



Cereal



Volume 35, Special edition
31 October 80AT(2025)

Presented (mostly) in alphabetical order by the second letter of the work's title

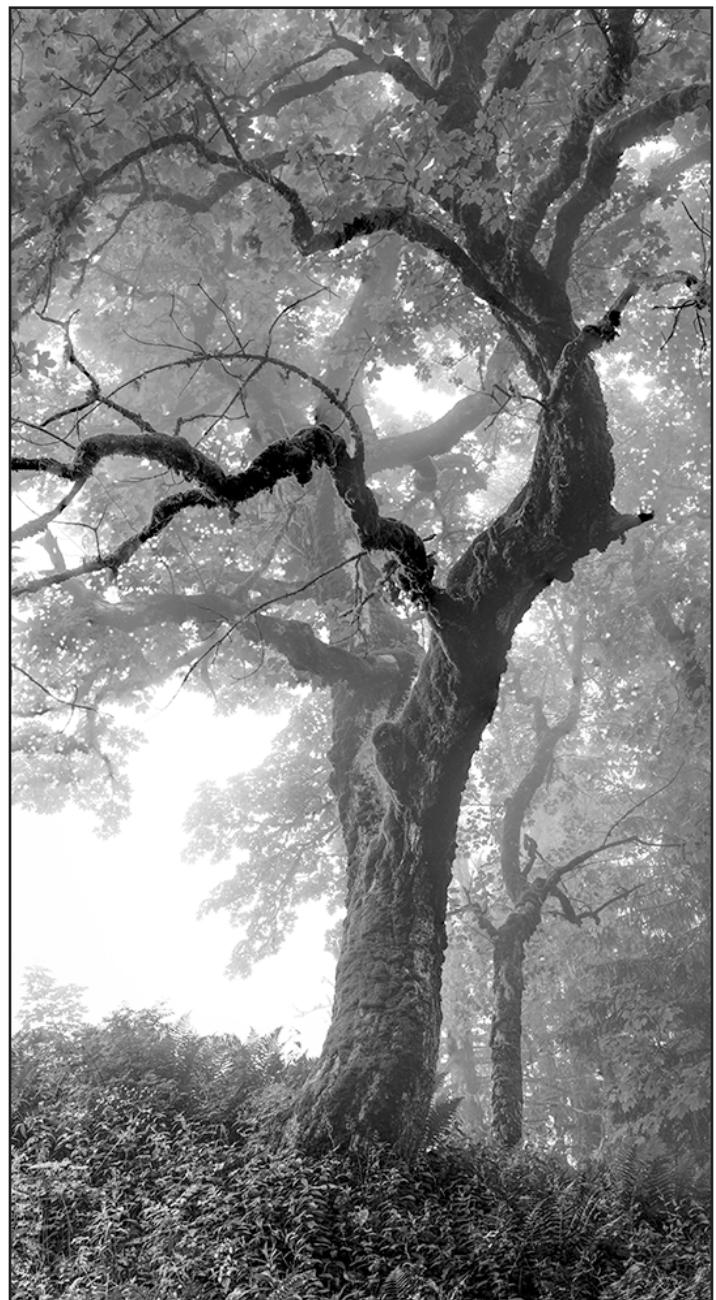
The Fall Breezes Sinfonia

If I could choose what time of year I'd die
I'd choose the Fall
I can imagine it perfectly
I'd take a walk into the woods
I'd breathe in the fresh air
Welcome it into my lungs like an old friend
The fall breeze would start picking up
Its chill surrounding me *con affetto*
I'd Surround myself with trees full of red and orange leaves
The breeze would control them
Making them sing and dance in *armonia*
The breeze becoming a conductor
Its orchestra being the trees and leaves
Making the fall breezes Sinfonia finally complete
I'd let the breeze take me with it
Carry me to my destination
It wouldn't rush me
It'd wait its time til I was settled
The breeze playing *allargando*
I'd finally settle onto a tree that could hold me against it
I'd want to be embraced in my final moments
I would listen to the breeze's music
Fully embracing the orchestras swell
Let it swallow me *amoroso*
Let it be the one to help me die peacefully
For I'd trust the breeze to take care of me kinder than mankind would
In my final moments I'd watch the sky darken
Allow the leaves fall on top of me
Shielding me from the world
I'd take in the music again
The smell of the air
Feel the stiff touch of the tree holding me

-by Layna Jade Sheppard

Honorable mention

As the breezes Sinfonia ended *calando*
I'd be ready for my departure
With the world ready to let me go
I'd find myself sinking into the ground
Letting the fall breeze devour me
Let it seep into my pores
My bones
And lastly
My soul



CANADA MADNESS

-by Stefen Lempert

He called it the Canada madness.

We had all gone on a road trip, up to Ottawa, for fall break. It was a long drive, but a gorgeous one — the trees every shade of orange and red, leaves scattered across the side of the road. We reached the border around sunset, passing through without any hiccups. The border patrol guy was bored, maybe. We were waved right through. The sky, the views, the conversation, an Airbnb vacation ahead of us: our spirits were high.

It was about an hour into Canada when Ethan began acting strange.

At first, we assumed it to be another joke of his. It was always something with him: some new long winded bit, a winding road to a punchline. A pretense with a straight face, his previous one was an ongoing back and forth with the nearby Taco Bell under a variety of names. So when he began muttering to himself, none of us took any notice. Classic Ethan, we thought. And that was our mistake. I wonder now: would any of us have been able to prevent what happened? My psych class calls it counterfactual thinking, the phenomenon of imagining different endings to scenarios that have already happened. What if? What if we did it different? What then?

We were on the freeway, cruising through the dusk as the stars began to peek out overhead, still surrounded by the trees on either side.

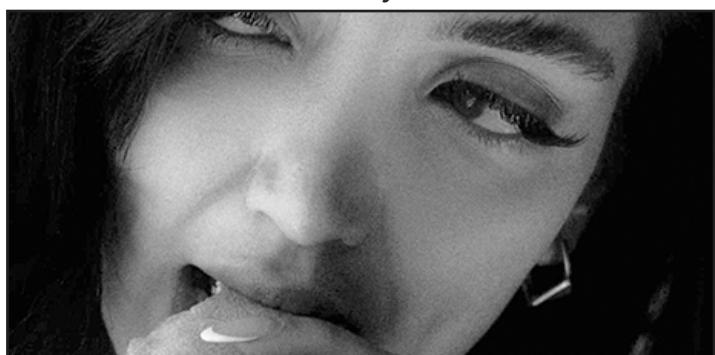
"Guys," Ethan says. "I think I'm getting the Canada madness."

"Oh really," we said. "And pray tell, what is Canada madness?"

"Well, you know. It's kind of like, well, it's like when you get to Canada and you just get the Canada madness and you start getting crazy. I mean, come on. You guys have never heard of this?"

