# 2026 SCARY STORY WRITING CONTEST



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# *The Hugger*

by Beatrix T

One Thanksgiving afternoon, a girl named Evelyn was hiding in her room. The reason she was hiding was because she knew that at any second her relatives would arrive. Right now, you're probably thinking "This Evelyn doesn't sound like a good kid since she doesn't even want to see her relatives on Thanksgiving." But the truth is that Evelyn loves her relatives just as much as any other kid does. It's just that Evelyn wasn't a big fan of hugs.

Every holiday at Evelyn's house started the same way. When the guests arrived, Evelyn's parents encouraged her to hug them, which always felt a little awkward. If it was up to Evelyn, she'd greet her relatives with a hand shake or a fist bump or just "It's nice to see you." But hugging was a big thing in Evelyn's family, so she just went with it.

On Thanksgiving this year, the last guest to arrive was Evelyn's Great-Aunt, Maggie. Of all her relatives, Evelyn knew Great-Aunt Maggie the least. In fact, she wasn't even sure which one of her parents Great-Aunt Maggie was related to. When Great-Aunt Maggie rang the doorbell, Evelyn's mom told her to come downstairs. Sure enough, Great-Aunt Maggie was already waiting in the foyer waiting for her hug. So Evelyn hugged Great-Aunt Maggie just like always, but it felt like Great-Aunt Maggie squeezed her extra tight for some reason.

Right after the hug, Evelyn felt like she needed to take a nap. But she knew her parents would never let her go back to her room, especially with Thanksgiving dinner on the table. The meal was tasty and Evelyn's dad made his famous gravy. But after the meal, everyone seemed just as tired as Evelyn did and she couldn't walk five feet without tripping over some random relative.

The only person who didn't seem tired was Great-Aunt Maggie who was full of energy, doing the dishes. Even though Evelyn knew she should volunteer to help, she was totally wiped out. After dessert everyone said their goodbyes, which of course meant more hugs. By the time Evelyn hugged her last relative, she was so tired she thought she could sleep for a week.

That night, Evelyn's mom could tell something was wrong, so she went up to her daughter's room. Evelyn decided to tell her mom the truth, which was that it was awkward to hug people she only saw once or twice a year. Evelyn's mom surprised her by saying that she understood and if Evelyn didn't want to hug her relatives during holiday visits anymore, she didn't have to.

Then Evelyn said she would like to know more about the people in her family, so her mom went downstairs and brought back a bunch of photo albums. She sat with Evelyn on her bed and told her stories about relatives that Evelyn had never heard before. There was Uncle Rick Rick who got his nickname because he always said things twice. And Shelby who once shaved one side of her head. Evelyn loved hearing stories and she could feel her energy coming back with every passing second.

But when Evelyn asked her mom to tell her a story about Great-Aunt Maggie, her mom couldn't think of a single one. It turns out, she didn't know Great-Aunt Maggie any better than Evelyn did, which was kind of strange. All Evelyn's mom knew was that Great-Aunt Maggie showed up at every family holiday and she'd been doing that ever since Evelyn's mom was a little kid.

Then Evelyn's mom pulled out some even older photo albums to prove it and sure enough, there was Great-Aunt Maggie at every family holiday. The crazy thing was that Great-Aunt Maggie looked exactly the same in the pictures from forty years ago as she did today. But then it got even crazier. Evelyn's mom brought some really old photo albums down from the attic. These albums had pictures of her great-grandparents in them and sure enough, Great-Aunt Maggie was in them too looking the same age.

Evelyn knew this could only mean one thing. Great-Aunt Maggie must be a vampire because vampires are immortal. But Evelyn's dad had a different theory. He said Great-Aunt Maggie wasn't a vampire. She was a hugger. Evelyn's dad said that huggers latch onto a host family and suck their energy from a family. Then they move on in search of another family.

Now that Evelyn and her mom and dad knew Great-Aunt Maggie was a hugger, they didn't know what they should do about it. So they decided they should do a fake family party and they mailed it to Great-Aunt Maggie's condo. Sure enough, she showed up on time for the event.

But as soon as she walked in the door, she knew she was busted. Evelyn's parents told Great-Aunt Maggie she was no longer welcome at their house anymore. Evelyn knew it was the right thing to do, but she still felt bad about it.

But one day during the winter break, Evelyn decided to go to Great-Aunt Maggie's and visit. When she opened the door, she knew this wasn't right. But she still did it and gave Great-Aunt Maggie a hug. It took all her energy out and she had to skip school for two weeks.

THE END

# *Monsters of Moon Hollow*
by Lucas T

Once upon a time, there was a town called Moon Hollow where the flames were always cold and the moon was always full. In this town, lived werewolves, sirens, mummies, vampires, Frankensteins, invisible men, mind readers, fortune tellers, and a whole lot of adventure.

This story starts on a dark night after the last scary movie ended and the movie theater was closing down. The movie theater owner, Jack Philip, was supposed to be walking home when he suddenly vanished. No one knows where he went and the town was a little freaked out. Some people were just complaining because they wanted to see their favorite movie but the theater was closed.

A young vampire boy named Victor and his sister Arabella were also disappointed that they couldn't see their favorite movie but mostly they were scared. No one had ever gone missing in Moon Hollow before, except for the Hide-And-Seek champion, Tom Transparent who disappeared for a whole 24 hours to win the contest. The next hide and seek competition was happening the next day.

Victor and his family were getting ready for the Hide-And-Seek competition. Victor and Arabella would be participating this year as seekers, so they wanted to look for good hiding spots which they could check during the competition. "Victor, do you think Jack Philip is okay?" asked Arabella. "That depends" said Victor "on if he's in a safe place or not." "What do you mean by that, Victor?" asked Arabella. "I mean if he is in the woods or not. He could run into a werewolf!" replied Victor. "Well I think we found all of the good hiding spots. Let's go home and play Cloud-and-Seek." said Arabella. So they went home. They played Skull, Skin, Knives (like Rock, Paper, Scissors) to figure out who would be the seeker first. Victor lost so he was the seeker first and Arabella turned herself into a bat and flew into the clouds to hide. And they played until dinner time.

The next morning was the Hide-and-Seek competition which started at 8 o'clock in the morning. Victor and Arabella woke up, ate breakfast, got dressed, did their chores, and left for the competition. This year there were only ten Hiders, including the champion, Tom Transparent. The mayor started the game. They all counted down from 100 while the Hiders got to hiding. The crowd shouted "5, 4, 3, 2, 1!" And the seekers got to seeking! Victor and Arabella had 24 hours to find the hiders. So they started checking all of the good spots they had found the day before.

The first Hider they found in the 2nd spot they checked. By dinner time they had found 6 Hiders. By midnight they had found 9 of the Hiders. The only one left was Tom Transparent. They continued to search until 8 o'clock the next morning but still had not

found Tom. The crowd counted down “5, 4, 3, 2, 1!” And their time was out. The mayor announced that the game was over and used his super speaker to call out to the whole town “Alright Tom, time is up! You win!!” But Tom didn’t respond. The mayor called out again. But still no answer. He called out for a 3rd time, and then he began to worry. “Has anyone seen Tom?” But no one answered. Then they realized that Tom was missing, just like Jack Philip.

Everyone went home feeling very frightened and made their children stay inside. Victor’s parents were sent on a search party to look for Tom so he and Arabella were sent to Frank Dark’s house to spend the night. Victor and Arabella were excited to have a sleep over with the Frankenstein’s. When they arrived at Frank’s house, Frank was waiting at the door for them. His mom had set up an air mattress for the vampire children. They all had dinner together and then went to bed.

The next morning, Frank’s dad went out to get firewood to cook breakfast. Frank and Victor went out a little later to help Frank’s dad with the firewood. They saw a hole open up in the ground behind Frank’s dad and then a figure dressed all in black came out of the hole and grabbed Frank’s dad and pulled him underground. The hole vanished! Victor and Frank ran into the house, found Frank’s mom and told her what they saw.

After Frank’s mom acknowledged what happened she told Victor, Arabella, and Frank that they must stay inside all the time, but Victor, Frank, and Arabella were going to discuss a plan. Their plan was to make a dragon scarecrow because if they made it look so realistic, they might be able to trick the thing that has been taking the people. So they spent the rest of the day making a giant dragon scarecrow. They left a note for Frank’s mom apologizing for disobeying her rule but they needed to go to the woods to try to catch the monster. Then they snuck out of the house and ran to the woods with their dragon scarecrow. Their hope was to catch the monster taking the dragon and follow it. The vampire children would then use their power of infrared vision to try and find the missing townspeople.

