were my dad's black hair and glasses of an author, my mom's blonde hair and blue eyes just like mine she's a teacher, and my grandma's gray hair light brown eyes she was pretty skinny she had retired. It was too late, I looped back to my first day of 6th grade.

I remember it like yesterday, oh wait it's today. I came up with something! I would ask the teacher, Mrs. Bagart to have another locker other than #13, that would freak her out enough to agree! Mrs. Bagart said no and she yelled at me for "looking at her papers". It made me so mad, I had to think of a plan b.

I got it, I would make a friend so that they would give me their locker! Such a good plan right. Not. Who would willingly make friends with me, the girl who is unlucky, and if they do to give me their locker! Anyway I got a friend whose name is Terry Daniels. She's the worst friend you can get. She is always bragging about how she's better than everyone, she's always teasing and bullying other people, she lies all the time, and anyway she won't give me her locker.

I went home to my mom (my dad was still working). I went to my room to read but I couldn't focus. I kept thinking about my locker and what to do. This was my 3rd time looping after all!

It was a Saturday, I woke up at about 8:00. I had a pretty good day (the best you can have with a locker that brings you bad luck). It was nearing nighttime my mom, Elizabeth and my

dad, Henry, told me that they wanted me to go to therapy because I was acting weird and I was stressed all the time. I started to protest but thought it wouldn't be half bad to surprise the therapist with my special case.



The next Wednesday I went to the therapist. The building said "Tonya & Taro's Therapy". It was cool and smelled good like strawberries. I went to room 13 and sat in a black leather chair. There was a man in the chair across from me. He was fairly skinny with curly orange hair and turquoise eyes.

"Hello my name is Mr. Taro, what's your name?" he asked quietly.

"Mary. What's your first question?" I asked louder than him.

"Tell me Mary, were you assigned locker number 13?" Mr. Taro said louder than usual.

"Um-yes how did you know?" I asked in shock.

"In due time, in due time," he replied rather shortly.

"Mary, how old are you really?" he asked rather calmly for the situation. Then counting the years I was shocked as I realized I was 35!

"I-I-I'm 35!!" I yelled.

"I can help you, you just have to listen." he replied with a sorry face. I decided in a second I would listen to all he had to say.

"I'll listen to what you have to say, what do you have in mind?" I managed to ask calmly.

"Alright it looks like our time is up, see you next Wednesday," he managed to say normally.

I thought all night about it. It was then I realized that this had never happened before. Everyone always does the same things. What about the time loop?



I had another bad day at school, F's on everything. When I got home my mom yelled at me because of that. Also I had a new friend Brittany. I told her to stay away but she wouldn't. Well we went to my locker and a huge bottle of soda fizzed out and landed all over her.

"I could never have a friend like you. I trusted you, I wanted to be friends with you!"

I went home, had a snack, sat down, and did my homework. That night I slept soundly knowing that it would all be fixed soon. The next week I went to therapy happily. My parents were glad about that. I went back to room 13 and sat down in the clean room.

"Alright so you want to fix it, correct," Mr. Taro said, getting to the point faster than I expected.

"Yes now how do I fix it I want to know this locker is torture!" I screamed.

"I had it when I was a kid, and your parents told me when I asked, that's how I knew,"

"So listen," Mr. Taro continued. "If you want to fix it you have to go to your locker at a school event such as a play, dance, party, etc," he told me.

"Ok so I just go to the Candy Dance?" I asked, thinking that this was going to be easy.

"Sure, just make sure that you do a special combination." There was a pause when I waited for him to continue.

"That's all I can tell you, a special combination," he said.

"WHAT, A SPECIAL COMBINATION?!!" I screamed angrily.

"I really am sorry but the locker still even now forbids me from telling you the numbers even now." he said truthfully.

"Alright, alright but I still have one more question," I told him, calming down.

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid we're out of time." Mr Taro stated.

"Ok, ok see you next week," I said, completely calmed down now. My mom picked me up. All I could think about all Thursday was therapy with Mr. Taro.

On Friday though my locker sabotaged me when a teacher tried to praise me for helping someone. My locker had work with F's on them in the corner all ripped. Then the teacher told my mom and yelled at me. All weekend I did my homework, read, and wrote but I couldn't focus because of my thoughts. Thursday was the day of the dance but I still didn't know what he meant by a "special combination". "Would this really work, I mean it does have good chances to at least, maybe. Today was therapy but I still didn't understand completely. Why is therapy happening now? I got to therapy went to room #13 and realized what the number meant, it meant that this might actually work! I sat down very confident.

Then Mr. Taro wasted no time in saying "What was your question Mary?"

"My question was why, why now I've never done this therapy before, what about the time loop?" I asked still confidently.

"Oh, I knew you would ask that. 3 is in 13 right so if it's your 10th or 3rd year looping as you call it you have a chance to escape your locker," he said normally but it still sounded scary to me because of what it meant.

"What, do you mean to say that I only have 2 chances to try the combination or else..." I didn't finish the sentence, it was too awful to say.

"Yes that's unfortunately true," Mr. Taro said depressed.

"Ok that was my only question," I said kind of worried.

"Bye I give you my luck!" Mr. Taro said hopefully. Therapy then ended.



The next day I went to the dance. Brittany sneered at me and I got the punch bowl dumped on me by Charlie. Then when everyone was dancing I snuck out. I finally got to locker #13. This time my locker knew what I was doing, stuck out a tongue and tried to catch me and eat me! But no, I wouldn't let the locker eat me. So I went to the knob and tried to turn it anyway. Being very hopeful I then turned the knob to the numbers 1,2,3,4. "NO NO NO!!" The sound scared me half to death. The locker was screaming and crying.

The next day I was somewhere very odd! I looked in the mirror on the wall and realized that I looked 35 my real age! I decided to go out of the room. At least I knew the combination worked! I got out of the room and realized where I was, I was in "Tonya & Taro's Therapy"! I went to room 13 and saw Mr. Taro, a reassuring sight.

"Ah, right on time," Mr. Taro said sadly.

"What's going on?" I asked calmly, thinking it would be easy to get out of this place.

"Well um let's make this simple me you and Tonya are all stuck here unless we find out how to escape which is almost impossible to my understanding," Mr. Taro said, looking down.

"Oh no, but I need to get free and live my life. I just got away from my locker! Wait, why aren't there others?" I asked, surprised it was just them.

"Well in this world you can die of old age that's why you are currently 35," he said, helpless to do anything else.

"But is there any way you know that might even almost save us?" I asked hoping the answer would be yes.

"Well Mary I've done research and um yes there is a way that might just save us but I still don't know for sure," Mr. Taro replied.

"I really do want to know. What is it?" I asked him, hopeful he would be right about the plan.

"Well we have to escape not through the doors or windows and you're the only person yet who has been able to go through the doors to get to the exterior door except Clarissa," he said sadly.

I started to say "Who's-"

Mr. Taro then exclaimed, "OF COURSE... SHE WAS THE THIRD... AND YOU'RE TENTH!! GO GO GO, AND ESCAPE FROM HERE **NOW!**"

I ran away all the way to a wall when I realized I couldn't break it! I was stuck here with Mr. Taro.



ONE MONTH LATER...

A kid came to our therapy office and to my surprise a miracle happened. He had a hammer with him for some weird reason. He told me it made him stronger and happy because it reminded him of his dad. So that's why he always had it with him on the weekends (His therapy was on the weekends). To my surprise again he told me that I could use it. I slammed it into the wall of Mr. Taro's office, as hard as I could! Then Ms. Tonya's and we all escaped from the place together. Then we all went back to different years to our different 6th grades. The principals all around the world (and in Tonya's and Taro's time) destroyed all locker #13's. I then lived a perfect life. I got a husband and two children.

THE END

6-8th Winner

1

My name is Amelia Ke
My phone number is
I am in 7th grade.

Are you who you say you are?

I was simply watching TV, as any normal person's day would. Nothing special, just some cartoon, eating some hard, stale cereal straight from the box. My sister, Natalie, came down the stairs in her unicorn pjs. Yawning, her hair not even the slightest bit combed. I just stared at her with my cheeks filled to the brim with cereal.

"Why aren't you ready for school Natalie?" I questioned, it was already 6:35, and our bus came at 6:44.

"I woke up late. Why else do you think I'm not ready Emerson." she replied, snotty, frustrated and as if I bugged her.

I didn't bother replying as it was useless for a now teenage girl, she was starting her 7th grade year so her attitude has been changing with her growth. Our parent's divorce didn't help the wound of puberty either. Though her attitude always displeased me, I didn't have even the slightest care of trying to make her restful. She was like a volcano, always ready to explode. All I could do was look back inside the cereal box and process how disgusting it tasted against my tastebuds due to its lack of flavor. Our mom came into the kitchen which was open towards the living room so you could see everything going on. She was on the phone with our dad, arguing about when he would pay child support for my sister and I. It was nothing new. Mom wasn't even rarely around due to the fact she was too busy out of the house trying to find a stepdad. Though Natalie never knows about that. She's too busy thinking of mom as a role model. But I know mom, the true mom. Though I wasn't going to ruin it for Natalie since she would only hate me more. Mom and her don't really enjoy my company as I look like such a mini version of our father. I think the only thing they thought of when they saw me was hatred and an absent father.

I only tuned out my mother's yells and the sound of Natalie blow drying her hair. All I could do at the time was turn back to the TV. The TV was playing a couple of AD's that I probably already had memorized in my head, as they were all the same. Soon a warning from the News came, interrupting an advertisement talking about shampoo.

"Warning, recent reports of unknown figures roaming the streets. People say these figures look like your loved ones, ones dearest to you. But don't fall for it. These figures are described as already knowing things about you, or the ones they are disguising as. Being able to impersonate someone perfectly. But

researchers say that perfect white teeth is a way to find out if they are real or fake. If there are perfect white teeth they are not who you think they are. Stay safe, and be aware of those who you talk to."

I blinked slightly, I had to blink three times in fact. I even put down the cereal box. I looked around, I looked towards my mom who didn't even hear a word of what the news man was talking about. I got on my forearms and got up and walked towards her, placing the box on the table.

"Ma, did you hear the TV?" I asked, my voice deep but slightly quiet as I didn't want to anger for interrupting her reading in the newspaper.

She gave a loud, aggravated sigh, "What Emerson? What could've been so important that you have to interrupt my reading?"

I just stared at her like a lost dog. I knew if I said it, she would just roll her eyes and tell me to get out of her face. I didn't really need an angered mom at 6:39 AM in the morning. I just mumbled and said nevermind, then headed upstairs to Natalie. Pushing open her door, I was met with the loud sound of music blasting, and the strong smell of probably 5 different types of perfumes. I looked over and saw Natalie doing her makeup.

"Aren't you 12, why are you wearing all that foundation stuff or whatever it's called." I asked while turning down her loud radio.

She huffed and looked at me, "What do you want Emerson?"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing at all, I just wanted to tell you to hurry up or I'm leaving and going to the bus without you." I responded, throwing her plushies at the back of her head. All she did was ignore me and yelled for me to get out. Which I ended up doing. I went back downstairs and put on my dirty, grubby shoes. Snagged my backpack from the coach, then headed out the door. It was 6:41 and I wasn't going to wait for Natalie any more.

When I got to the bus stop, I went into the bus when it pulled beside the sidewalk, and I sat down in my seat. Then my best friend Jamie sat beside me. Jamie was a rebellious kid but he was one of the most trustworthy people I've ever met. I looked at Jamie and he gave me that same smudged smile he always gave me and handed me our shared walkman.