"No," we said. He relented: "Fine. Whatever." We thought that would be the end of it.

And so we drove onwards. By the time the sun had completely set, he was twitching, leg bouncing in the backseat. We were beginning to take more notice. Usually, he couldn't keep a straight face that long. And yet, even that began to fade into the background, joined by the monotony of the road stretching ahead of us and the stars silently above.



A few more hours and we finally made it to the Airbnb. Exhausted, each of us stumbled through the front door, dropping bags into our respective rooms. Too tired to notice Ethan still twitching, mumbling, head jerking to the side at every slight noise. He entered his room and closed the door. We were all busy unpacking. Again, I can't help but wonder. What if we had been paying attention? Would he still have both legs? Or would we have been unable to prevent the Canada madness from taking hold of our poor friend?

It was about a half hour when we realized we hadn't heard from him, other than a brief loud gnawing sound, which had been quickly drowned out by our Spotify playlist playing from the speaker.

We opened the door and he had chewed his leg clean off. In a series of lunging movements, bizarrely akin to the Pixar lamp, he hobbled out the door and into the night.

We never saw him again. The Canada madness took him. ☠

Hargett

-by Rock Goblin

Third Place

He had eyes like a breakfast table blanketed by the sun. Everybody wanted them. They were curtained by long, delicate lashes that fluttered like a dying bird.

When he looked at you, it was as if the world was ending, and you were the only one left, and we all loved him for it.

For weeks, he coasted along, buoyed by the affections we dropped at his feet, his loyal bitches obeying his every word. But then someone had a cousin. And the cousin had irreputable proof.

When he cast off to Elba with his birds, everyone was glad for it.

I still wanted his eyes to be mine.



My Heart stood in the court room — this was the game we played. Today, I was to be the prosecutor and She would defend my monsters.

There, I laid the frenzied beast at Her feet. She saw it for what it was, and the gruesome wounds my anxieties caused it. Her cool hand calmed the rage, as I tore it to shreds.

"What good is a trinket, if taking it causes grief?"

"What good would happiness bring if it was torn out of the hands of the dead?"

"How do I know if they really will be mine?"

Her stillness cut through the chaos, my swan across the lake. My Heart was never wrong, and even now she guided me along.

So, I decided that they would be mine.



Everyone agreed it had been a terrible accident. Everyone agreed he was lucky to be alive at all. Everyone agreed that if it had happened sooner, at least he wouldn't have had so many accidents waiting for him to return.

Some people celebrated.

After the accident, his followers increased in number, the bleeding hearts, the sympathetic, everyone who was still in love with those birds. Even my own dogs betrayed me for the memory of a good meal.

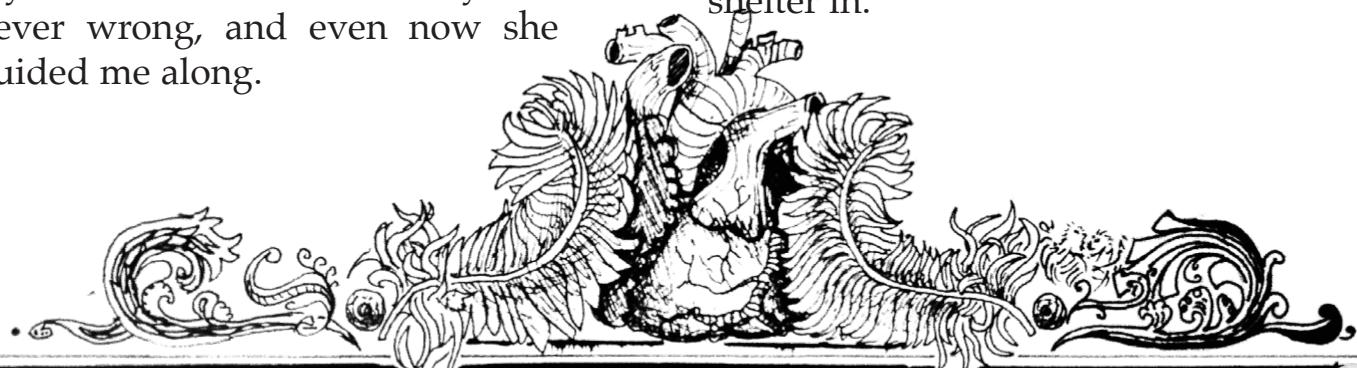
His eyes still held a dying world.
I still wanted them.



We went to court again, my Heart and I. This time, it was the angels speaking. They wanted certainty, and closure. They wanted tranquility not yet found, free from the binds of others. This time, however, I was the defendant.

"What use is peace if it is not constant?"
"What use is closure if it is not certain?"
"When will I know I am done?"

Her frantic pacing whipped the air into a storm. This time it was I, not she who was to cut through the knot. I offered her my compass, and gave her a harbor to shelter in.





Together, safe, we worked.



He liked to run. Both away from accidents, and towards new ones. It made catching his eyes even the more difficult.

The game was the best I had ever played.

My dogs, hungry again, slipped through the forest like shadows on water.

We had tracked him from the camp, until even the faintest smell of human had long been forgotten. From my vantage in the trees, I watched him.

It was easy to have accidents in the woods, alone. My dogs had enough sense to stay back.

His confidence tainted the air around him, as a magnificent buck, unnoticed, slipped away from the would-be killer.

My bow strained against me.

The crisp air was split by a falling leaf, floating lazily to the ground. His gun was still strapped to his back, and his hat covered his ears.

My arrow, remembering the tree it had been rendered from, took root.



Years later, we got a house together, us two hags. My Heart, long freed from the cage it had been stuffed in, lazed contentedly in our bed. Our world was filled with warmth, and fat, happy dogs with golden brown eyes. ☺



The Raven (Brainrot Edition)

First Place

-by Sam W.



'Twas dark as fuck, yo, oh so creepy, while I raw dogged reading, eepy
Searching books I left on read, no "reading arc", the words unsure

While I thought with tired aura, rapid rhymes crept through my door, bruh

Of a rizzler quickly rapping, rapping at my book-fort door

"sybau o'er there, you're serving 'f-tier rapper'-core!"

This for real, no cap more

Bet, delulu I was never, it was in the ick December
When the unaliving fire shone its drip upon the floor

While I glazed for coming daybreak, coping, sobbing, seething, headache

Lost in all the sauce of heartbreak – missing rizzy queen Lenore

She's the sigma lady giving "slay queen" aura I adore

Name mute. Helen Keller-core

Plus the soggy, sus, un-sigma curtains colored purple ligma

Made me tweak – they made me freak – like some glitched NPC behavior

Slay my scaredy aura, pookie, sounds outside are super spooky

Horror beyond comprehension? Surely just a visitor...