They entered the woods and found a spot of invincible ground where the monster could tunnel up but wouldn’t be able to tunnel back down. And they waited. After 45 minutes, they saw something emerge from the ground. They could tell right away that it was the monster, and the monster soon discovered that it couldn’t dig back down underground. So it walked away with the scarecrow. The children followed it to a nearby cave, but before the monster entered the cave it turned invisible! “How did it do that?” whispered Arabella. Victor was trying to put it together and he realized that maybe the monster took the power from Tom Transparent. So Victor and Arabella start using their infrared vision to look for the missing people. They entered the cave and found the monster right away. And for the first time, they saw its face. Its eyes were completely white. It was 8 feet tall. Its skin was very pale and it wore a long dark cloak. And it was looking right at them.

Then the craziest thing happened. The monster split in half and each half ran down different tunnels in the cave. Now the children definitely knew that power came from Frank's dad, his ability to detach his body parts! They decided that Frank should do what the monster did and split himself in half too and one half of Frank stayed with Victor and ran down one tunnel and the other half of Frank stayed with Arabella and ran down the other tunnel.

The halves of the monster ran all the way to a big open cavern in the center of the cave and rejoined itself. Chained along the walls of the cavern, the children could see the missing townspeople, and in the center of the cavern was a tube shaped machine with a chord running into the ground. The monster quickly chained the dragon scarecrow to the wall and aimed the tube shaped machine toward it. The machine started humming and parts of the scarecrow started getting pulled off and sucked into the machine. "This must be how the monster is stealing people's powers!" said Victor.

The children acted quickly. Frank detached his hand to go distract the monster. Frank's hand ran up behind it, quickly jumped onto its shoulder, flicked its ear, then reattached itself to Frank. At the same time, Victor and Arabella turned into bats. They flew above the monster, grabbed its shoulders, and pulled it up. The cavern was tall so they were able to take it so high that when they dropped the monster, the monster's head fell off (but it was able to do that because of Frank's dad's power). While the monster was confused, Victor and Arabella flew back down, turned back into vampires, and took control of the machine. They aimed it at the monster and sucked all of its stolen powers. Then the only thing that remained was the monster's cloak.

They figured out how to put the machine in reverse mode and gave the townspeople back their powers and freed them from their chains. Then they all left the cave and walked back to Moon Hollow. Everyone was glad that the people were found and the children were safe.

Life went back to normal…for now.

The End

# *Helios Forest*

by Joeli A

***THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1999, 11:13 PM.***

“Shush! Cleo, you’re loud. What if your dad hears us?” Alzira stage whispers. I force myself to quiet down, one foot out of the window onto the roof, rain drizzling onto my new sneakers trying not to slip and wake my father up. Alzira holding my right arm to make sure I don't slip and fall to my demise.

Me and her had heard a myth growing up in our little town in Brockwill. That on Friday the 13th, never go to Helios Forest, especially not at night. Killian went there and that's why he never went to high school again. Now I’m in his grade going to Helios Forest to check it out. Me and Alzira made it onto the roof and Alzira looked at me. The fear in her eyes was apparent. I could tell she didn't want to do this, but she knew if she didn’t come, I would do it myself. I thrust my backpack tighter against my back.

“You ready?” I questioned. Alzira swallowed her saliva, her throat working. She nodded. “Yeah, whatever, let's go and finish this,” she croaked out. I strode to the edge of the roof, and crouched down, I had thought of this route 200 times over. I hopped off the ledge and angled my body to land on my backpack, but my body’s impact made a *thud* against the ground anyway. It temporarily knocked the air out of me. I managed to pull myself up and back over to the ledge under Alzira’s taller form on the ledge.

“I’ve got you. Jump.” I called out. She held on to her backpack tighter and stepped off the ledge. I was quick to wrap my arm around her lower abdomen and pull her closer, to ensure her safety. I placed her on the ground and dusted myself off slightly.

“You good?” she piped up. I looked up and nodded at her before nodding towards the driveway, I began striding down avoiding the wet crunchy leaves under my feet as well as sticks to not alert my father. She followed behind me. I took my flashlight out of my backpack’s water bottle slot and pressed the rigid button down and aimed it at the asphalt of my driveway as we walked our way up to the entrance. I looked back and she had her compass necklace locket open and pointed northeast. We began to walk down the sidewalk, our flashlight shined ahead of us, Helios Forest was only about a mile away and we could both walk that in 20 minutes. We were track runners after all.

***THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1999, 11:41 PM.***

I checked my watch 19 minutes later and we were right around the corner from the sign. I glanced over at Alzira. She was hitting her locket repeatedly. I looked at the compass. The magnetic needle was going haywire. Spinning around, so fast that the needle looked blurry. My eyes widened

“What the hell?” I cried. I grabbed the locket with my free hand and closed the pendant. “We’re close, Cle,” she murmured. We crept around the corner, there it was. Helios Forest. We stood at the entrance. The smell was gut-churning, like burnt fabric and blood. So strong I could almost taste it.

“Cle, I don't like this idea, anymore. Maybe we should go home?” she suggested, but her suggestion fell on deaf ears. I walked away, hellbent to find out what that smell was. I could only hear my own ragged breathing. As courageous as everyone saw me, I was a scaredy cat, blood rushing in my ears, my heart pounding so hard, I was sure Alzira could hear it. I drifted through the entrance, as if a magnetic field was pulling me, but the magnet was my curiosity and I was willing to do *anything* to satisfy it.

Alzira followed behind me like a shadow. I could hear her breathing against my neck. I heard a sharp sound. My ears perked up. Gurgled screams. Me and Alzira began to see light. Fires. We creeped closer and saw an octagon shaped clearing. A stone tablet in the middle, a girl tied down by ropes, and her hands pinned by jagged sticks. 8 men, all with torches I would like to say 7 feet tall, stood at every vertex of the octagon, and men stood at the edges of the tablet. Every man in a chiton, like the ones my teacher said the Greeks wore. Alzira and I hid behind a ragged rock, there was a main man I could tell by the way everyone looked at him. Like he was the only man alive. The woman’s mouth was covered in a rag drenched in black sludge. I couldn't make out what it was but it sure wasn't tie-dye. I looked over at Alzira. Her backpack was next to her as she was reaching in to grab her binoculars.

“There is writing on that stone and I want to read it,” She whispered to me, she read it and murmured what she could read. The men blocked most of it, but she said enough to scare me half-dead.

“Sacrifice.”

“They will save us.”

“Spirits.”

“All hail Thanatos and Hades.”

We froze and looked at each other in fear. The woman was sobbing and the men untied the knot of the rag, and took it off her face.

“Let go of me!” the woman cried, tears staining her face. The woman was beautiful, mid-twenties, probably the same age as my cousin. The men ignored her and looked at the moon as it aligned with a rock. When the glow of the moon hit the rock at an angle, a portal-like crater emerged from the rock. Whatever was in the portal had a magnetic force hard enough to make Alzira’s compass go nuts.

***THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1999, 11:58 PM.***

The men put their hands on her jaw. The man put a calix into the opening of the portal, and liquid poured into his cup. As he stood in front of the woman, the woman thrashed and screamed.

***THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1999, 11:59 PM.***

Three men behind the rock stepped forward to hold her arms and legs down and the last one grabbed her hair and forced it back. The men gripping her upper jaw, pulled upward and the men gripping her lower jaw pulled downwards, barbarously.

***FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1999, 12:00 AM.***

*SNAP*

The woman's jaw stretched obscenely. The corners of her mouth began to tear and bleed, my vision began to blur with mortification, he poured the sludge in her mouth, she thrashed but soon gave up and just let it happen. I could barely watch more and I stood up and began to try and sneak out. The air around me went cold when I heard.

"A visitor?" I turned quickly and saw the main man staring at me. No, At my skin, My patches, My vitiligo. He turned to the woman who was now convulsing. Her veins bulged and turned black. The liquid is surely doing something.

"Get them and take her skin first." the man barked at the woman.I looked at Alzira before I started sprinting. She got the message fast and took off with me. The woman had suddenly gone still before her legs bent inward. She started to chase after us. We ran like our lives depended on it because they did. I tripped over a rock and every flash of death crossed my mind. The woman caught up to me and tried to pick the white patches off my skin with her teeth. I grabbed a rock and strained but managed to hit the woman in the head causing her to be disoriented. Getting up, starting at a stumble to a sprint and I caught up to Alzira. We made it out to the street, and ran back home and as we ran Alzira pointed to my arm. "CLEO!"
I looked down, and X was on my arm, bleeding. A mark. Proof of the horror from the

forest. ***FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1999, 12:46 AM.***

We made it to my room and cleaned the filth from the forest off in the bathroom. It was too quiet, when we heard a knock on my window, the one two stories up. We froze and I took a shaky inhale.

"No. Please no." I walked to my room slowly. At my window was the woman with her jaw still open. She started hacking and suddenly vomited against my window. It burned my window and melted a hole into it. It smelled like pure acid. The woman lunged and grabbed me, causing everything to go black.

***???***

I woke up staring at the sky, pitch black, and the same man stood in front of me with a smile and a dagger.

"Finally." He raised the blade.

I shrieked. This was the end. My end.