"Sorry dude, I had it for a week." He laughed and slightly playfully shoved me in the shoulder.

"Yeah. I told you we split it man." I said with a scoff but then a smile. Then I played our favorite song and we both started singing the lyrics. The girls in front and behind us were yelling at us to shut up but we didn't bother hearing them over our "beautiful" singing.

When we made it to school, and were at our lockers, I turned to Jamie and asked him, "Have you seen the news yet?"

"Oh about that creepy crap about those mimic things, huh?" he said with a certain country accent that always made me laugh.

I laughed and said with a snicker, "Yeh, those 'creepy crap mimic things" I mocked him with the same accent. Which made us both laugh and wheeze as we walked to our class.

"Ha, gosh..I couldn't breathe for a moment, ay? But yeah, I saw the news about them, quite weird but I don't believe it." Jamie said with a puffed chest full of his ego.

I rolled my eyes and snickered, "okay, what are you gonna do, superman?" Which led to Jamie with wide eyes and a shocked face, he laughed and shoved me.

During the school day, it was just me and Jamie the whole time, every hour, each class, same partners. A duo nobody could split or come apart in. We've been friends since childhood and nothing was changing that.

From snow falling, to the tulips growing from the ground,

Lately, Jamie has been weird. He was gone for 3 weeks from school, then came back. It doesn't sound weird, yeah, but it's not a Jamie thing to do. Jamie never misses school and his parents would never allow him to miss school. There wasn't even any news if something happened to his family and him. But when Jamie came back he seemed rather normal. Normal as in, no more flying paper airplanes across the classroom, no more disturbing jokes interrupting class, not even the same accent he uses to make us laugh. It was unnatural. I asked one day if he went to boarding school or something but all he managed to do was laugh and say no..

But I didn't let it get to me, or at least I tried. I didn't want to keep bothering him with it so I let it go. Weeks later, I got over it eventually, he started using the accent again and being his usual self so I thought of it as just an episode. One day, we were at the subway. Sitting on the bench, waiting for our train to go to a music concert of our favorite band.

We were joking around, laughing as usual and being our iconic normal duo. Until I looked at him. When I genuinely ANALYZED Jamie. When I fully looked at his *smile*.

'Perfect white teeth. Perfect white teeth. PERFECT WHITE TEETH!'

Perfect white teeth. That was the only thing running through my head, my heart was pounding out of my chest, a lump formed in my throat, my pupils felt like they were shaking, my

hands almost starting to tremble. Perfect white teeth. Once again. Nobody in this town had perfect white teeth, and it was even confirmed! It was confirmed that those..those figures! They have perfect white teeth! This whole time..entire time. I thought Jamie was Jamie!

In a split second, everything stopped and I don't know why. My heart stopped beating fast and it slowed down to a steady pace, the lump in my throat went down and I clenched my teeth. Jamie looked at me. No. It..it looked at me. It stopped smiling. Its eyes grew wide, then it spoke.

"What's wrong Emerson.? You look, startled."

Those words, that sentence, the eyes, the *teeth*. I sighed and looked back at my hands. I clutched my bag. Sweat about to drop from my chin. It felt like my body was overusing my nerves.

"You're not Jamie. Are you?" I confronted it.

The thing looked at me, looked at me with pure..pure distress.

"I thought I replaced him. I thought I replicated him..perfectly."

When I looked back up at it, it's face. Oh my gosh, it's face. A sight that haunts the back of my head. A sight I never will forget. Its face was melting, so slowly. As if it's the figures punishment for being caught. The flesh under the skin, the..the organs. The gore. I hated it all. The voice of it distorts from Jamie's to a deep rumble of a pure demon. The eyes, the eyes were so wide, popping out of Jamie's sockets. The teeth, oh gosh the teeth. The mouth formed into a smile, a smile wider than the jaw can expand. Multiple teeth growing in its mouth as it held a taunting smile with its stupid, perfect. White. Teeth.

My heart was pounding so quickly now, I felt like my own body couldn't keep up with it, my teeth itched and trembled, my hands twitched, and I gagged uncontrollably.. My eyes are watery and wide. Unable to process what was happening right in front of me. I looked around, seeing if anyone was seeing what I was seeing. But there was nobody. I was just the only one. Was I going crazy? I fell down, of the quivering of my legs, unable to support my body. I swear this subway was full before. Even the trains were gone. The thing looked at me with its half melted, gore body. It was taller than anything I had ever seen.

It inched closer, and closer, putting me to the edge of falling onto the train tracks. It's face. Half melted, only flesh. Its eyes, wide, pupils barely visible, popping out of the sockets. And the smile. So wide. So perfect. All I could see was my vision getting blurry and dark, my breathing getting choked up, my heart rapidly pounding too fast, too fast for my body to handle. The vomit smell on my shirt makes it horrible to even try breathing. The snot out of my nose from crying, the dried tears on my cheek, my eyes were sore from crying and all I could do was whimper in fear. Right as I closed my eyes.

"This time, I'll replicate you, perfectly."

Then the loud horn of a train blasted through my ears. | "911, what's your emergency?"

"Hello?! Hello, yes okay! Some little boy got hit by a train!" yelled the train conductor, Philip.

"Okay sir, is there an ID nearby or anything we can use to identify the boy?" questioned the dispatcher.

Phillip looked around and grabbed the boy's bag near the bench, "Uh, oh! Okay..okay. His name is Emerson. *Emerson Thomas.*"

6th-8th
2nd place (tie)

7th grade
719-
...

The ceiling

By Evalyn M

I ran home from school, opening my front door with a satisfying click. I close the door behind me with a small 'slam' and throw off my shoes onto the floor. My feet thump up the stairs and jump onto my bed. the blanket puffing up before it slowly goes down. I hear my old bed creak loudly under the pressure. I sigh as I slowly turn onto my back. The bedsheets shifted underneath my body. I huff and I stare at the ceiling, counting the bumps on my popcorn ceiling. But something keeps sifting. The ceiling looked like it was closer than it should be, but I brushed it off and got off my bed and sat at my old desk. Opening my computer, the fans worked desperately to turn it on without shutting off or overheating. I opened my school page and started to work on homework.

For a few hours I worked, the only sounds in the room were the typing of the keyboard and the crows flying past the sky, yelling at each other outside as they fought over a bird. I get up and walk over to my door to get some water but I hear a thump in front of the door. I tried to open the door but it was locked. I turned onto my side and tried to bang my shoulder onto the door. But it wouldn't budge, it was like something was on it, holding it down. I panicked and started to pace around the room. My hands are clumpy, my legs shaky, and my forehead sweaty. I looked up and it looked like the ceiling was more down than always, it was closer to my window. I jumped over to the window and tried to open it, it felt like it was shut with glue from how hard it was to open, it didn't even move. I sat on the floor, scared out of my mind, I walked around the room, panicking more and more as time went on.

As I walked I kept looking up, it seemed like the ceiling was getting closer, and closer, but I thought it was because of stress. I keep walking. Around and around and around, like an elephant in a cage. I just sit back down at my desk and I try to pick up my phone to call my mom or dad, but when I do pick it up it shocks my hand. I look down at my hand that had a big burn mark on it and try to cool it down. I looked at my phone lying on the floor and the screen cracked. I sigh and I just go back to homework, even when my hand hurts. I just sit there typing away, the document growing bigger and bigger, and bigger. My old computer is struggling more and more to keep up with my typing. The fans inside of the computer are working faster and faster to cool down my computer.

I hear a big bang and I look at the door. There was a small smell but i was guessing my brother was home. I stand up and run to the door. Calling his name

"Ethan!Ethan opened the door, it's stuck" I yell, banging on the door, but he did not come. He did not help, he wasn't there. I looked up at the ceiling again, it seemed closer, my eyes wide with fear, I brushed it off as my mind was playing tricks on me. My ceiling wouldn't be closing down on me right? I just go back to my bed and sit down. I was breathing slowly and calmly as i try to keep calm.i put my head down on my pillow, my mind rising, thinking i was locked in my house, with no way out. I look down at my burned hand

"God please make this stop" I say as I put my hand to my chest, holding it there as I try to take my mind off the pain. I grabbed my computer and put it on my lap and started typing again. This time on a new google doc. Typing about this crazy hallucinations, my room door being locked, my window being closed shut with some kid of glue. The thing outside my room door is clothing, I type for hours trying to cool my head to calm myself down, to not freak out again.

I look up at the ceiling again, staring up at it with wide eyes, it was right above my door, it was going slowly to my door, I wasn't going crazy, it was coming down, i jump up off my bed and hit my head on the ceiling and fall to the floor again, i panic more as i rub my head, my breathing bring faster, my forehead sweater. My pulse beating faster. I bet anyone outside of the house could hear it. I look up at the ceiling. Panicking more and more as I saw it slowly crushing my door, I was dead, I knew I was, I knew I was going to get squished like a bug under a shoe.

I hear what sounded like a grinding sound as the ceiling slowly goes to the door and starts to make this insufferable sound of wood being chipped off. I got up and I bit my head on the ceiling again, and I tried to hold it up to the ceiling so it didn't try to crush me. But I just feel my arms being slowly pushed down and I just sit back down on the floor. Desperately trying to calm down as the ceiling was about to crush me. I try to calm down and I pick up a book on my bookshelf and open it, trying to calm myself down. Maybe I can finish this book quickly before I get crushed.

I read for what seemed like seconds, knowing that I was going to be crushed, making me feel more and more claustrophobic by the second. Seeing the ceiling slowly going over my window, the loud grind of the ceiling grinding against the door makes everything worse. But I just try to keep reading my book, trying to keep my mind on this. I feel my hand start to blister and I look down as it was red and black, pink around the house, I just look back down at my book, and keep reading"

As the ceiling hit the window it made the grinding sound of the wood get worse, as it moves against the window and door now. I tried to calm down my breathing but it just started to speed up, I felt like I was going to throw up, to pass out, the feeling of being locked in a space with half of my room gone felt suffocating. I look back up at the

ceiling, my eyes wide, my mind easing, my heart beating so fast I felt like I might have a heart attack. The book slips from my hands and flips to a certain page, i look down at the book and it looked wired, it had a large red hand print on it and text over it saying

"Get out when you still can" my eyes widen and i panic more, maybe if i finished this book faster then i would have been saved. I look at the ceiling, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. And I close the book and lay on the floor helplessly. Staring at the ceiling slowly gets closer and closer to the floor. It hurt my bookshelf and it started to crush it slowly. The sound of wood being brushed and the horrible sound of wood being shaved off my window and door was making my room a ruckus, wooden splinters all over the floor now from the bookshelf. I just close my eyes, giving up on escape. As the ceiling slowly keeps coming closer, and closer and closer. The bookshelf barely missed my arm as I looked over at it. The bookshelf was half its size, the wood sputtering now the ceiling close to my desk, it forcefully closes my computer and grushes it. Slowly reaching my bed as well. .

It hits my bed and wooden desk, crushing both of them, and the bed's lags slowly collapse under the pressure of the ceiling. I couldn't sit up anymore. At least without hunching over. And I would rather live as long as I could before I got squished in some kind of twisted hydraulic press. I grab the book, reading over the last page over, and over, and over again, the five words haunting my mind, repeating in my head . I just stare at the ceiling as it slowly gets closer and closer. It crushed my desk and my bed . making me feel hopeless of anyone trying to save me, or even know that I would die here..