Tweaking heart I must ignore...

To the dark abyss I gazed, heart beating like I had been tazed

I, a beta, faced toward the big dick energy galore

'Twas no yapping but the clapping, of my ass-cheeks overlapping.

With my growing fear boner, I whispered out "my queen Lenore?"

I got ghosted, as my whisper came back to me through the door.

Just an echo, what a bore...

Then I steeled my brave cahones, knees were weak just like mayonnaise
"King", I blurted, "slay-queen or, please, retcon all my trauma lore

I, extremely eepy-deepy, did not hear your raps-so-creepy.

Yes, your raps were quiet-maxxing, like a sneaky imposter

Now you're waiting there, I'm sure, I FINNA open up the door"

Waiting for me: darkness more...

Feeling like a skibidi – I turned away, ready to flee.

Fear had followed me, despite respite, when rapping I heard more

"Wow, my window's NOT bing chilling... Loud! Like metal pipe that's falling!"

"This is giving 'sussy baka boomer window visitor'"

What the sigma's lurking there? It's giving 'Freddy's Pizza'-core...

Just the howling wind galore...

Through the shutter came a flutter, I discovered with a shudder...

That a bigass bird stepped through into my reading room decor

I was shook as it stood there, so nonchalant without a care

Soon it flew across the room to mew above my big-ass door

Then it sat and shat all o'er my bust of Tung Tung Tung Sahur.

Standing there, wow, so demure.

Its shoddy drip unparalleled, its goofy-goober look long quelled

Its aura somehow tricked my frown and then it turned it upside down.

"feathers, patchy; plumage, plucked. You look like you've just been fucked.

Spooky scary raven brotha, why've you flown above my door?

You've travelled far. What is your name? Do you arrive to share your lore?"

Croaked the raven "Nah, oer naur!"

Holy guac, this bird can talk! An Aussie accent, not a squawk!

Still, its rizzy Aussie squawkings mean but nought; its words a bore.

Ask Anypony, they'll all say "a crazy thing occurred today"

For nopony has ever seen a bird above their big-ass door

Shitting on their favorite bust of brainrot dude Tung Tung Sahur,

With the alias "Oer Naur."

But the gov-drone (for we know that real birds are as rare as snow)
 Ejaculated (like prof Slughorn) those two words that made me mourn
 Then I thought, as that "bird" fluttered, 'bout Lenore being buttered
 And I muttered "you will leave me, just as lover birds before-
 You will go to get the milk and take my hopes right out that door?"
 Then the bird said "nah, oer naur."

Awe-struck by the big gov-drone, I exercised my thinking bone
 "Surely", I said, "what it spoke was learned from men, not nature-folk
 The tone was soft and very rizzy, but its words so full of mis'ry
 Thus its previous Dommy-mommy must've been so goth girl-core
 Sadly yearning for her Sub, oh what a burden that she bore
 What a tragedy, oer naur!"

But the Raven got me thinking, so consumed I ceased my blinking
 So I man-spread 'cross my sofa watching bird and bust and door;
 Thus my sofa gave a hug, and I felt snug, like bug in rug
 "Ay caramba, I don't know. What's the sussy raven lore?
 What's the shoddy, patchy, drip-less bird upon Tung Tung Sahur-
 Mean by saying 'nah, oer naur?'"

Its gaze intense, it did not blink; its words and timing made me think
 Its fiery eyes lasered my titties like the Nazi Homelander
 Thus I thought in sexy pain, just stewing in my sweaty stain
 On the Pride of Vance I laid, the velvet that the lamp shone o'er
 That's the light that used to silhouette my rizzy queen Lenore!
 Her shadow I'll see nevermore...

Then, I thought, the air got denser – doubling grams per each cubed meter
 Changed by sneaky angels, pouring stanky perfume on the floor
 "Yo," I cried, "my sweet release from heartbreak's long held-over lease!
 With this treasure I do summon, great release from queen Lenore;
 Drink the ichor of sweet Lethe so I'll forget of lost Lenore!"
 Said the raven, "nah, oer naur."

"Raven, you're", I yelled (so angry!), "evil, not like mustard tangy;
 Whether Rizzler sent, or whether blizzard pushed you to my door,
 My life is desolate and empty, thus you come here just to tempt me?
 In my House of Horrors, I stand, begging for some needed closure
 Fog is coming, I must know, oh, is there respite past The Door?
 Squacked the raven "nah, oer naur."

"You're so evil", I yelled flustered, "not like tangy Dijon mustard!
 Swear upon yo momma's life, to tell the truth and end this strife
 Brimming balls and heavy heart do make me miss my other part.
 Does a rizzy queen await me when I cross the ghastly Door?
 Fair and glowing gamer girl whom the Angels call Lenore?
 Smirked the raven "nah, oer naur."

"You cringy creature of the night", I shrieked in anger and in fright.
 "Don't pull up again, you baka, or I'll cover you in gore!
 If you leave as much as guano, it will end for you 'no bua-no'!
 Less of 'digging in my head', and 'diggin in your butt twin' more!
 Do not shaft my broken heart, and get off Tung Tung Tung Sahur!"
 Belched the raven "nah, oer naur."

Still that raven, never parting, still is sitting, still is sharting.
 Camping on the chokepoint situated just above my door
 With his demon-scaring eyes, he dreams of all my hope's demise.
 The freaky shadow cast by lamplight shines his drip across the floor
 And that shadow traps my soul, and edges me with lovestruck war.
 Am I free? Never, oer naur.



May Pak Crashes Out

-by Alex Johnson

If you keep drinking matcha, you're gonna turn green like Elphaba!"

May Pak, a 1st year SOIS major studying Quantum Computing, was livid. She'd ordered a large matcha for the 67th time at Artesano's just to be ridiculed by the RIT Dining worker.

"Nuh uh. Mm mm," murmured the president of the RIT Satanic Club, shaking their head. "No way the Artesano's cashier said that to you."

"And just last week," continued May, "I went apple picking at Wickham Farms with some girls from my orientation group, and I got one of those apple cider donuts, y'know?"

"Yeah, and?" asked the Satanic Club president.

"One girl called me fat! It was literally just ONE donut!" cried May, holding up one finger.

"That's crrrrrraaaazy... maybe she meant 'phat'?" said the Satanic Club president, trying to hold back their own laughter.

"Excuse me? Uh, no, she didn't! I think she works at RITZ too!" May was in a frenzy now. "These RIT Dining workers, like, hate me or something?? The other day, I was at Gracies, and I was getting some, like, BBQ, and the bread they gave me had, like, MOLD on it!"

"Classic Gracies," muttered the Satanic Club president.

"And that's why I need your help," explained May. "I've got like, three opps!"