***FIN***

# *Noah*
by Travis C

## Chapter 1: Noah

Noah was a nice kid, never getting in trouble and never talked back. That was in the past. Noah is a homeless child in the town named Raven Brook, he would always roam the streets with his red and white striped shirt, Jean shorts, black backpack that basically had nothing inside, and his dirty Van's on his feet. It was once a happy place filled with cheer and happy children but it's now filled with nothing but dying plants and vines on houses. Noah's father was basically the town's heart. He would go out of his way just to make people happy. He would spend money on kids that just wanted one piece of candy. Noah's father died years ago, and he's been homeless since then. His mother died when she gave birth to him, so he always thought he was adopted because he never saw his mother.

Noah woke up on his dirty mattress behind the abandoned store and thought it was a normal but depressing day like it always is. Little did he know he was about to say goodbye to his town. When Noah woke up he was still tired like always because of the wolves that keep howling at night but Noah got used to being tired at that point. He started walking up to the nearest corner store to get a piece of food from the money he's been saving up by finding stray coins on the ground. He ended up going to "Lewis's Candy Emporium" which used to be where his dad worked.

"Hey kiddo, long time no see," Lewis said. "What have you been up to lately".

"Nothing much Lewis... Just trying to survive out there" Noah replied.

"Well we've got some new types of candy," Lewis said, trying to change the subject.

Lewis went into the back to try and get Noah something, so Noah looked around for something he could even afford. That's when he saw something, someone with a knife in the reflection of the window. When Lewis came back to show him what he had, Noah was gone. He looked out the window to find Noah running into the woods that clearly had signs that said "Don't Go" or "Turn Back". Noah didn't care about the signs, all he cared about was survival and if that guy was even after him. He was only twelve, so seeing someone with a knife staring at him would cause him to run. All he remembered was the knife and a dirty tragedy mask. Noah looked behind him for a second and didn't see anyone, he slowed down and realized he was lost. He tried to make it back to the town, without any luck. The worst part was that he barely had any supplies. All he had was his black backpack and the three quarters that he was gonna buy candy with.

# Chapter 2: Britney

Noah was in the forest for a couple of days now, and hasn't thought about the mysterious mask ever since he went into the forest. He kept walking and found an old abandoned cabin and went inside. He saw many gory things like bloody knives, stuffed body bags, and pictures of kids on a wall. The pictures were of kids that went missing. One of them was his "missing friend" Walter with a big red X. He gasped and kept searching for more kids he possibly knew. He found himself on one. He then remembered the tragedy mask. All of sudden he heard a whistle outside getting closer and closer. He hid under a table and prayed to god that it wasn't the masked man. Seconds later the whistle was at the door and stopped. The door opened and Noah saw black pants with rubber blood stained boots. Noah couldn't breathe. He then saw a girl, tied with rope and tape on her mouth. The man brought her to a chair, then tied her to it. Noah was scared! He then remembered the face of one of the kids in one of the pictures. Her name was Britney. She didn't have a red X yet, but Noah was beginning to think that was about to change real soon. He then heard tape rip and then he heard heavy breathing.

"Why are you doing this," said Britney while still breathing heavily.

No response from the man. He walked up to his assortment of dirty knives and picked one. The sharpest one out of all of them. Noah tried to count all of the knives and saw at least 19 of them not including the one the man took. Britney tried to scream but was cut off by the sharp knife slitting her throat. Noah almost screamed, but passed out because of all the blood. He woke up about 2 hours later and saw no blood. Noah thought he imagined it. He didn't hear the man so he got out from under the table and saw everything was still there, but no blood, and no Britney. He then saw the big red X on her picture and knew it was real.

He busted out of the door to see the man out there cutting wood. The man saw him and got up slowly. Noah froze in fear. He wanted to run and scream but he couldn't. The man grabbed him and threw him inside the cabin. Noah tried to get up and run, but couldn't. Not because he was scared, but his leg was broken. He looked up to see the man had stabbed something on the door, then slowly walked out. Noah had no idea what was going on until he noticed the note saying "Last Chance". Noah slowly crawled out of the cabin into the forest as fast as he could. He found a bed of moss and passed out because of what he just went through.

# Chapter 3: Tragedy

Noah woke up to birds chirping. That's the first time in years he felt peace around him. He then remembered his leg was broken and snapped back to reality, and thought to himself, how am I going to get out of this place? He got a stick to use as a crutch, and tried to find his way out.

A couple hours went by when he heard the same whistling he heard when he was under the table in the cabin. He hid as fast as he could behind a tree. Peeked around and saw the man appear in the woods with another kid. He got so scared he thought to himself, that kid is going to die. He closed his eyes and all of a sudden, the whistling faded away. He knew he needed to find a way out. He felt so helpless and scared. Noah got up and hobbled on.

Hours later he stumbled across the cabin again. He realized he was back where he started. He was scared and debating if he should look inside. Through the window he saw 5 more kids had red X's. Noah was terrified! Out of nowhere the whistling appeared again. His heart sank! He turned around to see the man standing behind him. Noah, screaming with every step, tackled the man right then and there.

The mask flew off him and was revealed to be his father. Noah was horrified!

"D-d-d-dad," Noah said while holding back tears "Why?"

His father didn't answer. He pulled a knife out of his pocket and slashed Noah across the cheek. Noah was bleeding uncontrollably! He got up and pushed Noah to the ground.

"It was hard to raise you Noah," his father responded.

"this was my only option... to kill you".

"B-b-but all the kids in town loved you Da-!"

"NO THEY DIDN'T!!!" his father cuts him off.

"All they wanted was my money for treats!"

"I never got a break from them, and could barely make ends meet."

"This was my only option... to kill them. I couldn't take it anymore!"

Noah froze in shock.

"Your next son," said his father.

His father grabbed him, taped his mouth shut, and tied him up. He dragged Noah in the cabin and tied him to the chair, the same chair Britney died in. The same chair all the kids died in. He looked at his father, then at the pictures of the kids. On the top it said "The kids that ruined my life". Noah was the last one on there, Noah tried to escape but it was too late, his father picked up a knife.

"This one was made just for you," his father said with a grin.

The knife had Noah's name engraved on the handle. Noah froze, just like when he saw his father cutting wood when he busted out of the cabin. Years have passed and nobody has seen Noah since. Most people think he skipped town, but nobody truly knows what happened to him.

# *Untitled*
## by John C

I was in a U-Haul pulling up with all my stuff to what looked like a 1900s house. The air was very dry and not a cloud in the sky. You could smell the freshly cut grass from the neighbor's lawn across the street. He was old, but kept his yard maintained, the lush bushes cut and the rose gardens weeded. His lush green grass stopped dead right where my property line started, turning into dry, choking dust and weeds.

We backed the U-Haul up the rocky driveway. I got out to take a closer look at the house while the others struggled to open the U-Haul door. As I looked closer at the siding of the house, I noticed the vinyl siding was a pale, creamy yellow color. It was cracked and stained with dirt.

I went over to the elevated garden connected to the side of the house to peer into the window. It seemed like I was peering into a kitchen or living room. I couldn't completely tell due to the amount of filth and scratches on the window. I could make out that it was one of the few rooms in the house that was not redone. It still had plastered walls painted white.

The cracks on the siding were somewhat mesmerizing and odd. It made my breathing slow, my eyes unable to blink. They looked like something organic—veins. I was tuning out all the sounds until the U-Haul workers' talking became a bunch of mumbles. I smelled something strong. It had a faint, metallic sweetness—like copper mixed with old, rotting wood that coated the back of my throat like oil.

The mumbles got louder and louder. I was tuning back in. I was starting to hear the sound of the engine humming at an irregular rhythm. Footsteps were starting to walk towards me.

"Take the lock," Josh shoved the heavy brass metal onto my chest, his knuckles stark white. He wouldn't look at me; his eyes were glued to the dirt at his feet. "We're dropping the ramp. We're leaving."

"Wait, what about the furniture?" I asked, looking at the half-full truck.

I rushed into the house through the maroon door. I ran up the stairs to grab my phone. The screeches of the U-Haul's tires died out, leaving a suffocating silence over the empty driveway where my entire life was now locked inside a giant metal box. The silence felt like I was suffocating from deep water pressure.

The silence was broken by the groaning stairs in the house. *Creeeak.*

I ran back down the stairs. Once I got outside, I dialed Josh. It didn't even ring; the call just went straight to voicemail. I decided to leave a message demanding how I was supposed to get my stuff.

I spun around to sprint toward the old neighbor's pristine yard for help. He was standing perfectly still, his face white as chalk, staring in absolute horror at the upper story of my house—before he suddenly dropped his garden clippers, ran inside, and forcefully slammed his blinds shut. The heavy thud of his door left me completely exposed out in the open, my dead phone vibrating in my hand as a magnetic, terrifying pull dragged my gaze slowly upward towards my own sagging roofline. What did he see up there?