The ceiling was slowly coming down on me, it was touching noise now, slowly pushing down, making me feel helpless and trapped, making me get more scared, tears slowly falling down my face as I slowly closed my eyes. Waiting for the end to come. And slowly feel a small crack, and my eyes close, to never open again.

6th - 8th
2nd place (tie)

Name: Mariah O

Address:

Phone #:

Age/Grade: I am 13 years old in 8th grade!

The Damsel Murderer

By: Mariah O ..

It wasn't normal for the woman you just murdered to show up in your apartment the next day. At least, it wasn't for Richard Getty. Getty, a man of impurity. His hands were not clean, not one bit. A lunatic was a common description of him. "The Damsel Murderer" was the name that went around. Getty was not special, but he wore the name with honor. He was a man who was feared by women, for he only decided to target them. A man who caused alertness, stress, and *fear* for any woman walking alone.

Marina Moore was one of the unlucky. "A damsel" Getty would mock. Marina, once a girl, was then nothing more but another mangled, missing person. Another victim that would soon be forgotten. Well, that is if it weren't for the fact that she was standing in front Getty's couch. Getty stared at the woman. She looked completely untouched in the moon's lighting.

Getty took a step closer, and she slowly turned to face him. Marina's long, wavy hair was draped over her shoulders. Her eyes

held that same pureness that Getty remembered. She was wearing her same pair of jeans and a light blue sweater from the night before, when she was killed. Getty rubs his eyes, blinking a few times. Yet, Marina didn't disappear from his vision.

“Richard, do you remember me?” Marina whispers eerily, and Getty's neck hairs stand up.

Getty scoffs, shaking his head. He didn't tell her his name. It bothered him that he even remembered hers. If it weren't for her paranormally standing there, he'd have already forgotten like all the others. He remembers her screams of “I-I'm Marina! Marina Moore! Sir please— I don't want to die!” It puts a cocky smile on his face. Getty slowly walks over to his small kitchen, drawing a knife from a drying rack. Marina's eyes track him. His brain was playing tricks on him. It always did, for a man as insane as him, that was the only explanation. Marina doesn't scream when he stalks towards her. It's only until he begins to plunge the sharp blade inside her when she flails around.

“This ain't real...” Getty muttered to himself as he watched the blood pour down onto his carpet.

Marina's weak arms attempt to push him off, but he's far too strong. Marina gags on her own blood flooding inside her mouth. With one last gasp of air, she's dead once again. Getty slowly stands with a grunt. He looks down at the pool of blood on the

floor and he has to remind himself it's just his brain playing tricks on him.

Getty's had found himself a loud one today. He had tugged her by her long, dark-hair to his warehouse. She squeals and cries as Getty sits on top of her, stabbing her in the stomach once then twice, then repeatedly with a laugh. This was Getty's favorite part, when his victim took their last gasp, then they just went completely limp. But, before he can enjoy the pleasure of this fatality, he hears something... No, someone nearby. Getty shoves himself off the girl, and she rolls to her side limply. Getty holds his knife tightly. There's a shuffle... Then, he begins to recognise the sound more. The click of boots.

Getty quickly stalks down the sound, a big smile on his face. Two in the same day wasn't rare, but it sure was still fun, easy. Getty's getting ready to pop out until he sees something recognizable. The bright color of blue passes his eyes. For the first time in forever that Getty's spent killing, he stops in his tracks. Getty begins to walk slower, then he comes to a quick halt.

Marina Moore stands with a bright smile on her face. Her smile almost reaches from ear to ear. Getty gulps, watching the girl's eyes never once leaving his. He had killed her yesterday... And the day before that. It felt a little more real today. He could hear her breaths clearly in the silence. They're heavy and loud.

“What in the...” Getty shakes his head, taking a step closer to get a better look at her. “My goddamn head is playing tricks with me...”

Getty’s a bit agitated now. Marina was supposed to be gone two days ago. Out of his mind, out of his life, and out of distance. Getty decides to repeat the process, so he storms up to her. She tilts her head ever so slightly, her expression not changing until he stabs his knife through her throat. Marina gasps, her hands slapping onto her throat. Marina falls onto her knees, and she looks up at him.

“You won’t forget me, Mr. Getty. Not like the others.” Marina collapses onto the ground after speaking, blood spluttering out of her neck when Getty yanks the knife out.

A week had passed and Getty felt as if his mind was deteriorating. Marina had seemed to follow him everywhere. Even from the corner of his eye, he could swear he saw her even if she wasn’t there. Getty, a man who held his head high, had been on edge. Like the women that he usually stalked down the streets, he felt some kind of unnerve that something was nearby, something evil. Marina’s visits began to feel inescapable. In which, they really were. He had come face to face with her everyday. Each kill of her,

it began to feel old, repetitive. Getty couldn't stand it. Everything about her drove him absolutely nuts. He couldn't tell if he had actually even killed her the day before. His mind a blur, and his hands constantly shaking, he hadn't set out to find another "damsel" to taunt.

Getty sat down on his bed, rubbing his hand over his forehead. The sweat stuck onto his hand. Marina hadn't appeared today. Not yet, at least. It had only been a week and some days, but yet, he was beginning to expect her visits. He was starting to expect to kill her every night. The evidence always disappeared the next day. Her blood didn't stain the walls or flooring, but it stained him in a mental way. A spirit she was perhaps, made to get revenge. Getty couldn't wrap his head around it.

Her squeals and cries didn't seem as pleasurable anymore. They felt dreadful, and they hurt his ears. She'd say little phrases before she soon died. Or, he would hope that she died. Getty felt apprehensive. Each time he killed her, he felt this new feeling, *guilt*. It was such a new feeling. He never felt bad. He never wanted to turn himself in for his wrong-doings. Yet, her constant appearance hurt him in some kind of way. A brutal and harsh way. A slap to the face.

Getty jumps up from his bed to the sound of a footstep. He recognized it, as he did the last seven days. Getty slowly steps to the door, staring down the dark hallway. He sees her. Marina smiles. She had seemed to get more disfigured as the days went by,

her eyes twitched and her smile became wider. Getty frowns, he hated that this sight scared him. He hated her. He despised seeing Marina Moore's face. He couldn't even escape her outside, her missing posters plastered everywhere. Her body hadn't even been found yet, she wasn't even announced dead. She was a nobody, Getty thought. A little devil, Getty believed. Getty's masculine ego told him that he was better than this. But, the fragile part told him to be fearful about whatever she was. He couldn't face these fears. The fear of being caught was now something he considered. What would they do to him in jail? He feared this paranormal thing. There was no way this was simply just human Marina, scared Marina, helpless Marina. No, this was more.

Marina begins to walk closer to Getty, her smile unwavering. Getty stiffens. He walks backwards. Marina begins to giggle, a terrible sound in Getty's ears. He's being played by his own game. Getty walks back over to his bed when Marina is in his room. Marina comes to a stop and continues laughing.

"You're not as strong as you look. You're weak, Getty. You're nothing without our deaths." Marina states in a derisive tone, her smile serving as another jab to his ego.

Getty looks at her with disgust, anger. Something ugly builds up inside him. He grabs one of his pillows, staring at her with sharp, brown eyes.

“You’re no Ted Bundy, Richard.” Marina grits her teeth together. Her voice is scratchy, deep, and chilling.

Getty tightens his grip onto his pillow. He charges towards Marina and slams her into his bedroom wall. Getty pushes the pillow against her face, muffling her screams. Marina kicks Getty repeatedly, but he’s far too strong. Marina scratches his arms to attempt to get the pillow off of her face, but he pushes down further until getting a breath is impossible. His ego builds up once again, seeing her pathetic attempt at survival. Getty lets Marina flop on the floor after he’s finished suffocating her.

It had been about three weeks now. Getty couldn’t sleep, he couldn’t even eat. Getty tried to numb the fear out with alcohol, but he could only see her. She felt less of a hallucination now, she was routine. He couldn’t take it anymore. Her constant screams, mockery, and that damn smile. Getty couldn’t sit in the dark alone anymore. She came back everyday, no matter how he killed her. She followed him, her eyes and body.

Getty steps onto the wooden chair. He stands tall on it in his bedroom. Getty grabs the rope tied in a tight noose. He has tears streaking down his face. Marina watches from the corner of his room. She’s nodding with a big smile on her face. Getty, a man without pride now. A man with a puddle of pee in his pants.

Getty's mind was blank. It took a knife and a day to take Marina Moore's life. It took her three weeks to get him to take his own life, for good. Getty stares at Marina. Marina doesn't move, but she waits.

"Coward." Marina whispers, and her voice echoes in Getty's mind. A coward. He was a coward. He would've never killed a man. No, he was far too weak. Getty puts his head through the noose in shame.

Marina begins to whisper "Coward" over and over again until it seems to get into his head. Getty lets out a sob, one like a little boy. Getty trembles, the chair rocks under his weight. Marina laughs at the sight. Getty cries at her laughs. Getty slowly moves his right foot off of the chair. Then, with one swift movement, Getty kicks the chair over.

9-12th
Winner

Falcon Santelices 1

The Signal

By Jeremy Fa

Erroc sat in his bunker doing the same mundane and useless task as always. Listening. Listening for a sign of any sort of life. Extraterrestrial or not. He hoped for anything at this point. It had been years since the dormant nukes left at the bottom of the oceans and in abandoned missile silos exploded, mutating the Earth. Since his birth, all he has known is this bunker, gray and cold, just like his parents' lifeless bodies stored in the bunker's walls, since leaving to bury them was risky. Ever since he could talk and read, listening was his job, assigned by his parents. Constantly without stopping, he just listened and listened. They all did. The static became his white noise. He didn't understand why they always listened, since others being alive was farfetched. However, he didn't care at this point, it just became the normal sound of the world. Inside the bunker and outside the bunker. The constant static was the only thing that kept him sane after his parents died. Until today.

“Hello...come...we...dy...static...take...off...”

Erroc shot his head up off his desk. Words. Real words. Not static. He quickly replayed the message.

“Hello...” He turned it off without listening to the rest.

“People! Other people,” Erroc quickly pinpointed the location of the radio signal on the large map taped against the wall. It was only 16 hours away from him. If he left now he could make it there by tomorrow around noon.

“Civilization!”

He grabbed as much supplies as he could and placed them into his sack. The supplies consisted of rope, food, a flashlight, first aid kit, water, alarm clock, knife, map, and walkie talkie. He placed his gas mask on his scarred face, slicking his cinnamon colored hair back. He

grabbed his gloves, threw on a black hoodic and cargo pants. Then, for the first time ever, grabbing his AR, he opened the bunker hatch.

The sounds of the world quickly overcame his ears, almost hurting them. Creatures whistled, water flowed, and wind blew through the trees scattered across the landscape. The world seemed normal. Nothing how his parents described it to him. Sure, it was seemingly desolate, but the world wasn't the wasteland described to him. Instead of grey and dead looking, almost like his parents, the world seemed full of life.

He pulled himself out of the entrance, grasping onto the brown dust above his head. The grass tickled his hands. Closing the hatch, he took a deep breath and gazed at the sky above. The sun shone through the clouds, blinding him. Looking anywhere blinded him though, since the light within the bunker was almost nonexistent, the only illumination cast by the radio transmitter. He plucked a piece of the grass out of the ground and bit down on it. He quickly regretted that decision.