"Right," nods the Satanic Club president. "Uh-huh, uh-huh. We're gonna summon a low-level demon from Hell, so you can use it to zap them and get revenge."

May rubbed her hands gleefully as she followed the president outside to the dark woods behind Grace Watson Hall. "Ohh man, I hope we get someone good- I mean- evil. Maybe A tier, or B tier?"

"Yo chill..." called out the president. "It's really not like a Gacha game at all."

DEAR READER, NOTHING IS WRONG WITH YOUR ZINE. YOU ARE ABOUT TO EMBARK ON A JOURNEY THAT BENDS THE IMAGINATION BEYOND ITS LIMIT, CHURNING TOGETHER POP CULTURE, FOOD, AND RELIGION. BRACE YOURSELVES AS YOU VENTURE INTO... THE GRACIES DINNERTIME THEATRE!

October 31st, 6:16 AM

The Korean girl from San Jose stood in front of a circle of half-melted candles. The chilly wind viciously attacked her skin through her sweater and sweatpants. I'm gonna need to put on some hand moisturizer... and ChapStick after this because gee-whiz it's cold, thought May. "Hey, how much longer?" she whined.

"SHUT UP, woman!" screamed the club president in a shrill voice. "I'm concentrating!"

Did they just tell me to shut up? Boy, this is super lame. I can't believe I thought we'd summon a demon from-

SHOOM! The candle flames suddenly stood up vertically and extended upwards maybe 25 yards into the air before extinguishing, leaving only the moon to illuminate the dark, shadowy woods.

"Holy smokes!" cried May. "What the blazes was that?!"

"What the blazes indeed," boomed a deep, creepy behind her.

"HEY! Who the heck is standing behind me?!" demanded May.

The president of the Satanic Club answered, "It worked! We summoned a demon from Hell, and it's basically like, a genie floating behind you, or a... y'know Jojo's Bizarre Adventure?"

"Like... Stone Free?"

"Yeah, basically. No one else except us two can see it."

And so, May came into possession of a low-level demon from Hell named Peggraft. It was an androgynous humanoid with oily, orange and black skin that swirled and constantly moved like the storms on the surface of Jupiter. Several small bumps of various lengths protruded from its head. Its eyes were glossy black ovals with grooves in them, like sideways roly-polies.

Later that morning, May walked on the Quarter Mile. Talking to Peggraft, May bluntly blurted out, "You're real ugly, y'know that?"

"I haven't been promoted to incubus yet, that's why," explained Peggraft.

"Oh. Okay, that makes sense, actually. So, how does this deal work?"

"You got three people you hate. That's three opportunities to warp reality however you wish."

"Oh sweet. No catch?"

"Anyone who doesn't believe that *He* died and rose is going to Hell anyways. So, what's our first task today?" asked Peggraft.

October 31st, 9:30 AM

May walked towards Artesano's. She stood behind a corner and peered out behind it. She lifted up her right hand and pointed it like a finger gun, aiming at the worker. "Heh heh heh! I can't wait to see what happens next!"

However, before she could shoot the RIT Dining worker, a ghostly apparition of a matcha with angel wings descended from the ceiling. "Maaaaayyyyy," he cried out eerily. "I am... the GHOST OF THE MATCHA! I'm here to stop you from making a decision you will... REGRET! O O o o o o O O oooooHhhhhh!"

"What the...?" May was confused.

She looked at Peggraft, but it just shrugged its shoulders. "That RIT Dining worker is a member of the RIT environment club. Do not hurt her! She planted two trees the other day and picked up some garbage littered on the side of the road!" continued the matcha ghost.

"Who gives? By the way, you look like a stupider version of Navi from Ocarina of Time. I must've taken too much Advil or something because... jeez louise!"

May's thumb slammed down. ZAP! The worker's blood turned into gasoline, her hair became plastic six-pack rings for soda cans, and everything else transformed into Styrofoam peanuts. Truly, a twisted, nightmarish parody of the fate of Lot's wife. "Hair today, gone tomorrow!" exclaimed Peggraft.

May scurried away before anyone realized what had happened. Back in the privacy of her Res Hall A dorm room, May discussed the events with Peggraft. "That was so crazy!" she exclaimed.

"One down, two more to go," Peggraft mused in a sing-song voice.

"What was the deal with that transparent matcha with wings?"

"Suddenly growing a conscience or something? I had nothing to do with that," answered Peggraft.

"Er... I dunno," replied May sheepishly.

Later that afternoon, May returned to The SHED. "Look, Peggraft!" she whispered.

"There! She's the one who called me fat when I ate a donut! Boy, this is gonna be good! I- I mean, evil!" chuckled May.

May raised her left elbow, placing her right hand on her left wrist, like a sniper steadyng her rifle. She closed one eye and aimed for the girl's head. But before May could pull her imaginary trigger, an apple cider donut with angel wings flew down from the ceiling of the SHED.

"Again?! What's going on!" she cried

out bewildered.

"I am... the GHOST OF THE APPLE CIDER DONUT! Due to the hole in the center of me, you may call me... the Holey Ghost!"

"Yeah, no, I'm not gonna call you that," muttered May as she turned away, trying to ignore the donut flapping and fluttering its wings, hovering a mere few inches away from her face.

"May, I know what you're thinking of doing to that poor girl, but please don't do it. It's so cruel! It's super mean!"

"Yeah, well, maybe she shouldn't have called me FAT then, huh? Maybe she shouldn't have made me feel bad!"

May moved her hand so her finger pointed through the donut's hole. She pulled her imaginary trigger. ZAP! In an instant, her target's bones, internal organs, and blood were all turned into strawberry jam. The girl bloated up and her legs folded underneath her. Her bulbous body collapsed and the impact caused her to burst open like a swollen water balloon, splattering all over the floor.

"I changed my mind. Worshiping demons is pretty dumb, actually."

"Nuh-uh," the president scoffs. "Satan is freakin' dope."

"EW GROSS!" cackled May with evil laughter.

May covered her mouth in shock as another student, glued to his phone, accidentally walked through the puddle, leaving a trail of sticky red footprints in his wake. "What an idiot! How did he not see that?"

However, unlike the Matcha Ghost, the Holey Ghost didn't leave May alone. "Peggraft! Look!" May pointed at the angelic donut. "This is like that matcha ghost!"

"Shoo! Go away!" snarled Peggraft, gnashing its teeth.

"Hey," chirped the Holey Ghost. "You realize that you only have one wish left? You can still revert things back to normal, you know! Ctrl-Z! Simple as that."

"And what if I don't want to, huh? I just want to see those idiot losers die the most horrific deaths imaginable, yeah?"

Peggraft floated over. "Scram, you dumb, stupid dessert! No one cares about you or your God."

"Killjoy," muttered the Holey Ghost as he flew away.