When I finally got over the visceral events, I took off my clothes and stepped into the walk-in shower. Once I was fully submerged, the water beating up against my skin almost felt like a prison. Then, I heard a noise. It was a click sound.

I looked towards the door and it was open. I looked around the bathroom and no one was there. I then heard a high-pitched noise—not a scream, but like nails on a chalkboard.

As I turned to look back in the shower, my eyes glanced over the mirror. It had a sad face drawn on it. There was a line of mist that was pushed upwards, looking like it had just been drawn. I was almost frozen in fear. I shut off the water and slowly checked behind the curtain.

Then, I frantically started putting on my red checkered pajama pants and my baggy black night shirt. After that, I started rushing my way down to my room through many piles of boxes on the second floor. When I looked at the dim shadows from the boxes, they started to look like human shadows. Once I got to my room, I clambered to my bed.

We had not yet settled in, so I just had my mattress to sleep on with my dusty pillow and a thin sheet. The bed was, I believe, a queen that was stuffed in the corner of the room up against the window, which was dimly lit by the light of the moon.

I crawled down into my bed, pulling the sheet over me as I tuned in to what actually happened at night. My eyes finally adjusted to the darkness. I lay on my back, glaring up at the cracked ceiling.

It was about nine o'clock at night when it all started. At first, it was nothing out of the blue. Just the simple activity of rodents scurrying around on the third floor. I had not yet been on the third floor. I did know that it was planned to be redone but was not. It was quite odd, knowing that they already had the building permit to start building.

The more I looked at the dotty, cracked ceiling, the more uncomfortable it made me feel. The more I watched the cracks, the more they looked like veins spreading across a sheet of

plaster. They were taking over. Trying to seep into my soul. But it was probably just water damage—just a leaky roof.

Something dripped onto my face. It had that same unusual metallic smell as earlier. I reached my bony hand out to wipe it off. As I tried, it just smeared. I still couldn't figure out what it was. A shiver shot down my spine when several more cold, sticky drops dripped onto my skin. The drops were cold, ice-cold. My breathing stopped for a split second as I winced in pain.

When those drops touched me, I came back to my senses. I noticed that I was shaking frantically, along with clutching my sheet. I turned my head and glared towards the window. It was wide open with little holes in the screen.

The more I listened to the sounds, the heavier the scurrying grew, shifting from the light scratching of tiny claws to a rhythmic, dragging thud. Like a body being pulled. Like a corpse being dragged across the floorboards.

I was just about to close the window when a flying creature shot through one of the holes in the screen. I jumped back on my bed, cradling myself in the corner. I locked my eyes on where the creature was flying. It then flew into the corner of the room—the opposite side from where I was trembling.

Then, I saw it! Two beady, little red eyes watching me like a hawk. No, wait—it was a bunch of beady, little eyes watching me. I tried to make out how many of them were in the corner, but it was too dark to tell. I went to look at the time on my alarm clock, but it was covered in that liquid. It slowly trickled off the front, creating an everlasting waterfall. It produced a faint brown glow, illuminating a couple of inches in front of it.

When I looked back, the eyes were still watching me. The cracks on the ceiling now had glowing eyes of their own. The eyes lunged forward, closer and closer. I started to hear a nerve-racking scratching against the drywall as the deafening flapping became louder and louder. It was like a chaotic wind outside. I blinked, and the eyes multiplied. Thousands of them. Surrounding me. The sound of flapping leather was driving me crazy.

I felt a leather, cloth-like thing touch my right shoulder, draping over my face. It blocked out all light. Clean air was all gone. It was replaced by the hot, rancid breath of a swarm and an overwhelming stench of copper. It gave me a chill down my spine.

I tried to scream, but the air caught in my throat like a pile of dust every time I breathed in. The smell of copper and rot filled my lungs, choking me out. Then, a bunch more of those leathery things took hold of me. I got pulled back into the corner of the wall. The leathery wings applied immense pressure, suffocating my breathing.

Then, I felt cold teeth touch my skin, and a sharp pain shot through my whole body. I felt weak. The pain lessened slightly, so I reached my hand to where it hurt the most with the last of my strength. As I stroked my hand over my shoulder, I felt two puncture marks. Those marks were slowly gushing blood.

Then, I suddenly lost all my energy. My hand dropped to my side and hit the ground. My vision blurred. My face started dripping sweat. Right before I blacked out I saw its form. It was too late.

# *It's 10 PM*

by Quincy Q

37 year old Jenny Yan was sitting on her couch watching a random horror show about a local folklore forest demon, Jinkouteki, on the night she died. Her 16 year old daughter, Lana, was out with her friend, Isa, at Isa's house. Because of this, Jenny had all the time in the world while she waited for the call from the mechanic fixing up her busted car.

While watching her show, an ad came up.

"It's 10 pm! Do you know where your children are?" The ad questioned.

Jenny almost didn't think about it. She knew where her kid was, she was at Isa's house. Yet, despite this, something about the ad made Jenny question if that was true. Maybe it was that motherly instinct all mothers seem to have, maybe it was just anxiety from the late night. No matter what caused it, Jenny got up and went to the landline phone hung up in the kitchen.

Quickly, she dialed the number of Isa's mom, Sarah. The phone rang once, twice. Jenny anxiously tapped her fingers against the table. Then someone answered.

"Hello?" Sarah's sweet honey voice came out.

"Sarah, hello. It's Jenny," Jenny rushed out.

Hi, Ms. Yan. Is everything alright?" Her voice was gentle but concerned, like a customer service worker who's a bit too good at their job.

"Yeah um… everything's fine. How are the girls?" Jenny's voice came out more anxious than she wished.

"Why are you asking me, silly?" Her voice came out a bit teasing. "The girls are at your place," Sarah giggled and Jenny felt her heart drop.

"What? They said they were going to yours!" There was silence on the other end like Sarah was holding her breath before there was a sharp exhale and the sound of someone's hand hitting the counter. Jenny could hear Sarah's rings click against the wood. "You… you know what?" Jenny sighed "Just stay there. I'm coming to you. We'll figure this out," she then quickly hung up.

Jenny ran to her door, her gaze getting caught on a photo of her

and Lana when she was a baby for just a second. Before Jenny could fully process the picture of her and the face of her precious baby girl once more, the door was already open and she was already walking out.

Sarah and Isa's house wasn't far from Jenny, a few minutes walk maybe. Sarah would've driven there anyway just to be there faster if she could, but the car was still being fixed. She didn't even bother putting shoes on before leaving to try and save time.

As she jogged to the other house, she spotted something in the corner of her eye. In the bushes by the woods, there was a pink and blue beaded bracelet with a hand lying on the ground just before it, the base of the arm and the rest of the body being hidden within the bush. But Jenny knew that bracelet. It was Isa's.

Jenny ran to the bush and dropped to her knees. The hand was covered in blood. She grabbed the hand and tried to pull Isa's body out while yelling her name but Isa wouldn't respond. Finally dragging her out, Jenny could see the extent of the damage. Isa was brutally mutilated, deep cuts scarring her face and arms, her clothes cut up. Deep roots and sharp vines were growing out of the cuts. Two of the vines were stuck through her eyelids, forcing her eyes open. There were vines covering the inside of her mouth, forcing that open too.

Disgusted and terrified, Jenny dropped the body. A piece of paper fell out of Isa's body. On it were step by step instructions on how to summon Jinkouteki.

Stumbling to her feet, Jenny ran into the woods to find her daughter. The woods, however, were like a maze. She ran around, calling her daughter's name to no avail. It wasn't until she was too far in the woods to see the light of the town that she heard faint crying. She could tell it was her Lana the second she heard it.

"I'm coming, baby!" She yelled, running to the noise, her bare feet getting cut up by the forest floor.

She found Lana sitting on the floor of the woods, her back turned to Jenny, her long hair running over her shoulders as she sobbed into her knees.

"...It's okay now, Mama's here," Jenny whispered.

"Mama?" Lana whispered between sobs, turning to face her mother.

Lana stared at Jenny for a moment with hope, her sobs turning to

sniffles. Jenny came closer and held her daughter.

"It's alright, baby. I'm here, I'm here," Jenny whispered into Lana's ear.

Once Lana's sobbing stopped, it changed. It turned into tiny giggles of relief that she was finally safe in her mothers arms. Then it grew and grew. Small giggles turned to maniacal laughter. Lana grew too, her limbs twisting and turning into that of a tall old tree. She looked down, staring at her mother, who was now trembling and scrambling away, with wide inhuman eyes.

She smiled, a wide grotesque smile that tore the flesh on her cheeks, at Jenny. She laughed hard, her grin opening unnaturally wide as she does, as though her own jaw is popping off of the skull. She reached out with a long wooden arm, wrapping cold lengthy fingers around Jenny's neck, lifting her off the ground.