The alarm clock blared from his sack. It was noon. He quickly grabbed it out of his bag and turned it off, but it was too late. Something slithered through the greenery ahead of him. He carefully watched as the grass parted, the creature slowly moving closer and closer to him. He grabbed his knife out of the sack crouched towards the ground, his eyes steady on the parting grass ahead, the creature seemed to be moving faster. It was only around 3 feet away from him now. His grip tightened on his blade. Finally, it reached him.

Erroc lifted the knife above his head and struck it down into the creature. The slithering quickly stopped. He lifted the creature up off the ground. It looked like a noodle. He methodically ran his hand down the creature, feeling its slick body. Erroc had the thought of biting into it, but remembered the last time he tried that. Instead, he looped the creature through

one of the belt loops on his pants. He rose from the ground and started his trek towards the signal. As long as he kept walking straight from his bunker, he would arrive at the civilization.

The static was still almost a constant in his ears, even without sitting at the radio and listening for signs of life. The static combined with the sounds of the world quickly overwhelmed Erroc. His mind quickly became boggled by the noises, paired with the constant thoughts racing around his head. Why was the world not what he had been told it was for years?

His head ached as he continued his walk towards the signal. He reached the large group of giant broccoli and slumped down against one. Erroc grabbed his clock out of his bag and checked the time. It was now one o' clock. He only had 15 hours left till he should arrive. He looked into the dense collection of trees ahead of him. Even with the sun shining above, it was still almost pitch black in there. Something was shuffling through the forest.

He attached the flashlight to his rifle and aimed it through the forest. Cautiously, he entered the forest.

Fallen leaves and sticks crunched below his feet. Something darted behind a tree ahead. Erroc steadied his aim on the tree and meandered towards it. The thing didn't seem to leave from behind the tree.

Once Erroc reached the tree, he slowly walked around it, his finger placed on the trigger. He reached the other side and found...nothing. Nothing was behind the tree.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

A liquid fell on Erroc's head. He slowly looked up into the tree and found a creature, sitting in the tree, its eyes yellow. Crimson fluid dripped from its mouth. Erroc stumbled back and went to shoot, but the creature was too fast. As soon as Erroc clicked the trigger, the creature had already vanished.

After that, Erroc moved faster through the forest, trying to not be the creature's next prey. He could faintly see the sun getting lower and lower as he ran through.

Finally, Erroc found the edge of the forest. He exited it and checked his clock. 19:00. According to his map, he should reach the point of the signal in 8 hours. He looked up from his map and saw a worn down shack near the forest edge. He meandered over to it, his legs weak from the long walk and run he endured in the forest. The shack was just enough to give him a “comfortable” place to rest.

The next morning Erroc arose to a snarl from behind the shack. He peered over the sad excuse of a wall, crumbling as he looked and saw a big brown ball. It unraveled and rose taller than Erroc and slowly climbed over the wall. Erroc quickly scampered backwards, hitting his head on the doorframe of the shack. He reached down and grabbed his AR steadying the aim on the creature. *Click*. He pulled the trigger.

Bullets flew from the gun, piercing the creature's flesh. It slumped over, its head landing on Erroc's lap. It winced as Erroc locked eyes with it. He could sense its pain. It breathed shakily and slowly, the breathing ended. He carefully scooted out from under its behemoth of a head. He looked down at it. What was it snarling at? Why did it not attack him as soon as it saw Erroc. Erroc exited out of the shack and continued on his path.

He reached a hill so steep he almost had to crawl up it. Once he made it over he spotted it ahead. The compound. Its towers shot up 100s of feet and its gate was at least 50 feet tall and 100 feet wide. He checked his map. That's where the signal should have come from. He ran towards the gate, his energy fleeting as he got closer.

He fell to his knees in front of the grand gate of the compound. For the compound possibly brimming with life, it was eerily quiet inside.

“Help!” He hollered, gasping for air. He crawled towards the gate and slouched next to it, opening his sack to grab water and food. His hands, body, and clothes were covered in the blood of the brown creature's flesh, and the other creature had rotted on his belt loop. He leaned his head back against the gate, and it slowly creaked open. He fell backwards and laid on the ground.

“What the,” Erroc looked around stunned.

He rose up off the ground and saw that there was no one. It was silent. The only sound he could hear was the dirt below his feet. He slowly walked through the gate, keeping his gun ready. He looked around at the walls of the compound, etched were names. The walls here, just like the walls in his bunker, were used as graves. He entered the compound's main building, and it was pitch black. A stench perforated his nostrils. He clicked on his flashlight.

The scene was horrendous. Blood was streaked across the floor. Bodies laid out, limbs thrown across the room. Their faces were frozen in fear. He analyzed some of the less mutilated bodies and found bite marks. Large bite marks. Marks that basically tore people's bodies in half. Something was wrong.

“People were here,” Erroc said, “They were just here and alive less than 24 hours ago.”

He moved quicker through the building, following streaks of blood into rooms. The rooms had even more horrific sights.

Bodies were laid out in an almost ritualistic manner. Incoherent words were transcribed on the walls in blood. He exited the last room and came to the top of the stairs to the basement. A faint red light glowed through the basement. A streak of blood guided him towards it.

He slowly followed the trail as his hopes quickly died. No one seemed to be left. He saw the red light blinking at the end of the hall. A radio. He pulled out his walkie talkie and talked into it.

“Hello,” his voice echoed down the hall back towards him. This was the radio he got the signal from. He approached it quicker. As he got closer he saw someone sitting in a chair in front of the radio. Her face was buried in papers.

Erroc grabbed her by the shoulder, lifting up her head. He turned the chair around and saw her face, or lack thereof.

Erroc stumbled back, but quickly got back up and analyzed the radio, pushing the chair out of the way. She had recorded the signal she sent out. Erroc pressed play.

“Hello, if anyone can hear me, don’t come help, we are dying. Listening to the static is the only thing that stops them from hunting you. Don’t take off your headphones.”

Erroc stood, stunned. That’s why his family never took off their headphones. The static was what protected them. Not the bunker. The radio powered off. The generator had ran out of fuel.

He ran out of the building and up the towers of the compound. He saw the creature he had seen in the forest, standing in front of the compound. Its eyes were yellow, but now that it was day, he could make out more features.

It stood on two hind legs, its arms eerily humanlike. Its face had gills and its body was sickly pale. Other than that, it seemed strangely human. It wiped blood off of its mouth and screeched. Seemingly, it was a rallying call. More of these creatures crawled out of the forest. They all locked eyes on Erroc.

As Erroc stood amazed, he realized he couldn’t hear the static in his ears anymore. All he could hear was the creatures, busting into the compound and crawling up the walls.

9-12th 2nd Place THE CALL

Anastasia B
9th grade

Mark was sitting on the couch and nearly falling asleep while watching his “favorite” gameshow. I say that because he’s always sleeping while watching it. If I asked him what one of the questions was, he would never know the answer. The last time he actually watched the gameshow was two years ago when my parents visited. Even then, he was talking to my parents the whole time, and so it doesn’t count. Regardless, the show was on.

Tonight was like any other night. Wake up early in the morning, head to my job as an accountant, get paid minimum wage, and then come home to see Mark sleeping. He *has* a job, but he has a night shift as a security guard, and so I rarely see him awake until the weekend.

The living room was dark, with only the light from the TV illuminating Mark’s face as he snored. I dropped my keys on the kitchen counter and flipped the lights on. After washing my hands, rather than making dinner, I chose to just pull out the freezer drawer and grab a tub of ice cream. *It’s a Friday, I deserve to relax.*

I slumped down on the couch next to Mark, and turned on *The Haunted Mansion*. I felt Mark move around a little, and then he adjusted his eyes to the light.

“You’re home already?”

“I always come home at this time.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you turn off my gameshow?”

“You never watch it anyway. Plus, it’s my time to relax now. You have to leave for work in two hours.”

“I do?” Mark quickly looked at his watch. “Shoot!”

Mark hopped out of the couch and I watched him shut the door to the bathroom right as I looked over. I looked back to the TV and began scooping out spoons and spoons of ice cream out of the bowl.

I flinched as my phone began playing the emergency alert system. The movie kept on playing as I checked what the alert was for. The message read:

20 year old Mariah Keys kidnapped. Last seen 2 hours ago in Oakland Homes neighborhood. Suspect is in a red SUV. DO NOT APPROACH IF SEEN, SUSPECT IS ARMED. Contact emergency services if seen IMMEDIATELY.

This message didn't warn me. It didn't sound scary. Morbid, I know. Someone was *kidnapped*, but these messages come up on occasion. While I feel bad for the person who it happened to, they are never near me, and even if they are (like this time), I never see them. Then I feel guilty about not being able to do anything about it. So, I just looked up to the TV again, realizing that the movie just ended and was rolling the credits.

I lifted the remote and turned the TV off, then walked up to the front door, checking if there were any red SUVs driving around. None. Deciding it was late, I walked up the stairs and dropped onto my bed.

I lay in silence for twenty minutes, not being able to fall asleep. My phone then vibrates again. Same message, different location. I look at the location, Lunar Drive. Seeing this, I shot up and quickly walked across the hallway to look out the window. I panned from the left to the right slowly, trying to find a red SUV amongst the many cars lined up across the sidewalks. At first I saw nothing, but then I spotted a red SUV parked along the sidewalk closest to me. *There it is*. Of course, I began dialing 911 on my phone, as I stood there staring at the vehicle.

"This is 911, what is your emergency?"

"I see the vehicle that has been described in the emergency alert system, the red SUV."

"Yes...what street are you on?"

"Lunar Drive, Oakland Homes neighborhood."

"We will dispatch officers to your location. Make sure to turn off all of the lights if they aren't off already, and make sure *all doors are locked*."

"Yes ma'am, thank you."

The call ended, and I continued staring out the window, then realizing that the front door might be unlocked. After checking all of the doors, I then headed back to the window to see if the SUV was still there. It was. Except this time, a man left the vehicle, then headed towards the sidewalk, towards my house. *Oh god, please don't get closer*. The man didn't stop. He came so close to the house that I couldn't see him from my angle. *The front door!* I grabbed the hardest thing I could find-a waterbottle-and stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at the front door. Someone began banging against the door, and I ran. I sprinted to the most secretive place I could find, the attic across the hallway.

After pulling down the ladder and hoisting myself in there as fast as possible, I pulled the trapdoor closed, and sat silently in the room, which was my home office. All of sudden, I heard a crunch as the door was likely knocked to the ground. My hands began shaking, and my breath became faster and faster. It took effort to stay silent as I started breathing even harder. I listened quietly to the faint footsteps of the intruder, not knowing what he may have been doing on the first floor of the house. Then, he began walking up the stairs, which is when I began clenching my hands around the waterbottle, willing to use it for defense. I heard the intruder walk around

the second floor a couple of times until I heard what I had feared. He stopped walking. Right below me. *Oh god oh god oh god oh god, don't kill me.* Then it happened. The door was pulled down. I sat on the opposite direction of the hole from where the ladder was, and I sat there shaking. My eyes began to water, and I sat there, a scared, weak accountant. The footsteps got louder and louder as the intruder walked up each step, until I saw his head rise from the floor.

Adult Winner

Category: Adult, Age 32

about 3,350 words

Unplanned Vacation

by Adriane R!