Later that evening, all over the news, Instagram, Tik Tok, WhatsApp, KakaoTalk, and on the RIT Reddit, news spread like wildfire of the two mysterious, supernatural deaths of the two girls. The families and loved ones of the two girls grieved, as did their friends and classmates.

"Jeez, Peggraft, I might've gone a little overboard, huh?" asks May.

"Meh. I mean, you do have reality altering powers. What did you think would happen?"

"I mean, well, I don't know. I just, I never HAD this much power before, y'know? I thought they were just like, pranks, y'know? I didn't... I didn't mean... I didn't realize all of THIS would happen buh-because of... 'cuz of me..."

That night, May took a long time to fall asleep, as she rolled over the many, many thoughts in her mind.

The next morning, November 1st, May woke up after sleeping in. "Rise and shine," exclaimed Peggraft with jubilation. "Her majesty, theeee Empress of Evil, theeeee Violent, Villainess of Vengeance, the Maestro offfffff Malediction!"

"Uhhhhghhhh. I'm just not feeling it today, Peggraft! Leave me alone!" May threw a pillow at the ghoul, which phased through it with a puff of smoke.

"SIGH!"

May exhaled and slumped her shoulders before plopping back down onto her pillow. "I just... I just keep thinking, maybe it's not too late. It's not too late to... turn things back to normal."

Peggraft blinked. "You're kidding," it said.

"Nah... I'm not."

Flabbergasted, Peggraft sputtered, "Whuh-wuh-well, you-you're gonna have to, well what?! You got two dead girls, and I'M still haunting you. How do you expect to undo everything you did? Huh? You're just a little yellow girl getting chased by ghosts! Tell me exactly how you think you can reset things back to normal, you absolute IDIOT?"

"Exactly that, you dumb demon. No wonder you've never been prompted. You're just not very clever."

May clapped her hands and used her third and final reality warp.

October 31st, 6:14 AM

It was October 31st again. Before the death of the girl who called May fat. Before the death of the Artesano's worker. Before Peggraft was even summoned. May blinked her eyes rapidly before running towards the circle of candles. The president of the Satanic Club looked up wildly. "Hey! What are you-?!"

May kicked the candles and stomped them out. The president was confused. "I thought... you said you wanted...?"

"I changed my mind. Worshiping demons is pretty dumb, actually."

"Nuh-uh," the president scoffs. "Satan is freakin' dope."

"Whatever," said May, shrugging her shoulders. "But you might want to look into the Holey Ghost instead."

"Excuse me? The... Holy Ghost??" exclaimed the president of the Satanic club.

But May no longer heard the president as she walked away back to her dorm in Res Hall A. She took her first step out of the cold and into the warmth; out of the darkness and into the light. ☺

THIS HAS BEEN... YOUR VENTURE INTO THE FANTASY WORLD THAT LIES WITHIN THE GRADIENT BETWEEN REALITY AND IMAGINATION... THE TWILIGHT REALM OF HALF-TRUTHS AND FAKE LIES KNOWN AS... *GRACIES DINNERTIME THEATRE!* CONTROL OF THE ZINE NOW RETURNS... BACK TO YOU!

Breathless, I'm running for my life across campus. I've made it nearly a mile from Gosnell by now. My legs are starting to cramp.

I look back and it's still chasing me: e^x . It never goes away. Unchanging, relentless e^x .

I run faster. Faster than any human could. The Rochester wind blows directly at me, knocking me off my feet onto the hard brick, and I see it looming over me. My world goes black.

I passed Torture I and Torment II. But even in Triple the Tears III I can't escape it! e^{xy} is back, worse than ever. And in Expressions of Depression next semester I'm sure I'll see... *him* again.

Leonhard Euler has been dead nearly two and half centuries and *still* this man fills me with terror. After a close call a couple decades ago I hibernated for a while, stewed in my coffin another hundred years and foolishly hoped he'd be gone by the time I crept out again. Wrong. He just won't leave me be.

At long last I gave up on hiding and went back to college last year (my seventh time. It's really improved since 1720). Rochester is far enough from Basel, Switzerland, right? No. He's somehow wormed his way into every single rotten class of mine.

Really, Leonhard, why do this to me? You could've confessed in 1722, when we were young "competitors" in that philosophy tournament. Instead you've gone down some terrible path, determined to make me miserable instead. I see you laughing from beyond your grave. I see your formulas in my sleep.

I know what I have to do to end this curse. I must get rid of your most famous number: **e**.

No wonder your ghost is haunting the Gosnell halls! Gleason too! What's next,

Eastman? The Student Hall for Euler Development? I must stop this madness.

It took many years of scheming but I'm finally here, RIT, the tech school, the temple of **e**. I made sure to bring my weathered, gigantic spellbook, gifted from an anonymous wizard lover. I knew it would come in handy someday. But I had to bide my time and wait for the day where I would look the least suspicious hauling it around campus. Halloween!

Late that night, still battered from encountering my least favorite function a few hours prior (hey, the bruises match my "costume") and pretending to be a lost freshman trick-or-treating, I sneak into the academic tunnels. My backpack is full of supplies and my fangs are freshly sharpened. My Halloween costume includes my prized velvet cloak to shield against any tricks, my monthly budget's amount of hair gel, and a rotting pumpkin to throw if all else fails.

As I climb the stairs up into Gosnell I eat a 100 Grand bar and mentally steel myself to see Leonhard's ghostly blue body.

The dim lights on the first floor flicker as I sneak past the fish tank, scanning for any paranormal mathematician activity. I nearly jump out of my skin as I hear muttering from below. Peeking over the atrium railing, I see a shimmering blur muttering to itself in the lobby. Every chalkboard is full. Over and over I see it: **e**. I watch the ghostly Leonhard, maybe better described as Leonsoft-and-transparent, manically writing out of the corner of my eye as I grip the foul-smelling pumpkin tighter. I reach into my bag and pull out the spellbook to look for my trusty banishment spell. Flipping through the pages spews up centuries-old dust and I cough, freezing in fear. The ghost's muttering stops.

Seemingly frozen to the floor as he fixes his gaze on me, I throw the pumpkin

down the stairs towards my target. It goes straight through him and splats onto the atrium's glittering tiles, breaking his cold gaze and allowing me to run down the hall. I frantically sprint and flip through the pages again, hacking as my fingers struggle to grip the dusty paper. After what feels like minutes I find the spell and turn around to face the ghostly Leonhard flying towards me at an alarming speed. Puffing up in my cloak and using my most imposing voice to banish this vengeful spirit, I begin to chant, *Geh, böser Geist! Komm nie-*

Ah shit. I can't chant fast enough (should've practiced my German) and the ghost blasts right through me like a wave of ice, trying to grab my book as I shudder and fall hard onto my back. Watching him from the floor I steel myself once more, jumping up towards him. I turn into a small bat and dive, grabbing my book as it slips between his fingers, flying through his legs and through a lab door. Back in a more humanoid form under the lab bench, I rifle through the pages in search of a more effective spell and gasp as I find it.