Jenny struggled and thrashed violently before Jinkouteki, in the body of Lana, stabbed its fingers through Jenny's body, causing twisted sticks and vines to grow through every crevice of her body.

Jinkouteki then went on to make its art. It poked and prodded and stabbed until Jenny was a bloody mess. Then it dropped the body on the floor of the woods, and went off to the town Jenny lived in.

After all,
All he needed to do
Was go the way
That Jenny came

The end

# *They Move*
## by Sarah Houghton

I used to love Halloween.

The lights, the costumes, the candy, the joy of it. The chance at mischief, if, you know, you were inclined to that kind of thing. But it was fun. Plus, I live on a road straight out of Old Hollywood set dressing: a dark, winding country road, few streetlights, looming trees and shadowy woods plus an centuries'-old cemetery just down the way.

That's how lots of horror movies open, right?

There aren't many houses so trick-or-treaters don't bother to come out this far.

At least they didn't. Then the Jacksons moved in next door.

They're nice people. No complaints.

But they decorate … aggressively.

Every major holiday and a few of the minor ones, they put out a display. Lights, stand-up figures, inflatables, sound effects, music, animatronics – you name it, they have it somewhere, (and, if not, it's probably just because they haven't found one they like enough to buy.) I honestly don't know where they're storing all that stuff.

Out of all the holidays, Halloween is the clear favorite. The whole yard is covered, and any day I expect them to annex my property for decorating space.

I just sighed and ignored it. After all, everyone has a thing. I collect books in a way that SOME people might think was hoarding. So, if the neighbors want to decorate for Christmas so that the yard can be seen from space, well, so be it. It's not hurting anyone and they enjoy it. (I don't have to pay their electric bill.)

Then last year, everything changed.

They installed two animatronic werewolves in the front yard.

I hated them on sight.

Yes, they were very neat. Howling, and raising their paws to the sky, eyes and maw glowing red, demanding … something.

It didn't matter.

I hated them. No idea why.

The dog didn't like them either. No surprise. She barked at statues in the park, so she probably thought they were real people.

But then weird things started happening.

I would hear howling outside the window. See two tall figures standing on my lawn.

Night after night after night.

But that's not possible, right? They aren't real.

They just act real because that's how they're programmed. They're machines.

No matter how often I tell myself that, it doesn't change anything. I would dash outside in the middle of the night – figuring I'd catch someone playing a prank – only to find no one there. Not a single sign of anyone.

And those stupid werewolves would be calmly standing in the Jacksons' yard, smug as only poodles on steroids can be.

(I know it was them. Yes, I know I sound paranoid, but what else could it be? This isn't exactly a prime tourist destination.)

Then Halloween was over, and I was safe for another year.

Time flew by a lot faster than I anticipated.

Before I realized, Halloween is only two weeks away, and the Jacksons were setting up their display. Including the werewolves.

And horror of horrors, apparently the wretched things had bred. Now there were the two big werewolves and two smaller ones. I wanted to do many things in that moment -- faint, run away, possibly call the CDC – but instead I made small talk about their new purchases. A dragon, an ogre, a gremlin, among others.

I did not run back to my house.

I did not burst into tears.

(I wanted to. I did not. One shows strength in front of the enemy.)

I waited until I got into the house, then hugged the dog and cried.

The siege started again that very night.

Howling outside my window.

Figures standing on the lawn. Only this time there were four of them.

Over and over. Night after night.

It isn't real. It isn't possible.

I just had to hang on until after Halloween. Only a few days more.

It's not possible. They aren't real.

The night before Halloween, I heard laughter outside the window. That made no sense. I thought maybe it was a kid, playing a Halloween prank. (There had been much more traffic in the area especially at night; people were coming to see the display.)

This probably should have been a red flag visible from space. In fact, I'm sure there is a very confused scientist on the ISS writing a report about it at this very moment.

I rushed out the door, thinking about who it might be, and the penny finally dropped.

The laughter.

The gremlin, laughing and muttering about water and Gizmo.

It was a trap to get me outside.

I spun around … but my way was already blocked. Four figures stood waiting, two tall, two short.

More laughter from behind me.

I try to run anyway.

More howling. The triumph of the hunt.

This isn't real. This isn't possible.

This isn't real. This isn't possible.

I hear a snap. A crack. A squish. There's screaming that I think must be me but I'm not really sure because the world seems to be pulsing in and out. Like a heartbeat. I see nothing. I feel nothing. No, that's not true. I'm so cold and so cold and so --

END

# *the Unfinished*

by Cassandra Parker

Never leave a story half-finished, lest someone else step in and write the ending. Josiah Cord considered himself exactly that kind of man – the one who finished things. A deep-rooted compulsion entrenched in his psyche by years of discontent.

Crossing the threshold of the fog-choked street into the dilapidated Mor Mementos Oddities Shop, the shadow of his father walked with him.

Groaning like a disturbed beast, the massive door shuddered on strained hinges as it swung outward. A vacuum of cold air plucked at Josiah's jacket as the beast drew it's first deep breath, pulling him into its maw. Josiah hesitated on the doorstep, lifting his lantern to peer into the depths of his next conquest.

The door's key was a comfortable weight in his hand, his thumb tracing the ridges that had unlocked a world of new mysteries. It'd been left on his doorstep within a taped-up box, beside a folded note. In a tight, jagged hand, was written:

*13 Fallow Street*

*Finish It*

The last stroke skittered across the paper, a phantom line of things unsaid. Those two words had hooked into Josiah Cord's soul, reeling him in towards a ramshackle storefront that'd stood abandoned for twenty years.

Inside the shop was completely unexceptional, with its disorganized rows of cabinets and curiosities. The low-brow collectibles that titillated housewives and amused amateur collectors. Glass and goo crunched and squelched beneath his boots as he cut a path through the wreckage of the banal store, to a prize worthy of his unique interests.

Josiah was a practiced man in a practice of mystery, well-versed in the strange and unusual. Approaching the shop's back shadows, there sat a homunculus of ruined bric-a-brac. A deliberate piling of old furniture and rotted rugs. A final failing to obscure an unhallowed secret.

Scraping his boot through decades of dust exposed what Josiah had suspected; the outline of a trapdoor. The jumbled beast crumpled as he shoved the pile aside and the last obstacle between him and what lay beyond was dissolved.

Kneeling down, Josiah forcefully swept away the trapdoor's grime, his hand mapping the contours of a shrouded embossing. A jagged edge of the carving sliced deep into his thumb. He stuck it to his mouth to staunch the pain, watching fat blobs of blood spatter across the face that belonged to a nightmare.

Enclosed by an engraved pentagram, the head of the demon pressed against the door, straining to shatter the barrier between reality and creation. The blood pooled into the carved pits of its eyes that tilted towards a broad mouth, that leered at Josiah with a ravenous hunger that'd have a god-fearing man clutching at his rosary. The jaws parted slightly in high sardonic grin, baring rows of jagged teeth just as a predator leers at its prey before it pounces.

At thirty-two, Horace Cord lived in terror of demons he claimed haunted him in the brief moments between blinks. Had enlisted mediums, clairvoyants, and exorcists in a desperate effort to to cleanse his soul. He'd lined the walls with mirrors framed in wood and bronze and copper to be his standing army against ghouls and ghosts alike.

But Josiah was not his father, and so gripped the heavy iron ring and swung the door open.

He carefully navigated down the steep steps, and when at last he reached the bottom, raised his sputtering lantern. And the room flared into brilliance.

The basement was not the marvel Josiah's mind had conjured. The butter-yellow bloom of his lantern ricocheted off a wall-sized mirror, chasing the darkness to cower in the corners of the tiny basement. And in that blinding moment, Josiah Cord fancied he'd seen a shadow lurch across the glass. But Josiah's decades of experience meant he recognized the visual illusion that a dimly lit reflection can produce.

In contrast to the crammed storefront, the basement was surprisingly and disparagingly, bereft. And though Josiah's awareness registered the room's periphery – the table beside him, the misshapen beasts in the shadows, the glass casings nestled between large mechanical contraptions with no known names – his sight was entirely locked on the room's center.

His footsteps rang hollow as they carried him toward the simple wooden easel and its complimentary, rickety stool. Halting before the canvas, his eyes drifted past the eerie vignette to the painter's focus. They swept across purple-cushioned chair and up to a glass case suspended like a heavy pendulum above the sitter's head. To one side a gramophone bloomed like a brass lily in this somber realm. And just beyond the sitter's left shoulder sat the daunting silhouette of a taxidermy raven on a wooden perch.

"Who was meant to sit here?"

For the next week, Josiah Cord became fully immersed in his life's purpose; finishing his predecessor's work. As he carefully handled the delicate mechanisms sorted on the table, the familiarity reminded him of happier, more peaceful times.

At twenty-five Horace Cord had fancied himself a master tinkerer; scouring the home for minor repairs. Eventually however – as hobbies often do – this fancy dissolved. Leaving in his wake unusable devices that were never broken.