Jasmine stood at the baggage carousel, clutching and twisting the straps on her leather bag. The 12 hour flight left her feeling anxious and tired, but they made it. She was finally in America. This was her first time traveling abroad and it was intimidating. Her gaze found Cleo who was half grunting at a vending machine, shaking it slightly, trying to get it to release whatever she's already purchased seconds off the plane. Cleo had travelled to America several times before, but this time, she dragged Jasmine along. Jasmine managed a half smile when her friend finally managed to wrestle a snack cake from the machine. Cleo swiped her brown curls out of her face with triumph. She looked like she had won the lottery, Jasmine just felt an impending sense of dread.

At the rental agency, the clerk handed the keys to Jasmine skeptically eyeing her passport and foreign license. Cleo ignored the interaction and sucked a lollipop at the TV. An early snow was falling on the area. Jasmine eyed the weather report, jiggling the keys in her hands.

"Are you sure you don't want to get a room nearby?" Jasmine asked hopefully.

Cleo popped her candy out of her mouth and pointed it at Jasmine, "Nah, I didn't plan extra funds for that. Besides, you've been driving for a year now." As she popped her lollipop back in her mouth she mouthed a wet "Cheerio" in an exaggerated accent at the clerk and hefted her bag on her shoulder towards the exit. Jasmine rolled her eyes at her, apologized to the clerk and left quickly following her into the cold, dusky evening to their car.

Jasmine fiddled with the nav system and gently led the car onto the exit road. "I don't understand why you haven't learned to drive yet, you're nearly twenty-five." Cleo sighed dramatically and tossed her candy stick out of the window.

"I don't need to learn how to drive. I can just take the train or the bus everywhere."

"Not here, you can't." She bit her lip and squinted into the dark ahead of her on the road, the smallest of snowflakes had begun to fall. Cleo pulled out an AUX cord and plugged her phone into the car, blasting her pop country music for all of Colorado to hear. Jasmine tapped the steering wheel and bent closer to the dash, trying to make out the bright white lines on the increasingly darkening roads.

The snow swirled thickly in front of the car as the music blared throughout. Jasmine squinted and turned the radio down to see better. Cleo huffed in the carseat beside her, flicking through her socials on her phone. She whined loudly and tossed her phone at her feet. "There's no signal in this stupid state."

"Did you make sure to switch your phone to international?"

"Well, Duh. It was working when we landed and it suddenly stopped."

Jasmine looked at the nav unit on the center console, it was flashing a bright 'out of network' sign. She grimaced and tried to restart the unit, clicking buttons until the screen wouldn't respond anymore. Her car mate grew increasingly irritated, needling Jasmine, trying to give advice. Jasmine ignored her and looked out the windshield. The storm outside raged; blocking her vision of the road. Was she even on the road anymore?

A flash of grey darted in front of the car, causing her to swerve the car to the right and sent them careening into a ditch. The last thing she heard was a loud crunch and pop as the airbags deployed and hit her in the face.

When she opened her eyes again she was facing Cleo; who looked deathly still. Cleo's head was lolled over to the side on the spiderwebbed passenger window, blood congealed on her forehead and slowly dripped down the side of her pale face. "Cleo..." Jasmine choked out. A

streak of pain shot through her neck as she tried to lift her head. She reached out to touch Cleo. Still warm, felt like a pulse. Good. "Cleo?" She asked loudly and exhaled when Cleo moaned.

"Wait—" Cleo's eyes popped open in surprise and her face twisted into pain as she reached her hand up to her head. Blood ran down her fingers and Cleo's mouth made an O. "Are we dead?"

"Better not fucking be," Jasmine replied unbuckling herself and reaching into her leather bag for her phone. Outside, the snow had started to pile on top of the car and the cold began to seep into the car. Jasmine fumbled the passkey onto her lockscreen and punched the emergency dial button. "No service" the phone responded. Jasmine shrieked in frustration.

"Could you cut it out?" Cleo, still clutching her head in one hand, checked her phone. Again, "No service" lit up across the screen. "Damnit." She slammed herself into the door trying to open it. Stuck. She sucked in a breath and looked at Jasmine with panicked eyes. "What do we do now?"

Jasmine pushed the airbag away from her and craned her neck towards the road. The car was nose-down in a ditch. She released her seat belt and pushed herself into the backseat. The rear door opened under her hands. She stumbled out; Cleo slithered out beside her into the snow. Cold air whipped at both of the women, sending shivers down their spines. Cleo stomped out of the ditch to the road and stuck her thumb out.

"What are you doing?" Jasmine hissed at her.

"I'm trying to get us a ride, since you crashed the car."

"Since *I* crashed the car?"

"Mmyep, you were the only one driving. What the hell happened anyways?" Cleo turned to look at Jasmine. Jasmine clutched her arms and trembled.

"I don't know. I was trying to see the road and then something ran in front of the car."

Cleo rolled her eyes. "Of course, I should have known better than to let you drive."

Jasmine felt tears prickle at her eyes. Cleo sighed. "Okay, it doesn't look like anyone is coming, let's go back to the car with our stuff and attempt to bundle up. Okay?" She dropped her arm and walked back to Jasmine, caressing her arms softly and turned them back towards the car.

Jasmine fumbled the keys out of the ignition and unlocked the trunk for Cleo who stood impatiently by to grab their suit cases. Headbeams reflected in the mirror and blinded Jasmine. Two car doors slammed shut.

"Hello, out there?" A shrill voice called out. "Anyone down there?"

"YES!" Cleo shouted back and bounded up out of the ditch.

"Cleo, Wait—"

A spindly woman crested the ridge and stared down at wreckage, tutting at them. A small, portly man with wisps of hair blowing in the wind stood next to her, his glasses barely hanging onto the bridge of his bulbous nose. Cleo stumbled backwards at the sight of them catching herself in Jasmine's outstretched arms.

"Well now," the old woman said, crossing her arms. "Fell into a bit of a snare did you?" The man tottered over to the girls, grabbed their bags, and helped them out of the ditch onto the side of the road.

"Are you two okay?" He peered at both of them, eyeing them up for apparent injuries, his eyes darting past them at the wreck below. "How long have you been out here?" His eyes bulged with panic and concern.

Cleo swooned into her rescuer and acted faint. "Oh gosh, I don't even know. I think it's been hours." *Tut.*

The willowy woman snapped and squinted at the still steaming car. "Well dears, let us take you in, warm and feed you. Can't have you out here in this horrible storm." She turned her back on them quickly and trudged to a decrepit BMW parked on the edge of the road.. Jasmine followed behind the couple, twisting the strap on her leather bag. The man shook fresh snowfall out of his thinning black hair and cupped his hands around his mouth and breathed into them, waiting for Jasmine to catch up to them.

The doors of the car closed around them, encasing them in warmth. The man shifted uncomfortably in the driver's seat, "This here's my wife Katherine," She waved a hand nonsensically at him. "I'm Edgar. We live up the road just a ways, you can stay with us until the storm passes and we can get a wrecker out here." *Tut.*

Cleo chatted away at the older couple on the way to their home. Katherine tutted back in response. Edgar nodded along, half listening with two shaky hands on the wheel and sweat dripping from his brow. He steered the car down a dark, gravel road.

Jasmine nervously glanced at the road behind them. Katherine caught her eye in the rearview mirror. "A couple hundred acres. T'was my granddaddy's land." Her stern grey eyes flicked away, something like a smirk played at her thin old lips and made Jasmine uneasy. "Generations of us have lived and died on this land. Edgar and I are the last ones left." She rested a thin frail hand on Edgar's meaty thigh. He nodded and white knuckled the wheel. "It's not much in the dark and cold, but you should see it in the morn'. A full view of the mountains."

Jasmine squinted through the car window trying to place the mountains, all that she found were swirls of snow and darkness. The car pulled up to an older house, two story, shutters battened down, screen door creaking in the wind. Cleo exclaimed about the architecture, cooing

over the old style of the house and its attic windows. Jasmine overheard a mention of tuberculosis in the late 19th century.

The old couple led them onto the porch, ushering them out of the wind, while Edgar fumbled with his keys in the front door. The inside of the house was damp and drafty. Katherine led them into the kitchen for tea while Edgar started the fire in the living room. Firelight flickered against photos in frames: married couples, women with babes on their hips, elderly. The fashion of the house was that of a historical magazine. Woven carpets adorned the floors, knit blankets on a wooden ladder, a kettle steaming in the fireplace. The floors creaked under Jasmine's footsteps as she made her way to grab a mug from Katherine in the kitchen. Edgar followed quickly with the steaming kettle. The hot tea in her hands warmed her whole body when she took a sip.

Katherine lit a candle and placed it on an old kitchen island. "Shall we make something to eat? You must be starving." Edgar nodded nervously in her direction while stifling a trite laugh. Cleo placed a hand over her stomach and agreed, looking towards Jasmine.

Jasmine glanced away from Cleo and turned to face the sweaty man. "I'm actually very tired and could use a bath, would you mind?" Cleo moaned, setting her tea down harshly. *Tut.* Edgar glared at his wife and revealed to Jasmine a long hallway that led upstairs to a small platform with a singular bedroom and tiny restroom. He followed her shortly with her suitcase setting it down inside the small room. "American's really don't like baths do they?" She said, staring at the tiny tub. Edgar shrugged past her and handed her a fresh towel that smelled of cedar from a hideaway linen closet behind the door. Jasmine wrinkled up her nose at the smell but thanked him politely and locked the door on his exit.

She sat on the edge of the tub, thumbing through her phone looking for service. One bar. Not a lot, not enough to use data, but enough to get a few messages from her mum worried that Jasmine hadn't reached out in a while. She tried to send a text to her explaining the snow storm and that she was okay, but it wouldn't send. She audibly sighed in frustration.

The tub faucet looked foreign to her; a singular handle pointed downwards and a spout, caked in limescale. She undressed and looked her body over in the small oblong mirror above the sink. She looked tired and wary. Her pale cheeks were stripped pink from the cold winds and her hair was in a disheveled plait on her shoulder. She combed out her hair and sat in the small tub. The water was tepid at best, felt gritty on her skin, and chilled fast due to the drafty house which forced her to get out earlier than she wanted. Over the clamour of the tub draining she thought she heard a thud from downstairs. She stiffened as she became aware of a shuffling of feet and then eerie silence echoed as the last of the water in the tub drained out.

She dressed from her suitcase and slid her boots on. Subtle sounds of chopping came from the kitchen as she opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Her shoulders relaxed. She tried to make herself stand tall, slung her leather bag over her shoulder and she made her way downstairs to the kitchen. Katherine stood over a boiling pot on a gas stove; tossing aromatics in a broth. The food smelt wrong. Blood oozed off of the cutting board onto the island countertop and made Jasmine sick to her stomach. Whatever Katherine was cooking, Jasmine wanted no part of.

"Hello dear," Katherine said with her back turned to her. Jasmine jerked away from the kitchen island Katherine's voice startling her back to her senses. "Was the bath to your liking?" Jasmine rubbed her aching shoulders. The cramped tub would not allow her to soak her whole body at a time so she'd resorted to awkward positions trying to keep her body warm throughout.

"Fine, thanks." Edgar and Cleo were nowhere to be found.. "Um, where has Cleo and Edgar gone?" Katherine hesitated over the pot.

"Cleo went to lie down in the guest room down the hall." She flicked her wrist in a direction past the kitchen. "I haven't a clue about Edgar though. Would you be a dear and grab an onion out of the pantry?" Jasmine looked around her, *Tut*. "The large door just behind you, dear."