From the very back of the book I pull out my trump card: the love letter, cleverly disguised as a mathematical cheat sheet, you made me all those years ago, signed with your name in hearts. It pains me to see it again. Clutching it tightly against my chest as I hear your undead cries grow nearer, I realize I have no choice. I have to let it go. Shouting to be heard above the ghostly wind I scream and run towards the apparition, plunging the confession straight into his chest as I rip it apart.

With mixed feelings I watch the spirit of my half-enemy dissolve into glowing goop on the floor. The ghostly light slowly fades, but you can never be too careful – I have to get rid of the evidence. I wipe my hands on someone's leftover petri dishes and collect the spellbook from under the bench.

My next spell replaces e with my very own symbol: O. Named after my favorite drink. Finally, with renewed German

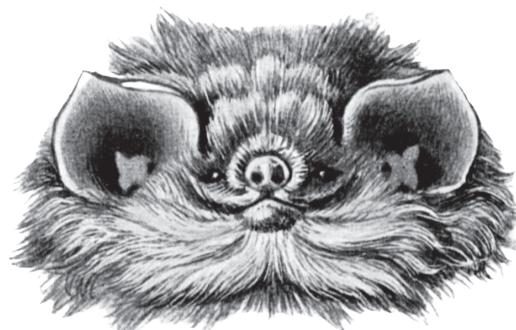
confidence, I can try that banishment spell again, but the book already feels... empty without the letter. Surely just a figment of my imagination. It was just an old piece of parchment after all. Oh, what I would give to do it all again in the modern time. Ignoring all those thoughts, I begin chanting. The goop pile begins to glow an ominous yellow. Backing away and yelling the spell to drown out my ever-louder thoughts, the bubbling goop vaporizes in a blast of light and the beakers in the room begin to explode. I shriek on beat with the fire alarm. Feeling the air grow thin and dodging glass shards bouncing off the lab walls I run outside, coughing and clutching the spellbook under my cloak. When I come to my senses, Gosnell is up in flames. Through the smoke I see the remains of the sign's e on the ground, and reborn like a phoenix is *GosnOll Hall*.

As the ringing in my ears dims I can hear Public Safety speeding towards the burning building. I start running and take refuge on the unpleasantly wet Fountain Park lawn, leaning against the glowing RIT sign. I'm shakily sipping on my Blood-Aid to regain some strength when a group of engineers passes me. "Pregaming for the Halloween party?" one of them asks, carrying his own suspiciously red drink.

"Yeah... Halloween" I say, laughing along with them. They're sure to have a great holiday night now that half of their homework is gone, because we all know engineering is just worse math.

I'm sorry it had to end like this, Leonhard. You really were a genius, even from the grave.

XO-XO,
Drac U. Later ☕



REMEMBERANCE

-by Astrid

I

t began in autumn, when the trees blazed gold and crimson beyond the cottage window. The wind stirred the leaves, sending them spinning like embers. Across from her, Arthur waited, expecting her usual remark about the colors. But this October, silence settled between them like a fog.

She turned to him. A confused smile curled at the corners of her lips, soft but distant.

"Hello there," she said softly. "Have we met?"

Arthur's chest tightened. He reached for her hand. "I think we have."

Her gaze lingered on his face, searching for something lost, before drifting back to the window, where leaves fell like forgotten memories.

As days passed, the pieces of her mind slipped quietly away. Her fingers no longer found the melody of their favorite song when she hummed in the kitchen. She forgot names, and the scent of the pumpkins she once grew. Arthur watched her move through the house, touching familiar things as if for the first time.

One evening, as they sat together in the dim firelight, her face softened. She frowned, eyes on her hands.

"Arthur... do you know if I have a husband?"

His heart twisted, and a lump rose in his throat. He reached for her hand, as though touching her could somehow bring everything back. He swallowed hard. "Yes, Ellen. You've been married nearly sixty years."

Her eyes softened. "Do you think he was kind?"

He smiled through the ache. "He loves you very much."

That night, she reached for his hand beneath the blankets—a small, instinctive gesture that still found him in the dark, trying to find a tether.

Honorable mention

"Arthur?" she whispered. "Did we ever live by a lake?"

He nodded. "We still do."

Then one evening, she looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. Her gaze was so soft, so unguarded, it felt like the first time she had ever seen him. There was no recognition, no memory, just a tender curiosity, as if he were a stranger, and yet, somehow, everything about him was familiar in the way an old song might feel, even when the lyrics escape you.

"Will you marry me?" she asked, voice trembling.

Arthur cupped her face, tears glinting in the firelight. "Yes," he said. "Every day, in every life."

For a heartbeat, her eyes sparked with recognition. Then it was gone, but her smile remained, warm as autumn sunlight.

And though her memories faded with the falling leaves, Arthur knew she would always find her way back to him. ☺



Development

-by Astrid

The sun hadn't yet shaken the fog from the horizon, and the air outside was thick with the damp, earthy scent of fallen leaves. A girl with hair pinned neatly above her head pushed open the shop door, the chill of October slipping inside with her. The bell above, a relic from better days, didn't so much ring as rattle, giving off a hollow sound that sounded like the last breath of a broken music box.

The store's shelves were lined with outdated camera models and dusty rolls of film. The soft hum of the lights flicking on made it feel a little less deserted. She made her way to the back of the store. The punch clock was out of place. It was the newest piece of equipment in the entire building, even though it was still ancient by tech geek standards. Pulling out her card, she slid it into the machine, clocking in for her shift. It wasn't the kind of place anyone her age dreamed of working, but in a town where the only other jobs involved graveyard shifts or pumpkin stands, she was lucky to have it.

She waited on the counter, scrolling through her phone. The battery icon blinked red, much like the neon "OPEN" sign sputtering weakly in the window. Business was slow, always had been. The only visitors lately were old drunk guys stumbling in from the Halloween bar crawl up the street or locals desperate for last-minute party photos.

The eerie and abrupt sound of the door's chime snapped her out of her trance. A lanky man let go of the door, allowing it to swing back into place. Instead of examining the merchandise, he strode right up to the counter. She leaped off the counter, noticing a small roll of film clutched in his hand.

"Need me to develop that?" she said, eyeing the roll in his now sweaty palm.

He didn't speak, just nodded. His fingers were white and cold as marble

when he handed it over. Despite this, the warmth of his sweat still peeked through and lingered on her skin a moment too long. Gross.

"That'll be \$9.99."