On the first day, Josiah sat on the floor and tinkered with an exposed skeleton clock encased within a brass rib cage. The clock only needed new catgut cords before it began ticking again. Although he noticed that in the heavy silence the ticking seemingly matched the beating of his own heart.

So then Josiah turned his attention to the gramophone, whose mainspring had snapped. The sound it produced was mere ambiance; the ticking of a clock, the low scuff of footsteps, distant laughter, and the occasional bird cry. But it was *noise* and so rather than go traipsing upstairs searching for another record, Josiah inspected the taxidermy.

The stuffed monstrosities were the amalgamations of a child's nightmares and a man's depravity. Examining a bloodhound's face had him tracing the line of two jaws attached at the shoulders, and finding no seam. As Josiah polished the bloodhound's teeth, he recalled his childhood dog for the first time in years. Horace Cord father had borrowed a Smith & Wesson to grant Sherman a clean death. He had wanted to stuff Sherman, saying that he deserved better than to become worm food. However, after three months, Josiah's mother had buried the dog herself.

Josiah polished the glass cabinets, completely indifferent to the objects inside. Jars of congealed concoctions, with some that held shrunken masses that may have once been organs.

Of all the displays, only the one above the chair caught his eye. Wiping off the glass revealed two perfectly preserved Monarch butterflies side by side. Josiah knew little of insects, yet recognized the orange-gold wings with their delicate black lines. He traced the patterns, noting subtle differences between them. And although he found them fascinating, it was a fleeting distraction.

On the seventh day, Josiah could no longer ignore the room's centerpiece. He slipped unsteadily onto the stool and stared at the canvas. The painting was a flawless replicate of the scene before him.

*Why paint an empty chair in a basement?* Perhaps *this* was his final, unfinished work. Had he felt compelled to sit here as Josiah now felt compelled to sit here?

*Finish it*.

Setting out the paints and brushes, Josiah began with a trembling hand, laying down deliberate, broad strokes and shapes. Every swipe of the horsehair brush matched the rhythm of the clock tick-ticking *(thump-thumping).* The gramophone's specter steps kept beat with the clock. Building confidence with every dip of the brush, Josiah was entirely entranced. In the blurry moments between strokes, he thought he saw the brief flicker of the crow's wings beyond.

Josiah couldn't recall the exact moment he decided that his father belonged in that chair. And as he gently dabbed a speck of blue to the man's eyes, Josiah recognized that this might be the most important work of his life.

Josiah stared into a face so like his own and blinked.

The face within the canvas blinked back at him, before the figure suddenly stood up and strode to the painting's edge.

And vanished.

Trembling with the terrifying certainty he'd gone mad, Josiah's head pivoted to the left. Not only to see his own pale reflection, but his father's apparition striding towards him. With slow, deliberate pressure, the man pressed scarred palms against the mirror and sank through the glass.

When Horace Cord stumbled from the world of creativity into the world of reality, it was to find that old rickety stool empty. He stepped around the easel and stared down at the canvas to find the scene had transformed. The purple-cushioned chair was gone, replaced by the easel and empty stool.

The old man breathed deep, eyes drifting up to the ensnared butterflies. He puffed out his cheeks before erupting into bellowing laughter that echoed in the sudden emptiness. As if on cue, the crow flapped its wings and cawed in perfect rhythm.

# *Have You Seen This Girl?*
## by Jill Wessel

I woke up to Hailey's face floating in the dark above me. Her pale skin flashed white and blue from the light of the muted TV screen, her eyes locked on me.

"Mama?" Her tiny hand was resting on my shoulder.

I sat up, my body moving faster than my thoughts. "What's wrong?"

Hailey leaned over me, her lips touching my ear. "I saw a girl," she

breathed. "A girl?"

Hailey leaned back and nodded, her small mouth half open.

"Where?"

"In the yard."

I rubbed my face, willing my brain to catch up to the rest of me. "It was a dream, honey," I mumbled. "Back to bed."

"It's not a dream, mama," Hailey whispered.

Hailey often woke like this, confused and shaken, the dream she'd been having stuck in her eyes. I kissed the top of her head and squeezed her warm, soft hand.

I stood and together we walked to her bedroom. Moonlight spilled across her bed from the window, lighting up her face as she crawled across the blankets. She peered outside, her lips pursed.

"She was right there," she said, pointing. I looked out; the oak tree in the yard looked silver in the light of the full moon, bright in the cold October air. The forest behind our house

lingered silently in the dark.

I rubbed Hailey's back in a slow circle. "See? No one there." I said.

"Can we help her?"

I smiled, pushing a golden curl behind her ear. "No, honey. She's fine."

Hailey frowned, her pale eyebrows furrowed together. "How do you know?" "I'll tell you in the morning," I said, patting her pillow. She crawled underneath the thick blanket, reaching for the stuffed lion that she slept with. "Get some sleep. I love you." "Mama?" Hailey's voice was small but clear. "She looked angry."

The muscles in my neck tensed. I forced a smile.

"It's okay, honey," I whispered. Hailey's eyelids drooped, the matted mane of her lion stuffy resting below her chin. I watched as she fell asleep.

The next morning passed in a blur of practiced routine and sleep deprivation. I woke to my alarm, my head throbbing dully and my mouth dry as sandpaper. I hastily threw away the empty beer bottles I'd left around the couch the night before— as I'd done every night for the past several weeks— then woke Hailey to get ready for school.

As I rinsed off our plates from breakfast, I looked out of the window above the sink. The sky above the forest glowed rose pink. Yellow leaves littered the grass below the oak tree, covered in frost glittering in the morning sunlight.

I made a mental note to call our family doctor later that day to set up an appointment for Hailey.

Time working in the café was marked by the unique smells that evolved throughout

the day: a combination of fresh coffee and dust when I prepared for customers in the morning, smoke from the wood stove and toasted bread at lunch.

Minutes after opening Rich walked in, the small golden bells tinkling above the door as it opened. I smiled and started pouring hot coffee in a large, paper cup.

"Hey, Rich."

"Mornin', hon." Rich's early morning shift at the paper mill started before most people woke up, so he was often my first customer of the day. He walked up to the counter and removed his woolen hat, his thin grey hair sticking out chaotically.

"So," he said, "how about that girl?"

My chest tightened, the cup I was holding almost slipping from my hand.

"What?" "You didn't see the Amber alert?"

The tightness in my chest squeezed, my breath becoming shallow. I shook my head. "She's about Hailey's age, I think. Missing since last night. There's a search party leaving from Connor Park soon."

My heart fluttered as I handed Rich the coffee. "Connor Park?"

"They got a tip that someone saw a little girl there around sundown. That park abuts your property, right?"

I nodded. Rich placed a five dollar bill on the counter, his eyes scanning me. "You alright? You look pale."

I stretched my lips into a smile. "I'm fine," I said. "Didn't sleep well last night."

He nodded and picked up the coffee. "Thanks, hon. See you later."

"See you."

Rich left, the bells chiming again as the door closed behind him.

The day passed in a haze, customers moving in and out of the cafe constantly. The search party had been unsuccessful, they said. A teenage boy came in with a stack of posters and asked to hang one in the door of the café. The missing girl stared at me from the poster all day through her thick, dark hair. Her name, Josie Miller, rang like a bell in my head.

I went back and forth about going to the police, my mind turning over the options like hot stones in my hands. If I was right and Hailey had been dreaming, I reasoned with myself, telling the police would only point them in the wrong direction. Besides, the chances that Hailey had seen the missing girl were minuscule: Josie was from the neighboring town, too far to get here on her own. And the tip about the girl that was seen in Connor Park turned out to be a completely different girl, according to her customers.

*And if even it had been Josie*, I told myself, *what could I do about it now?* Telling the police hours later would only bring questions and suspicion—two things I'd been trying to shake off in this small town for years.

I decided not to tell the police. A warm knot burned in my stomach all day.

That night, I told myself I wouldn't drink. I wanted to be alert in case Hailey needed me. If she had another nightmare I would be there for her, sober and clear.

So when I woke later that night surrounded by an army of glass bottles on the floor,

sweaty and sunken into the couch, I was convinced I was still dreaming. I couldn't remember drinking—couldn't even remember getting to the couch—but the evidence was on my hot, dry breath, churning in my stomach.

I went to the kitchen and clung to the sink as I held a glass under the faucet, my legs weak beneath me. I looked out the window above the sink, the harsh moonlight casting bony shadows that moved like fingers across the silver grass.

Then I saw her.

She stood beneath the oak tree, a girl no bigger than Hailey. She stared at me from across the yard, her eyes unblinking, curtained by black hair. Her white dress glowed in the moonlight. She wasn't wearing shoes.

Before I could think, the girl spun around and sprinted across the grass. Her lace skirt whipped behind her as she ran, her bare feet flying. Within seconds she had made it to the forest, where she was swallowed up in its inky black.