Jasmine turned and stood facing a small door; tall as the ceiling but narrow. She peered in cautiously. Pantry items were stacked from floor to ceiling. She found an onion and placed it on the kitchen counter. "You certainly have a lot of food for just the two of you. Not go to market much?"

"Oh no, we go rarely. Just about once a month or so to stock up on staples." Staples, Jasmine thought, more like end of the world prepping. Katherine threw the blood soaked cutting board and knife into the sink with a clang and dug out a second set to set on the island and began chopping the onion. Jasmine stepped back towards the small door watching Katherine and hugged herself, nervously looking around the kitchen. The kitchen was unsettlingly large. Herbs and spices filled dowels near the window to dry, pots hung from the ceiling.

Edgar shuffled back into the room, sweating profusely and beet red in the face. *Tut*. Katherine looked at her husband with a raised eyebrow and he nodded, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing his brow. "Guest room's all set up for you upstairs, opposite the bathroom." Jasmine cocked her head quizzically at him. *Tut*. He looked towards his wife who was scowling down at the onions she was cutting. "What? Is something the matter?" *Tut*. He glanced back at Jasmine.

"I'm sorry, it's just that Katherine said that the Guest room was down this hall here?" She pointed in the direction of the room Katherine mentioned.. Edgar's eyes bulged like a boggling

rat. "Right, yes, well. Uh, change of plans I guess then... The room down the hall isn't, uh, suitable." He tried to contain his nervousness to no avail. *Tut.*

"Okay, I'll uh, just grab my other bag and go to see Cleo." Jasmine turned to go up the stairs to grab her suitcase. Edgar grabbed her wrist.

"I'm really sorry about this, Miss." His eyes narrowed at her and he licked his chapped lips. Jasmine tried to wrench free of his grasp. The wife walked around the island slowly, holding the kitchen knife low to her waist. Jasmine panicked and pulled open the pantry door, slamming it into the man's face. He yelped and released her, holding his hand over nose gushing blood. Jasmine pushed past him and yelled out for Cleo down the hall where the raw-boned woman said she had gone.

She screamed Cleo's name, opening doors and looking inside each one for her. A second bathroom, a pristine office, and then a dark room covered in splotches and plastic. "Cleo?" Footsteps echoed down the hall behind her. She ducked into the room and locked the door behind her. They banged on the other side of the door. A heavy wooden table stood in the middle of the room. She pulled it over and blocked the door. Her hands came away sticky and warm. In the dim light she held them up, a thick, dark liquid ran down her fingers. Her skin prickled and every hair on her body stood up.

Her heart threatened to pound out of her chest. She slapped at the light switch. Red, blood, red, drying on her hands. The table was covered in a visceral mess of blood. She stepped away from the table in disbelief, bumping into something swaying behind her. She turned and screamed. A soft and tepid body was hung upside down by the feet, naked and gutted. She looked at the brown mop of hair on the head. "Cleo." She sobbed, staring at the curls covering

her face. "Oh god no." Cleo's throat slashed and drained. Jasmine backed away from the lifeless body and ran to the other side of the room.

Cleavers, hooks, and surgical instruments littered the surfaces and walls waiting to be used again. A utility sink in the corner stood solitary and blood splashed, a bucket nearby contained innards, seeping and wet. Chemicals for cleaning sat on an open shelving unit. Tears ran down Jasmine's cheeks, she rubbed at her eyes. A small window to her right that she could never fit through. The killer couple banged on the door, inserted a key and twisted the knob.

A saw blade came whirling at Edgar's head when he managed to open the door enough to stick his head in. A sickening crunch of bone slumped him forward into the open space, head split. Jasmine dropped the motorized saw and vomited. Katherine pulled on Edgar trying desperately to get him out of the door frame, sobbing and wailing. Jasmine rushed the door and trapped her captor's arm in the door frame. She slammed her body against it and heard the snap of bones. Katherine howled. Jasmine pulled the table further back and opened the door to Katherine cradling her dead husband, her right arm limp and crooked at her side. She looked up at Jasmine with wet, red eyes in disbelief. "Tut." Jasmine spat as she stepped over her. She ran back to the kitchen, the pot on the stove bubbling over. Bits of grey meat clung to the edges of the pot. Jasmine set a metal canister of cleaning chemicals next to the open flame and flipped all the other gas valves open. She walked out the front door into the snow.

When emergency services arrived they found a pale young woman stained with blood standing in front of the old house on Phagein Rd. The house was engulfed in flames. The fire department responded to a call from a neighbor concerned about a house fire. Paramedics rushed

to the woman with a medkit and blankets. Jasmine stood unflinching despite the icy wind. Red and blue lights flashed in her eyes. The house ablaze, crumbled behind her. *Tut.*

The soft cheeks of Audrey Hoffman weren't prepared for the pain of the blow. It was almost as if Erwin Tandor's knuckles were one with her mandible for a brief, horrific, moment. "Just who do you think you are?" he sneered. All Audrey could do was gasp through her tears and bloody nose. "I don't know," she sniffled, cautiously beginning to back away from her bully. "Exactly!" Erwin shouted back. "You're just some dumb first grader. You'll *never* know." Erwin turned away and walked off, of course, light on his feet. "Wait!" Audrey squeaked after him, and he spun back around. "You want more of this?" Erwin smiled wickedly and held up his fist. "Who do *you* think you are?" The whites of his eyes became frozen snow and ice, but only for a second. "I'm *strong*," said Erwin. "Stronger than *you*."

Audrey rubbed her black and blue face, and dashed off to the schoolyard, ignoring the coos and pleas of the teachers and administrators pursuing her. They had no power. The very same thing would happen to her again tomorrow. If those in authority didn't have real power to stop the sufferings of the "little kids" like herself, who did? Certainly not the parents. Her mother worked over time, and she never knew her father. Audrey had known how to fend for herself from the very start. Maybe that's what life was about. Surviving, and fending for yourself. But in order to accomplish that, one needed to be *strong*. Animalistically strong.



Micheal was higher than every eagle that soared the planet in his mother's hands as she held him above the chattering crowd at Metropolitan Local Zoo. "Closer, mommy, closer," the little one babbled. "I'll try," his mother answered hesitantly. It took some pushing and squeezing on Mrs. Jones's part to make it all the way up to the cage, but she made it. The gigantic glorious beast glowered, glaring at the sweaty tourists and families that gaped at him. There was a plaque on his cage that read, *Ajax, African Lion, King of the Beasts*. Micheal's eyes sparkled with wonder, and he smiled ear to ear at the thought of being called "king of the beasts." The only thing that stood between Micheal, and the king of the beasts were the cold bars of metal that caged the lion in. Micheal jerked forward, reaching his tiny arm closer..closer.. A frightened squeal escaped the boy's mouth as he reflexively pulled back. The lion had pounced on the bars of his cage, snapping his heavy mandible. His cold and kingly gaze was fixed directly on Micheal. A majority of the crowd around the lion cage had cowered elsewhere, whispering something about a savage beast. "Foolish child," Micheal's mother placed him back on the ground as she scolded him. "You should *never* place your hand near the cage of a wild animal."

Micheal pouted all the way home from the zoo, sorrowfully wishing that he had gained the favor of the jungle kingdom's ruler. He felt a weight on his stomach. It wasn't fear. Micheal knew he was safe now. The weight was much too cold and steely to be considered disappointment. It was shame. Not because Micheal had been scolded by his mother in public, that was something he had grown very accustomed to. When Ajax the lion bared his teeth in Micheal's direction, Micheal had been *scared*. He couldn't be *scared* of a lion, even if it *was* the king of the beasts. Getting scared was for babies. No, Micheal just knew in his heart that he had to be the one to *hunt* the lion. Show it who's boss. Because everyone died, but only the weak died a death of cowardice.



Kelly bit her dry and cracked lip as the battered truck she had owned since was fifteen rattled across the woodlands. She hadn't been back to her aunt's cabin since the Thanksgiving before last. (Kelly couldn't make it last year due to the unforgiving fleet of snow that walled her in.) She wished that she was visiting for the holidays. Instead, she was on her way to a funeral.

On the sweltering late August morning it happened, Aunt Estelle rang her six times, but Kelly had been operating a wood chipper at the lumber mill, so she didn't pick it up until the very end of the day. After Kelly came home, (where there was decent cell service), she returned her aunt's call. "Jill's gone." Kelly's heart practically stopped. "What? What do you mean she's *gone*? I thought she was at summer camp." No response. Kelly tried to swallow the boulder that managed to find its way into her throat. Did the line cut out? "She was supposed to be back from Camp Vestri two months ago. Apparently, some sort of batshit forest fire started the night before she was supposed to come home. The staff has been looking everywhere. *We've* been looking everywhere. Not a trace. The authorities decided that it was time to..." my aunt choked up. "Proclaim her dead." The color drained from Kelly's face, and her thoughts melted into pure static. "My baby's been reduced to ash.." Aunt Estelle was in hysterics.

Jill was only sixteen when it happened. Kelly didn't want to imagine what it was like to die at sixteen years old. Kelly could still remember how Jill would dash to the seat next to her every Christmas and Thanksgiving. Somehow, Kelly never lost track of all of the pictures, letters, and crafts that Jill had made her. If you asked her to, Kelly could recite Jill's favorite color (purple), favorite animals (penguins and moose), and best friend (it changed from year-to-year, but her most recent one was named Red.). Even though Kelly wouldn't have traded the treasure of a girl for all the money in the world, the tears never came. Kelly just *couldn't* believe that Jill was dead, despite the fact that all of the evidence was there. Forest fires were bitches that inhaled wood trees and cabins faster than five-year-olds inhaled macaroni and cheese. It was no secret that the fires inhaled people even faster.

Kelly shook the image from her head. There was still six hours left in her journey to Aunt Estelle's cottage, and she couldn't afford to crash her truck. She deeply inhaled, and caught a glimpse of her slightly wrinkled face in the rearview mirror, framed by a light brown bun streaked with gray. Aunt Estelle never failed to mention how stunning her verdant green eyes were. Kelly tried to reroute her train of thought, but instead, she accidentally rerouted her truck instead. Which wrong turn did she make? Her truck was just managing to squeeze between crowds of dying pines, branches brutally scratching against the window. Kelly tapped on her phone to open up her GPS, but the screen remained unchanged and black.

Kelly gasped in shock as her stomach took a leap at the sparky sound of a blown fuse. Or at least, Kelly thought it was a blown fuse. The smoke streaming through the cracked window of the truck made her cough. There was no doubt about it. The engine was broken. Kelly sighed, but remained calm. She knew she could fix this, but a two hour pit stop in the middle of God-knows-where was not exactly ideal for a long truck trip. Kelly popped open the bed of the truck, and it squeaked open like a tortured squirrel. Kelly's jaw hung open. Her suitcase and duffel bag took up all of the space in the truck bed. She was so used to having jump cables and repair tools stowed away, that she had forgotten she had taken them out. Kelly's heart began pounding, and she fought the urge to scream. But then again, she was so far away from society, that not a soul would hear it. All she had to survive on her own was some clothes, her reading glasses, her dead phone, and keys. Maybe there was an abandoned shack campground nearby. That wasn't uncommon in this part of the country. But that was a best case scenario. All Kelly could do was walk until she found some form of civilization. She'd be walking for miles, but if she waited for someone to rescue her, she'd be waiting even longer. Besides, Kelly was the type to take accountability and pull *herself* out of her own shitshow.