He dumped a handful of change and crumpled bills onto the counter. She counted: \$9.87. Close enough. She didn't even want to bother getting that last bit of change out of him. It's not like her boss checked, anyway. She slid his receipt towards him, avoiding his touch.

"Your photos will be available around the same time tomorrow," she said, glancing up at him expectantly.

He pivoted his foot, spinning to face the door, and left without a word. The bell clunked again, followed by the soft whisper of leaves skittering across the sidewalk, and he was gone, obscured by the dark morning frost.

"This town's full of weirdos," she muttered, spinning the film in her hand. The metallic text etched into the roll caught her eye.

For the ones we've lost—and the ones we'll lose.

She frowned. It almost sounded like an epitaph. Curiosity stirred. She grabbed her apron, flipped on the red light in the darkroom, and began developing the film.

The scent of chemicals mingled with the faint must of autumn air sneaking through the cracked window. One by one, faces began to bloom like ghosts on paper, of men, women, children. None familiar. Their eyes all seemed to stare through her.

Too involved in the process, she didn't even notice that the bell had rung. She didn't even notice the heavy footsteps.

Then came the last photograph.

Her pulse quickened.

Why was she staring back at herself?

Why was there a photo of her in the film?

Why was there a warm breath down her neck? ☺

All of them are real, tho

-by Kayleigh Kirchoff

Here I sit, seven hours before the *GDT* writing contest deadline. For the last seven days, my mind has been remiss of anything spooky, scary, or even seasonal. It's like forgetting a word. I can only think of spooky things when it's not October, damn it!

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, I've got writer's block. Creative writing is really hard under pressure, apparently. So I figured, if I can't write a scary fiction novel to rival Frankenstein in three hours, I might as well tell some haunted house stories instead! I love haunted houses!

I've worked as a scare actor for two years. (Not this year though :(because I decided to pay attention to homework instead). It's been crazy. It's been spooky. It's been pretty fun and exciting. You get to meet a lot of cool people at haunted houses. Like, actors will be insane evil chainsaw-wielding murder clowns by night, and normal engineers, college students, nurses, highschoolers, or business owners by day. Like Batman! But with significantly less children.

At night, these secret vigilantes (wanna-be villains?) congregate in garishly decorated "houses". Most actors bring their own costumes, but the place I worked for provided costumes and props for anyone in need. The make-up artists use either air-brush makeup or fake blood to make it complete. (I was a skeleton witch-doctor for my scenes both years. Last year, they even gave me glow-in-the-dark makeup!). At most places, guests are not allowed to wear costumes. Although one time I saw a

guest dressed up as Frozone from *Incredibles*. He was glowing under the blacklights like a radioactive Christmas tree! An anthropomorphized poisonous green beacon of unintentional doom! Now THAT was incredible.

Being a new actor can be scary sometimes, but it's very easy to get the hang of. Most newbies are scared to talk (I was too), so the best advice I can give is to just not talk! Literally. You don't have to talk to be scary. I spent my first two weeks using jump-scares and staring contests and it worked beautifully. My very first night, I was hiding behind a column in my scene. I heard a bunch of guests come around the corner, and a really confident guy saying "I'll go first." So I did what any sane person would do and I jump-scared him. Poor dude jumped so hard I wound up chasing him around the column several times. Ah... good times...

In fact, that column was my favorite place to hide. There were several times where all I had to do was step out, and people would literally sprint away from me in fear (RIP Frank). This one lady thought I was a mannequin and tried to stand next to me. All I had to do was turn my head, and she was screaming "SHE'S REAL!!!" Dang. Being a

mannequin was fun.

We also had a door in my scene. If any large guest groups came through, we would send half the group through the door, effectively splitting them up (Don't worry, it looped back so everyone got reunited in approximately two minutes).



Guests were so unreasonably scared of this door. It was kind of ridiculous. Y'all need to stop being afraid of doors.

My favorite trick to scare guests was to find out their names. I would jumpscare a guest, then secretly ask their partner what their name was and use it in casual conversation. 10/10 tactic, works every time. I think I might be evil.

But I promise that most actors are really nice. If you're not quite sure if the chainsaw's real, the best thing to do is to start dancing. There's a 50/50 chance the actor will join in and dance with you. I've seen it happen many times.

If there's any lessons to be gleaned from these stories, it's that you should definitely force your roommate to go to a haunted house with you. If they say they're too scared, it's because they just need someone to go with! Also, force your best friend to go too, and record their reactions. Also also, stop being afraid of doors!!!! Seriously! I hope you have fun going to your next haunted house!

Love, your friendly neighborhood scare actor <3

P.S. I'm definitely not Spiderman and whoever told you otherwise is lying. ☺



When someone lets out a scream of terror, their soul peeks out of their mouth for a split second. That's why I was shocked to find out that no other demons had staked out a haunted hayride as their feeding ground. It's the perfect opportunity; You scare someone, they scream, you take their soul, and their friends all laugh, assuming that your victim is expressionless out of pure shock and not because they have just become a soulless husk.^[1]

It seemed like it would be an easy feast for me, after all, isn't the whole reason people go to haunted hayrides just to scream their brains out? That's what I thought, at least until the hayride opened for business.

I had staked out a spot in the corner of the walkthrough, where people get off the hayride and have to walk through a spooky haunted house-esque area. None of the actors really questioned my presence there, I think they either thought I was an animatronic or one of the farm owner's

underpaid migrant workers filling in for someone. I tried telling them that I was an actual demon, not some fraud in a costume, but for some reason they kept complimenting me on my method acting.

To my misfortune, my first night there, I learned several reasons why no other demons had taken up residence along with me.

1.) The terrified teen girls. They're the most likely to let out a good scream, but they're weirdly friendly with me.

They keep greeting me and complimenting my costume^[2] and calling me "girlie". Are they trying to insult my masculinity or imply that I am of the homosexual persuasion?^[3]

2.) The young children. Whoever thinks that bringing their tiny child with the brain the size and consistency of a cup of Jello to an event where people covered in gore jump out at them needs to have a mental evaluation. These creatures are not at the age where they can distinguish that the

1 Though in our day and age, who doesn't feel like that already?

2 NOT A COSTUME

3 Plenty of demons are gay, just not me personally. Like Ellen DeGeneres.

man with a chainsaw is an actor who does not mean to hurt them and instead are in genuine fear for their lives because they think them and their family are about to be brutally torn to pieces. Have you ever been kicked in the shins by a five-year-old with steel toed cowboy boots?^[4] Yeah, be grateful for that. If they are old enough to have developed a consciousness, then they just stare at you like a zoo animal.