I stumbled through the kitchen to the back door, the night air sobering me as I walked out onto the wet, cold grass.

"Hey!" I called. I jogged toward the forest but stopped. My stomach spasmed; I hunched over, my hands on my knees. Vomit creeped up my throat.

I looked up, scanning between the trees, expecting to see her white face hovering in the darkness. The air was still. The forest leered at me.

Swallowing to keep the vomit down, I staggered back into the house. I found my phone on the floor by the beer bottles and clumsily dialed 911. My head throbbed as the phone rang.

When dispatch answered, I breathlessly described how I'd found Josie Miller, the missing girl. I articulated each syllable carefully, not wanting my words to slur.

"Then she ran into the forest," I explained. "She's in there now. You need to send the cops."

There was a pause on the line. "Josie Miller has already been found, m'am." My stomach went cold. I kneeled to the floor, afraid my legs would give out on me.

"She was located this afternoon. She was at her father's house."

"Oh." The room started to spin.

"M'am," the woman asked, "have you been drinking?"

My face burned. "What? No."

The dispatcher sighed. "M'am, please stop calling emergency services unless you have a *real* emergency. This is the third time this month."

My stomach spasmed violently. I hung up. I dropped the phone and crawled to the bathroom, hung myself over the toilet, and vomited. After I'd emptied myself I still continued to heave, trying to expel the shame stinging in my guts.

Black spots began to appear in my vision, so I leaned back and sat next to the toilet. I looked at the doorway and stifled a scream.

Hailey was standing there. Her wide eyes staring.

"Hailey?"

She stretched out her hand, pointing behind me.

"Look," she whispered. "The girl."

# *Untitled*
## by Denise Gilliland

Recently I was going to go to White River Jct. Vermont to see my cousin.

The day was absolutely beautiful. The trees were showing off their colors

In full spectrum with reds, golds, and orange shades.

I wasn't quite sure which way I should go.

I had remembered a few years ago my brother-in law had headed through

three red lights to an interstate. So when I got to Keene I decided to go thru the three lights heading north. My friend told me to get on route twelve and head north.

While I was driving I looked up in my rear view mirror and right on my bumper was a broken down black truck with Vermont plates. He kept coming as close as he could. I was going the speed limit and a little over. He was really making me nervous.

I think I traveled about five miles. There's a long stretch of road  climbing a low grade hill so you can see quite a ways up the highway. I realized I must be going

the wrong way. I decided to turn around and go back south. I would try to find route 12.

All this time there he was right on my bumper. I could see a side road on the right so I put my blinker on and went to take it. The truck went flying by me. He was revving up his engine. I'm thinking goodbye to bad rubbish.

The side road I took had a driveway off to the right. I went by the driveway and started to back in. A small compact car drove past me. I was only about 15 feet off the highway. I turned the car to get back to the end of the road and as I looked up there was that black truck with Vermont plates.

The driveway I turned around in was visible to the end of the road before the highway.

I'm thinking where did he come from? He never passed me to turn around to get

in front of me. He didn't come from the other end of the road. And he never pulled over on the highway to back in the side road.

Again he was revving up his truck. There was no traffic coming either way and all I could think of was I hope he don't pull a U turn and follow me back towards

Keene. Finally he scrubbed out and I drove right out towards Keene. I looked up in my rear view mirror and there was no truck and no traffic.

I couldn't believe it. I pulled over and got out of my car and no truck anywhere.

I got back in my car rather shaken and continued on my way.

The scary thing about this story is it really happened last week. It was very creepy.

# *The Haunted House*
## by Kathy Chencharik

Ten-year-old Jenny, awoke with a start. She quickly sat up in bed, listening again for the loud sound that woke her up. All of a sudden, a white mist floated through the air above her bed. When she heard a moaning sound, she jumped out of bed and ran to her mother's room.

"Jenny?" her mother asked, sitting up in bed as she wiped the sleep from her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Mom, there's something in my room. I heard a loud banging noise and moaning, and saw a white mist over my bed."

"Jenny," her mother sighed. "I'm sure you must have been dreaming."

"I don't think so. It seemed so real."

"Sometimes dreams can seem real. If there was a noise, I didn't hear it. I was sleeping, like you and your brother should be."

"Can I please stay with you?" Jenny asked.

"Of course you can."

As Jenny settled into bed with her mother, her younger brother, Sam, burst into the room in tears.

"Now what?" their mother said.

Sam noticed his sister in bed with their mother. "I think someone is in the house. I was looking out my window when the outside light came on. Then I heard a noise downstairs and footsteps.

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"David?" John asked as he entered the house. "Where are you?"

"I'm up here." David came out of a room and stood on the second-floor landing. He held up his hand. A bright white bandage surrounded his thumb.

"What happened to you?"

"I was nailing something up, and my thumb got in the way of the hammer."

"Ouch."

"You can say that again."

"Ouch."

"Ha, ha, very funny."

"I could use some help to unload the truck," John said. "Do you think your thumb can handle it?"

"Guess we'll find out." David started down the stairs and glanced at his watch. "It's getting late," he said. "How much longer are we going to be here?"

"As long as it takes. We do have a deadline, you know. I've turned on the outside light so we can see what we're doing."

When David reached the bottom of the stairs, he stopped beside John.

"Have you been smoking up there?" John asked, taking a whiff of David's shirt.

David hung his head. "Yeah, I needed to have one after I banged my thumb."

"You know the boss told us smoking was off limits inside the house. Don't do it again."

"I won't do it again. I promise."

"Was that you? I heard moaning a little while ago. I thought it might be a ghost."

"No, it wasn't a ghost. It was me, guilty as charged. It really hurt."

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Jenny glanced at Sam. "Do you suppose Sam was dreaming too, like I was?" she asked, turning to look at her mother.

"I don't know what to think. But it is possible. I certainly didn't hear anything."

"Mom," Sam said. "Can I stay in here with you and Jenny?"

His mother pulled back the blanket and patted the mattress with her hand. Sam joined them in bed. Their mother placed an arm around each and said, "It's all right, children. You both could have been dreaming, or you just heard the creaks and groans of this old house. Old houses do that, you know?"

"I know, Mom, but why does my room smell like tobacco?" Jenny asked.

Her mother shrugged. She sniffed her daughter's hair. "That's funny; there is a faint odor. Do you remember when we first moved here?"

Jenny and Sam nodded their heads.

"There was talk of this house being haunted," their mother continued. "There can be certain smells, or so I hear. But I've never seen a ghost in this house. Have either of you?"

"Not until tonight, when I saw that mist," Jenny said. "It could have been a ghost."

"Maybe, but I still think you were dreaming," her mother said. "Whatever is going on, it always seems to happen this time of year. Maybe something bad happened in this house around Halloween."

"Don't forget the noises I heard," Sam said, trying to get in the last word.

"How could I?" their mother said. "I love you two; please go to sleep now." She slid back beneath the sheets and closed her eyes.

"Love you too," Jenny and Sam said in unison.

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"It's a bit nippy outside; better put your jacket on," John said.

David grabbed his jacket and followed him out to the truck. He glanced up at the corner of the house, putting a hand above his eyes. "Wow, that light is bright," he said.

"Yeah, and we're sure going to need it. Especially if we put anything outside tonight."

"Can I at least smoke out here?" David asked.

"Sure, go ahead if you want; just pick the butts up after yourself. You know, hide the evidence, so to speak, in case the boss shows up."

"Will do." David took a seat on the tailgate of the truck, pulled a pack of cigarettes and lighter from his jacket pocket, and lit up.

"I'll be right back," John said. "I forgot something inside, plus I want to check on the weather again before we set up."

"I'll be here when you get back."

"Yeah, and by then your smoke break should be over."

"Nag, nag," David said before sending a cloud of smoke into the night sky. He slid off the tailgate when he finished his cigarette, crushed it beneath his boot, and placed the butt into his shirt pocket.

"Ready to get back to work?" John asked as he came back outside. "I thought we could start setting up out here tonight, but I just heard on the radio it might rain. I think we should unload the truck and put everything inside. Tomorrow is supposed to be a nice day. We can finish everything then. Better safe than sorry, right?"

David nodded. “How much more will we be bringing tomorrow?”

“One more load should do it. Then we’ll set everything up. The boss wanted it done by the 30th, and it will be done. We’ve never missed a deadline yet. Did you get to finish upstairs?”

“Yeah. Thank goodness I’d finished before I smashed my thumb.”

“Good. The downstairs is all set, so we’ll just need to do the outside tomorrow. Let’s unload the truck and get out of here before it does rain.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” David said, taking out some decorations and bringing them into the house.

“I could use some help with this thing,” John said, pulling a wooden box out from the back of the truck. “It’s pretty heavy.” David grabbed the other end, and they carried the long box into the house.

“OUCH!” David screeched as his thumb hit the doorjamb on the way in. He dropped his end of the box, and it hit the floor with a thud.

“Are you okay?” John asked.