As she strolled through the woods, collecting her thoughts, the silky scent of pine faded away to a prickly odor similar to marujana. Or was it gasoline? Kelly couldn't tell, but it certainly didn't belong in the forest. She kept walking anyway. Perhaps this was only the beginning of her going mad.

Her journey continued, and the forest changed from a dark cage of trees closing her in, to a slightly more defined, yet still unkempt, path. The path continued for a few hours before reaching almost a solid wall of pines. Kelly's heart raced. Could this be the boundaries to someone's property? She squeezed her way through the pines, into a clearing. Kelly was shocked to find a battered chapel that probably hosted a congregation of twenty, at most. The white paint on its walls was chipping off, and the cross on the top of the building looked like it had been pulled from a windmill. Outside the church, was a sturdy metal sign with engraved letters that read: PASCAL LAMB CHAPEL. CHRIST IS OUR HOPE. It was unsurprising that the age-old sign had been graffitied, but the text that was crudely spray painted in black felt...off. **HAIL THE LION.** Kelly raised an eyebrow. A crazy person had definitely made a visit here. A druggie who "found God," and wanted to share it with the world. Kelly sighed, and hoped that there would be a stash of doomsday prepper supplies inside the church. She walked up to the church's double doors, and pushed them open with a creak that echoed through the sanctuary. At least 200 pairs of eyes laser focused on her. What kind of church was this?



The stares of the congregation only lasted a few seconds before Kelly squeezed in the pews among them. The preacher at the altar kept going like nothing had happened. The man was tall, and muscular. His baby blue shirt was faded with dirt, and his beard was messy and unkempt. He looked like most of Kelly's coworkers at the lumber mill. "The book of Peter read that the Enemy roams like a lion, watching for someone to devour. The only way we can escape the traps of the Devil is if we devour *him*. We must *become* the lion." A chorus of 'amens' resounded through the congregation. Kelly relaxed. Practically all of the pews were filled, which meant that *someone* could probably show her where she could get help. "We must cut *everything* out of our lives that lures into the jaws of the enemy. The longer we linger in worldly pleasures, the more sumptuous we are for the hungry beast. Anything that

even makes you *consider* the experience of submitting to temptations, *you must kill.*" Roars of agreement, amens, and monologues recited in tongues were chorused back. "I will conclude today's sermon with the reminder that the weak do *not* pass through the narrow gate. You are a predator. You are a lion."

The preacher came down from the altar, and nobody spoke a single word as they left the church. Kelly could hear the breeze passing through the branches of the pines. A few men lingered in the chapel, whispering among themselves. Kelly stood up in her pew, and started to approach them, but was met by a furious and scrunched expression, and a cock of the head towards the chapel doors. She obeyed and left. Most of the churchgoers had already wandered back off to the woods, but Kelly was able to quickly tap one member on the shoulder before she walked away. The woman turned around, her brown eyes creased with suspicion. She couldn't have been any older than 25. Her dirty blond hair was pulled tight in a low bun, and her body was draped in a knit brown sweater dress. "Excuse me ma'mm," Kelly began. "I'm so sorry to interrupt your Sunday, I know that you've probably got things to do and people to see, but my old truck broke down not far from here, and I really gotta hit the road for a personal matter. Could you maybe point me in the direction of a mechanic shop, or someone who can help me out?" The woman avoided eye contact with Kelly, and picked at her nails nervously. She didn't answer. "I'm sorry ma'mm, I didn't mean to offend you or nothing, I just..." The woman dashed back into the church building, her eyes practically glued open with shock. Kelly shook her head, confused. Maybe the woman had some sort of disability that prevented her from speaking. Kelly had a cousin like that, and had always felt embarrassed that she didn't know how to sign back and forth with him.

A few seconds later, the preacher came out of the chapel doors, and approached Kelly. He smiled warmly, his brown, slightly bloodshot eyes glazed with honey. "I'm so glad you came to the service today," he said, holding out his hand for me to shake. "I'm Pastor Micheal, I'm sort of the one who keeps things shaking around here." Kelly gladly shook his hand back, grateful to have found someone friendly. Of course, Kelly knew that it was only to try to convert her, but she knew an easy way out. She would just politely decline, get her car towed, and leave. "My name is Kelly, my phone's dead, and I need some help getting home." "Home!?" Pastor Micheal laughed. "Daughter, you *are* home." Kelly suppressed a sigh. She would get some help sooner or later. "So, you guys are Christian?" she asked. "We are the Church of Deliverance. We are Christian, and God has revealed to me that it is my calling to start a *new* church community, one that breaks boundaries and expands the horizons of modern Christian life." Kelly opened her mouth to ask for a phone to borrow, but Pastor Micheal spoke first. "My daughter in Christ Sarah was very distressed. She said that you were travelling?" "Yeah, just to see family. And it's really urgent. I really need your help," urged Kelly, careful not to abandon her polite tone. "Well, what's the matter?" Pastor Micheal coolly asked, as if he had heard about—and dealt with—every emergency in the world. "Well, if you must know, my cousin is dead. I'm travelling for her funeral," Kelly coldly stated before biting her lower lip. "Who was your cousin?" asked Pastor Micheal. "Her name was Jill. She was killed in a fire at Camp Vestri a few months ago." Pastor Micheal stroked his chin. "Jill Comptren?" Kelly just barely stopped herself from gasping, and stared agape at the pastor. "That's her, alright," said Kelly. "Did you know her?" she quickly added. Pastor Micheal laughed. "Walk with me," he said, gesturing into the woods. Kelly followed, hoping that since he had connections with Jill, that he could direct her to Aunt Estelle's place.

"Jill Comptren was dead, but now she is truly alive!" the pastor grinned as he led Kelly through the trees. "Being alive in Christ and being *alive* aren't the same things," Kelly reminded him. "We found her," Pastor Micheal reassured her. "Really!? What!? Can I talk to her!? Why haven't you called..." "Shhh..shh.." the pastor coaxed. "You'll see her in time. For now, let me explain how *you* can truly be alive too." "I didn't come here to convert to no religion. I came here to collect my niece, and bring her back to her family." "My child, she *is* with her family..." Pastor Micheal started to say something else, but Kelly paid no attention. "*No she's not!*" Kelly meant to sound menacing, but her voice broke, so it came out like a whine. The pastor stopped in his tracks, and swiveled his feet to face Kelly. Then he clutched her shoulders and whispered, "It will *not* be necessary for you to say a word, because they *will* see how *pure* and *reverent* your conduct is." Kelly's face flamed, and she tensed every one of her muscles. She wanted to say something like, "You *did not* just tell me to shut up," or "It's in your best interest to take your hands off of me *this second*," but nothing came out. It was like her brain misfired, and wouldn't let her lips articulate her words. The pastor continued to walk. "When we found your cousin, she was miserable. She was sobbing with great pain, she had lipgloss on her lips, and diamond studs in her ears. She was a lost sheep. But we brought her home. And with the help of my sister Audrey, we showed her who she *truly is*. A lion."

Pastor Micheal squeezed between a couple of trees, and Kelly followed behind him, revealing another clearing. A very large plot of dirt was surrounded by cut tree trunks, and there were hundreds of little wooden shacks lined up in rows. At the very end of the rustic neighborhood, lay a small stucco building. The two weaved among the rows, and stopped at one that was a few houses away from the stucco building. Pastor Micheal nodded to the house.

"Pay a visit to Audrey. She will help you clean up and find something decent to wear. I hope you will choose to follow the light. It truly *will* bring you peace and joy." Pastor Micheal walked off, leaving Audrey alone.

Her first instinct was to get the hell out of here. She had mistakenly wandered into some sort of fucked-up religious commune, and would be toast if she didn't become a permanent follower. But if Jill was here, Kelly would never forgive herself for not bringing her cousin back. If she got on the pastor's good side, maybe she would have a chance to quietly escape with Jill in a few weeks. Kelly inhaled deeply, and walked up to the wooden shack. The entire house had clearly been hand-built of hard wood and rusty nails. The walls grew a garden of splinters, and the low and flat roof was wet from rain. Kelly gently knocked on the knobless door three times. "Come in," a deadpan voice commanded.



The interior of the shack was almost bare. The two things inside were a wooden rocking chair and spinning wheel. The woman inside was doing some sort of embroidery in the chair. She had lightly tanned skin with ratty dark brown hair that flowed just past her chest. Her outfit was a dress that looked similar to a bedsheet, with a bright orange sash draped across her shoulders. "Are you.. Are you Audrey?" asked Kelly. The woman gritted her teeth and stood up. "Are you the newcomer?" the woman asked, her clenched teeth forcing itself into a smile. "I'm just here to collect my cousin and go home," Kelly honestly responded. "I'm certain that The Wise One explained that you are home." "Uhh.." before Kelly could think of a way to answer, the woman kept talking. "How much do you care about yourself?" Audrey's fake smile softened into an expression of concern. "How much do I care about myself?" Kelly echoed, her brow creasing with confusion. She had never been asked that before, and didn't know how to answer. "When was the last time you felt truly..*loved*?" The woman's eyes seemed to pinprick every bit of Kelly's being, and Kelly shuffled her feet on the floor, unsettled. She wasn't sure if she wanted to answer the woman's question. Not because the woman scared her, but because Kelly truly didn't know. "That one stumps a lot of people."

A more natural smile melted across the woman's face. "Do you know why God tracks our every move?" How many questions was she going to ask? "Because He *loves* you. He *wants* you to be loved, sister." Kelly shrugged. That's exactly what she'd been told in Bible School. Maybe this place was more normal than she thought it was, and they were just a bit..out there. "But the only way that you can accept that love, is by accepting others. And when we all accept each other, well..that's how The Kingdom of Heaven is built." Kelly just nodded and played along. She had been raised Christian, so she was used to hearing this kind of stuff. "Even if you are an outsider, I accept you," the woman's airy voice seemed to float into Kelly's heart. "My name is Audrey. I promise, we *will* get you to your cousin, and help you back to where you came from. We just ask that you do one thing." "What?" asked Kelly. "Come to our Spiritual tonight. Just have an open mind. Who knows, you may learn something new." "And.." "And after that, we'll bring you right back to where you came from." "Thank you," said Kelly, her shoulders relaxing as relief took her over. "Oh, and my name is Audrey. Don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything."



Kelly spent the rest of the day wandering among the odd village in search of Jill. Irritation continually built up in her. Only some came out of their houses, and Kelly would've known Jill's face. She had even asked a passerby, "Have you seen Jill Comptren around here?" The man just shook his head and grunted. Kelly sat on a bare patch of forest ground, and sighed. It did occur to her that the preacher may have been lying, so that he had more time to try and convert her. But if he was lying, he wouldn't have known Jill's first and last name on the fly. She *had* to be here, and Kelly would not rest until she found her cousin. It was her duty and purpose now. Kelly's heart gave a leap as she spotted something against the wall of the stucco building at the end of the neighborhood. Her hopes weren't very high, but they didn't need to be, because what she saw turned out to be exactly what she was hoping for.