“I’ll survive. Good thing there were no bodies in this coffin. It could have been quite a bit heavier.” He picked his end up once again, and they continued to bring it inside, setting it down on the floor. “How much more is in the truck?”

“Not much; we’ll be done soon. Then we can go home, and you can give your poor thumb a rest.”

When they were finished, David said, “Come on, it’s time to go.” He went outside first, followed by John, who let the door slam shut behind him.

“Wow!” David said with a start. “That was loud enough to wake the dead!”

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“Mom?” Jenny said, shaking her mother’s shoulder. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” her mother asked.

“It sounded like a thump downstairs.”

“I heard it too,” Sam said, sitting up.

“Will you two please go to sleep?”

All of a sudden there was a loud crack, like someone shooting a gun.

They all jumped.

***

As they walked out to the truck, David lit up one more time. “So,” he said, “how many years have we been doing this? Do you remember?”

John scratched his head. “No, I don’t. But if my memory serves me, quite a few years. Tomorrow morning we’ll come back and finish up. This haunted house tour gets bigger every year.”

“I’ll say.”

As John opened the door to his truck, he glanced back at the house. A sudden chill came over him. He could feel the hairs on his arms stand up. “This place has always given me the creeps,” he said. “Do you think it’s true what they say happened here?”

David finished his cigarette. He nodded as he walked around to the other side of the truck. “I’m afraid it is,” he said. “I still have the newspaper clipping. It’s the reason this house never sold and why it’s only used one day a year. Many years ago, on Halloween night, a woman and her two children were found murdered upstairs, as they slept together in the same bed.”

THE END

# *The Bowl at Number Nine*
## by Hridoy Kundu

Every Halloween, the bowl at Number Nine was empty by midnight.

Not because children took the candy. There was never any candy.

At five-thirty, when porch lights came on along Marrow Street, a black ceramic bowl appeared on the steps of the abandoned house. Inside were photographs, warm as if fresh from a printer.

Nobody ever saw the bowl arrive.

The year Milo Crane reached in, he laughed. “Free picture.”

It showed him beneath a streetlamp, his back to the camera. Lucy Hale, his next-door neighbor, teased him for looking frightened. He shoved the picture into his pocket.

Lucy disappeared the following Halloween.

Her parents remembered her birthday, her laugh, the yellow raincoat she refused to outgrow. But when police asked where she'd slept, they stared at the wall beside their bedroom. They insisted there had never been a door there. Neither could explain the pale rectangle on the wallpaper where her portrait had hung.

Police searched Number Nine. No furniture. No electricity. No camera. Upstairs, an officer heard a shutter click directly behind him.

He didn't turn around. A week later, he resigned.

By thirteen, I knew the rules: Don't climb the steps. Don't touch the bowl. If you hear a camera click behind you, never turn around.

My little brother Evan thought the rules were stupid.

“It's a house,” he said. “Houses don't take people.”

“Three kids are missing.”

“Then why hasn't anybody arrested the house?”

I hated when he made me laugh while I was trying to scare him.
That Halloween, Mom let us trick-or-treat without her. She'd worked late shifts since Dad died, and Evan insisted he was too old for supervision. He was nine, with plastic vampire teeth and a

cape that dragged along the sidewalk.

Near the end of Marrow Street, he slipped away from our group.

I knew where he'd gone.

“Evan.”

He stood on Number Nine's porch, a photograph trembling between his fingers. “Jamie, look. It's our kitchen.”

Click.

The sound came from inside the house. Evan went still.

In the picture, Mom stood beside our kitchen table in her blue robe. The clock above the stove read 11:47. Evan lay beneath the table, still wearing his cape, staring at something outside the frame.

Across the bottom were the words:

NEXT HALLOWEEN. 11:47.

I tore the picture into quarters and dropped them in the gutter. Then I dragged Evan home.

The next morning, the photograph lay beneath my pillow.

Whole again.

For a year, we tried everything.

Mom burned it. By morning it was in the cold oven, smelling of rain. I buried it beneath the sycamore. It appeared beside my cereal bowl, with dirt caught in its border. Evan threw it into the river. He found it inside his lunchbox, between an apple and a sandwich.

After that, he stopped making jokes about Number Nine.

Each time the photograph returned, something changed. First, a blur appeared in the kitchen doorway. Then fingers curled around the frame. By spring, a pale face hovered behind Mom's shoulder, featureless except for a dark opening where its mouth should have been.

By October, two hands rested on her shoulders.
We stopped showing Evan the picture. Mom turned the kitchen clock toward the wall, though we could still hear it tick.

One night I found Evan outside Dad's old room, his cape folded in his lap.

“Do you think Dad was scared?” he asked.

“When?”

“Before he died.”

“I don't know.”

He picked at the cape's fraying hem. “I think I would be.”

Through the wall, we heard Mom washing the same plate again and

again. “I'm scared,” he whispered.

I wanted to promise he wouldn't die. Instead, I sat beside him until he fell asleep against my shoulder.

We moved two towns away. Mom rented a house with yellow kitchen tiles and a front door that stuck. On our first night there, at 11:47, a camera clicked inside Evan's bedroom wall.

The picture changed. It showed our new kitchen now. The clock still read 11:47.

The place could change. The hour couldn't.

On Halloween morning, Mom packed the car: clothes, water, the cash she kept in a coffee tin.

“We'll drive until tomorrow,” she said. “We won't stop.”

I wanted to believe her. Then I noticed something in the photograph's kitchen window, visible only when I tipped it toward the light.

The glass reflected a hallway that wasn't ours. At its far end stood a black bowl.

Wherever we went, the house could follow.

I told Mom I had to return to Marrow Street. She refused until I showed her the reflection.

At 11:39 that night, while she and Evan waited in the locked car, I opened Number Nine's front door.
It smelled of dust and vinegar. Photographs crowded the walls: children tying shoes, sleeping, running through sprinklers. Ordinary moments, except each child stared just past the camera. In one, a girl wore a paper birthday crown. Someone had scratched away every other face at the table.

I found a picture of Milo Crane beneath a streetlamp. On the back, his name had been crossed out. Beneath it, in different handwriting, someone had written:

LUCY HALE.

Milo had grown up. Lucy hadn't.

There were hundreds more, each with two names. Some belonged to missing children. Others belonged to people who still lived on Marrow Street and would not look at Number Nine.

The house marked someone. A family could give it another name

instead. I wondered who had written Lucy's.

Near the stairs hung one last photograph. It showed the house itself, its empty porch illuminated by a streetlamp. On the back, in the same narrow lettering as the others, was a name:

NUMBER NINE.

A camera clicked upstairs.

Then another. Then ten at once.

The pictures peeled from the walls and swirled around me. Every one showed Evan beneath our kitchen table. In some he was older, in others younger. In one, nothing remained beneath the table except his plastic teeth.

At the center of the room stood a table. The black bowl rested on it, beside a blank photograph.

The paper warmed beneath my fingers. Letters surfaced.

EVAN.

Then:

REPLACEMENT:

A pencil lay beside the bowl.
I knew names I could write. A girl from our old street had given Evan half her Halloween candy. I remembered her red gloves, her laugh when he thanked her through his vampire teeth.

I could save him. All I had to do was write her name.

“Jamie?”

Evan stood at the top of the stairs.

Except Evan was in the car with Mom.

The thing wore his cape and had his crooked front tooth. Its smile appeared a moment before its mouth moved.

“Choose,” it said.

The photographs whispered with it.

I checked my watch.

11:46.

I looked at the blank beneath REPLACEMENT. It didn't ask for a child. Only a name.

And I'd seen another name written on a photograph.

I picked up the pencil.

NUMBER NINE.

The whispering stopped.

The thing on the stairs opened its mouth. Its jaw widened until the skin at its cheeks split, but no sound came out.

The photographs went black. A crack traveled down the bowl, rim to base. Beneath my feet, the floorboards buckled. Somewhere inside the walls, a great number of shutters began clicking at once.

One clicked directly behind me.

I didn't turn around.

I ran.
At midnight, Number Nine was gone. Between Eight and Ten lay only weeds and a rectangle of bare earth.

When I reached the car, Mom was gripping the wheel, shaking. Evan sat awake beside her, his cape balled in his lap. He reached through the window for my hand.

For one year, no child disappeared from Marrow Street.

I began to believe I'd beaten it.

Tonight, at 11:46, someone knocked on our front door.

Three slow knocks.

Mom and Evan followed me into the hallway. There was nobody through the peephole. I opened the door a few inches.

The black bowl sat on our welcome mat, cracked from rim to base.

Inside was a single photograph.

It showed me holding the photograph I was looking at. Behind me stood Evan. Behind Evan stood Mom. And behind Mom, where our coat closet should have been, was a long hallway lined with photographs.

At the far end stood another black bowl.

Something was coming toward it.

From directly behind me came the soft mechanical whirr of a picture developing.

Then the click.