Kelly hadn't seen a real wall-mounted payphone in years. Of course, the one mounted on the building was rusty, neglected, and likely hadn't been shown any love for some time. Kelly frantically searched her pockets for loose change. No luck. Her last hope was her bra. Kelly discreetly searched below her button down, and managed to find a singular quarter tucked behind the thick band of her brassiere. She thanked whatever higher power had

blessed her, and shoved the quarter in the slot. Then, Kelly thanked the same higher power that she was born into a generation that forced her to memorize phone numbers. Her Aunt Estelle's house phone was the first—and only number—Kelly had ever remembered. It had been drilled into her head from the minute she could be outside and alone with the door closed. Kelly very carefully punched the number, hoping with all her might that Aunt Estelle still answered her house phone. 2484345508 A piercing and static beep rustled through the speakers. Kelly cringed, but still clung to the hope that the phone was functional. The phone made the noise a few more times, and then a tinny and almost aggressive automated voice informed her: *The caller you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please leave a short message after the tone.* The obnoxious distorted beep sounded again, and Kelly stamped her foot and growled, "Fuck!" "Aunt Estelle, this is Kelly. I don't have much time to explain, but the truck's bit the dust—and I'm at this weird religious commune—if you can track the call, please come find me as soon as you can. I have reason to believe that they've got Jill, and she survived the fire. It sounds crazy, but—" *Time's up.* The automated voice spoke again, and the receiver rang obnoxiously. Kelly slammed the receiver back down, and stomped away.

The brash orange of the sunset was almost a compliment to the dusty brown of the dirt on the ground, and the strange pot-like smell returned to the air. People in entirely beige and brown yarns started leaving their huts, and making their way back into the woods. Out of the corner of her eye, Kelly caught sight of a short girl with lightly tanned skin, dimples, and sandy hair—"Jill!"

Kelly ran to her cousin like an Olympic runner determined to win gold. A shiny and perfect smile spread across the girl's face—her white gingham skirt flowing behind her. The two embraced, beyond overjoyed. "Are you alright?" Kelly hugged Jill tighter. They broke, and Jill replied, "I've been given food, shelter, clothing, and community. I could've been consumed in the fiery flames, before a savior came." She sounded like she was reading cue cards, but the urgent wideness in her dark eyes told Kelly that it was safer to play along.

"I wasn't aware that the newcomer was you!" Jill practically jumped into the air. "Usually, we don't allow newcomers in the village, but Pastor Micheal, our Wise One, says he likes you. He says there's something special about you. What did he say again..." Jill tapped her fingernails together, thinking. "That God has put Himself in your eyes. Yes, that's what he said. And *that's* why you should come to the Spiritual. Come on," Jill took Kelly's hand, and dragged her towards the woods. "Uhh...what *is* this Spiritual thing, exactly?" Kelly questioned. "It helps you open your heart and mind to God even more. I've never been before, but The Wise One says I'm ready. I can't believe I get to do it with *you!*" Kelly bit her lip, and began to sweat. What was she going to say? She had no proof that this Spiritual—that this *entire establishment* was anything abnormal. Yet—she felt in her gut—that something *evil* lurked behind it.



The chapel was dead silent—just like she had first found it. Yet, every pew was evenly filled with people. Everyone stood entirely motionless, barely moving a muscle. They were like mannequins, but glassy eyed and gently breathing. Kelly imagined that their heartbeats sounded mechanical. The smell of hot honey wafted through the chapel, the result of the many candles that were scattered around the sanctuary. Kelly and Jill were the last ones to file in, save for Pastor Micheal and Audrey. The footsteps of the two echoed across the aisle, like the faint chirp of a bird who hid their nest in the ceiling of a tunnel. Audrey stopped at the front of the altar, and took a seat in the front pew. Pastor Micheal continued his walk, and stood in the center, in front of the bare table. "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him," he plainly quoted to the crowd. "Who among you would like to be *godly*?" Every hand in the congregation mechanically reached for the sky. Kelly raised her hand, too, so that she didn't cause a scene. But as she held her arm up, something flashed through her mind. Kelly didn't remember much about her childhood, but right now, something pushed her...*forced* her to remember.

Kelly was back in Bible School, in the bright red children's room of a tiny Southern Baptist Church beyond the grasslands. The burly preacher read aloud from a children's picture Bible in a honeyed and intense Southern accent, his eyes scanning every little set of button eyes in the crowd.

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.''" "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "*For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*"

Kelly's stomach churned, and she quickly put her hand down. "We must mimic The Lord in *everything*," Pastor Micheal continued his speech. "We must die with The Lord, we must rise with The Lord. Thus, we must

sacrifice ourselves to The Lord.” Pastor Micheal knelt before the altar, and opened a drawer attached to the front of the table. From the drawer, he procured a single rusty nail. Not a nail used for woodworking or repairs, but one that resembled a pike. Along with the nail, the pastor also withdrew a hammer with a yellow rubber handle, and a flat metal brick for the body. He also pulled out a clay chalice, and a pile of leaves. Pastor Micheal placed the leaves inside of the chalice, and fixed his gaze on Audrey.

“Almighty God, have mercy on me,” Audrey’s light voice rang throughout the chapel as she stood up, and walked up to the altar. She knelt next to Pastor Micheal, and Pastor Micheal turned to the crowd. “Lead by example, all of you,” he gestured to Audrey with the rusty nail. All of a sudden, he slammed the rusty nail into Audrey’s forearm with the hammer. She wheezed as the spike protruded through her dirty skin, the metal tinted orange with fluid. Kelly squeezed Jill’s hand and stood up. This macabre act of blasphemy *couldn’t* be anything religious or righteous. This was a cult.



In a flash, the pastor removed the nail from Audrey’s throbbing arm. The gaping wound oozed with infection, and Audrey’s eye twitched, a force of some kind suppressing her tears. Kelly didn’t notice this, her eyes were on the door, grip set firmly on Jill. *They were getting out.* The faded ivory doors moved closer and closer, but a weight ever-so-slightly pulled them back. Audrey was holding onto Jill’s other hand, and Jill stopped to look back. Pastor Micheal moved his head to the three girls by the door, and drank from the cup. The noxious smell that had previously filled the forest now filled the room. “We are lions,” he said. “The lions must consume the enemy. *I know* that both of you truly want to be free.” “See?” Audrey held up her limp arm, the sanguine opening pulsating. “God won’t let me cry, because the pain is *good*.” “All of you guys...are *fucked up*.” Kelly yanked her cousin back, and pushed on the double doors. A barrier clanked against the divide, locking them in. Pastor Micheal now stood with them at the back, holding his hammer and nail. “Do something *good* for your cousin. Show her what it’s like to be *like God, knowing good and evil*.” Kelly remained silent, and guided Jill behind her back. Hatred pulsed through her soul, like black ink in water. She wanted this man to *die*. “I’m still waiting,” Pastor Micheal impatiently tapped his foot. Kelly convulsively gave Pastor Micheal a shove to the shoulder. He stood still, like a sturdy oak. “I was *counting on you* to make the right choice Kelly. I thought you were going to be a fierce lioness, like Audrey.” “Do not. Touch. Her,” Kelly threatened through a clenched jaw. “I promise, I won’t,” the pastor smiled. “*You* have to find someone important to you, to assist in your transformation. Clearly, that person is our own precious Jill.” “You can’t make me do this,” Kelly couldn’t stop her tears from flowing. Pastor Micheal moved closer, and whispered directly into Kelly’s ear, “There’s someone I want you to meet, daughter.”



Echoes of breathing could be heard in the chapel while Kelly was being dragged across the aisle like a dog on a leash. Of course, the attendees stared, but Kelly noticed that some of them had tears in their eyes. Her heart pounded like the nail that Audrey had taken in the forearm. Kelly’s brain melted at the thought of what might happen to her, and the mush that her brain had become proceeded to boil at the thought of what might happen to Jill. Kelly was dragged onto the altar, behind the table. Pastor Micheal pushed on the bare wall behind the altar, forcing a built-in door to protrude. The sound that drifted out of the door was a squealing sort of whimper, a very faint and quiet cry. Kelly’s heart dropped to her stomach. Would she be left behind the altar to starve?

Pastor Micheal was the first to enter the door, and led Kelly down a straight cement staircase. Kelly caught a glimpse of a grimacing Audrey closing the door behind them. The whimpers and whines got even louder as they descended toward an echoing chamber. “Do you keep people down here?” Kelly stammered. Pastor Micheal didn’t answer until they arrived at the lower landing, an unfinished cement basement with stained walls. “No, daughter,” the pastor replied. “The people keep *themselves*.”

Kelly did not listen to the pastor’s answer. She was regaining her feet, trying not to pass out at the only thing in the cold and damp room. A large metal cage, holding a quivering and starved lion. Upon seeing Kelly and Micheal, the lion pounced on the bars of its cage, desperately scratching. “Are you *becoming* the lion?” asked Pastor Micheal. “Or do you *belong* to the lion?” The animal shakily prowled around its prison, and Kelly was able to count every one of its ribs, and the ridges of its spine. Kelly took a deep breath, knowing that there had to be *some way* to get out of this. She looked Pastor Micheal in the eye, and asked, “Why?” The pastor’s expression creased with curiosity. “*Why* do you hurt people—and animals—like this?” Above the basement, I heard a slight vibration. “You are

more *hurt* now than you've ever known. You need the healing of Jesus Christ." A repeated squealing noise startled the lion even more, and it snapped its teeth. "Ajax is *mine* now, because *I am* the lion. You have two choices, daughter. Audrey is keeping a close eye on your cousin up in the chapel. However, because *you* are her spiritual guide, *you* are the only one who can truly transform her into the lioness she truly is. In that process, you too, will become a beast. Audrey is already the queen of beasts. She can do nothing about your indifference." Repeated banging and shouts shook the floorboards that held up the ceiling. Kelly didn't know how to think. "So, your choices are, *become the lion*, or *be devoured by it*." Pastor Micheal reached into the pocket of his khakis, and pulled out a bronze key.

Kelly spun around, and bolted back towards the stairs, but the pastor was too quick for her. He restrained her by the torso, applying an overwhelming amount of pressure on her ribcage as he dragged her across the cement floor. Micheal slammed Kelly against the bars of the cage. The beast's unlatched mandible framed Kelly's head. The lion's putrid breath filled her senses, and she could closely observe the rubbery texture of its gums. One of his elbows dug into Kelly's neck, and he restrained her feet with the weight of his boots. The pastor's other hand still gripped the key to the cage, where he was less than an inch away from penetrating the lock. Kelly tried to listen for more noises from above the basement, but all that met her was silence. It was clear that nobody was coming to rescue her, or Jill. "Don't you *want* to be stronger than the enemy? Don't you want to *become* the lion? Become *like the one true God*?" The pastor's breath uncomfortably blew into Kelly's ear. She only had one course of action. Kelly barely gasped out three words. "*Jesus was a lamb.*"



This was supposed to be mine. Jill admired the intricately marbled ceramic of the urn. Engraved on it were the words: *Strength in Life, Peace in Death.* Jill almost wished it was her, knowing that she couldn't have done what her cousin did. Kelly was the only reason that she was able to escape the commune on time. Well, Kelly, and.. Jill shook it off. What she did was not worth a second thought. Not until the trial.

Excruciating pain suddenly dug through her legs, and she stumbled backwards. The morticians had left her alone in the room to say goodbye. There was no one to catch her. Jill went limp and fell on her back, uncontrollably quaking and shivering as she pulled herself into an upright seated position. She found that her black maxiskirt was soaked in blood. She pulled the folds up. Engraved down her left leg were the words: **YOU KILLED THE QUEEN.** On her right, it read: **IT'S YOUR TURN.**