- 3.) The drunk dads. These are probably the bringers of the aforementioned young children. I don't know how they snuck in alcohol, considering the hayride doesn't sell it or allow it, but they have managed to get themselves plastered enough to scream at whatever poor college student was assigned to be in the cage that night. I often hear screams coming from the path before me, but I am quickly disappointed when it turns out to be one of the drunkards that thinks it's the funniest thing on earth to scream back at the actors. They're annoying enough when incoherent, but when they manage to speak, it is either the most confusing or offensive sentence you have ever heard.
- 4.) The teenage boys. All boys from 11 to 18 should be banned from all haunted houses and hayrides forever. They are never there to get scared,^[5] just to insult and humiliate the actors to crush their own fragile egos. They

told me my horns look like I made them out of paper mache (They are made of bone and are attached to my head), that my face paint is blotchy (I have eczema, okay?), and they ask me how much my "furry ass paid for that moving tail" (My tail has no fur on it? I do not understand). Sometimes they just punch you. Not because of fight or flight, but because they think the law doesn't apply to them. They just punch you. They refuse to stop screaming, but not out of fear. They scream at you when you jump out at them, they scream at you when you scream at them, they scream at you when you aren't even doing anything. They try to provoke you by saying "You're not even scary," even though you just made them piss their pants five seconds ago. I got fed up and flew up above one of them, ready to take his soul by force, but he asked me "What the hell is your fruity Peter Pan looking ass gonna do?", and I was so stunned that he managed to escape.

In short, I am never doing this again. Any contempt I have already held for humans has multiplied tenfold. I used to think that us demons would be the downfall of humanity, but considering how they treat other members of their kind who are being paid minimum wage to stand in the cold and rain until 1 A.M., we need to only stand by and watch while they eventually bring themselves to ruin. ☐

4 Though, I provide this service for a small fee at the unofficial RIT BDSM club. Demon's gotta eat.

5 Literally the point of going to a haunted hayride.



The Woods are Never Silent *Honorable mention*

-by Ada H. Ominam

Characters:

- Jean, young adult, transgender woman.
- Berry, old, not human. Knows much.
- Lucas, adult, man. Jean's Father.

Setting:

A trail through old woods in a small town, approaching sunset.

Notes On Berry:

Berry should be animal, yet deeply human; unnatural, yet belonging to the forest; familiar, yet unknown. Its voice should be as if its lungs are filled too far with wisps of thoughts, and to speak is to let them out one by one to form sentences. Alternatively, its voice may also be like the creaking of branches and rustling of leaves in the wind.

Do not call Berry "he" or "she" or "they". You must remember Berry is an "it".

The Woods are Never Silent

[Twilight. Early fall. A trail cuts through the deep woods, a particularly sturdy tree just off the side of it—the center of the stage. The darkness is creeping in. The last chirps of songbirds. The humming of the insects is growing louder. Enter a weary JEAN, holding a flashlight and carrying a backpack. She sits herself down at the base of the tree, and clutches the bag in her hands.]

JEAN: Mom, Dad... I'm so sorry.

[She reaches into the bag. Whatever's inside, she can't pull it out. She tosses the bag aside, then curls up into a ball.]

JEAN: I can't... Why can't I— God, what do I do?

[She curls up tighter. The humming of the bugs grows softer, the owls' hoots less frequent, and the sun dimmer, until...]



[Darkness. Silence.]

[A beat. Creaking in the woods. Something is in the dark in the venue, not on stage. JEAN perks her head up, and turns on her flashlight, scanning about.]

JEAN: Is anyone there..?

[Silence]

JEAN: It's probably an animal. Deer, maybe. Deer. Definitely deer.

[JEAN sets the flashlight on the ground, illuminating her and the tree, then turns and faces the tree.]

JEAN: What am I doing here? I can't do this. I can't...

[Something in the dark moves closer to the stage.]

JEAN: I have to.

[She opens her bag, and takes out the single content—a few yards of rope. She hangs the rope from the tree, stepping back to observe it.]

JEAN: I don't want this. I don't want this.

[She touches the rope.]

JEAN: This is not what I want to be.

[She grips the rope.]

JEAN: I don't... want... this.

BERRY *[from offstage]*: Quite convincing.

[JEAN jumps in fright. She picks up the flashlight, and scans wildly about.]

JEAN: Who— Where are you?

BERRY *[from the other side of offstage]*: I am where I am needed, it seems.

JEAN: Please, don't call anyone, I'm fine, it's just— *[she starts to tug at the rope, trying to get it down]*... come on, come on— It's just a lapse in judgement. I'm fine, I swear.

BERRY *[in the shadows, onstage]*: Do you take me for a fool?

JEAN: [desperately tugging] No, no, I'm sorry—
But, really—I'm fine, I promise, just... Please.
Keep moving. Forget about this. I don't need
help. Honest!

[A snap of a branch, behind JEAN. She turns, illuminating BERRY with her light. It towers over her. She stumbles and falls backwards.]

BERRY: I tease. But you do need help. [it outstretches its hand.]

JEAN: Wh—what are you?

BERRY: I am Berry.

JEAN: Please... please don't hurt me... [she staggers up to her feet, backing away.]

BERRY: Hurt you?

[BERRY turns to the tree, and effortlessly pulls the rope off it.]

BERRY: I told you.

[BERRY finishes tying the rope]

BERRY: I want to help you, Jean.

[BERRY holds out the rope]

JEAN: No, no... I don't... Please. Don't make me...

BERRY: Make you? No, no, no. Only help you.

JEAN: Then why...

BERRY: Jean, you and I both know you can never go home.

[Silence from JEAN]

BERRY: You asked for an answer, yes?

JEAN: God... no, no, no that can't be it... My parents... no. No! They— I'm their child.



BERRY: I told you. I only want to help.

JEAN: Look, if you're gonna tell me it gets better, I know, I only came out here to prove to myself that I didn't want to, and I did! Got what I wanted, all better! Didn't even have to call 988. I'm okay! I'm just gonna go home, talk things out...

[BERRY begins to tie the rope.]

BERRY: With... Lu...cas... your father, yes?

JEAN: How do you—?

BERRY: I know many things. You are Jean Stone. You are here for college. You miss your mother's chicken parmesan.

JEAN: How do you know all this?

BERRY: Today is your... birthday. Your mother and father came... a surprise visit. They were not supposed to see you... like this, no?

JEAN: What do you want with me?

Their kid. They love me. They can get better, they can learn, they... they...

[JEAN stares at the rope]

BERRY: Do not be afraid. It is for the best. Your parents... the world... they are simply not ready for someone... like you to exist.

[JEAN is silent]

BERRY: Outliers... Anomalies... We are not meant to survive, are we?

[JEAN takes the rope]

JEAN: ...No...

[A slight smirk from BERRY. It quickly suppresses it.]

BERRY: You will choose what is right for yourself, then?

[JEAN nods]

BERRY: Very well. I shall give you the space you deserve.

[BERRY heads to a dark corner of the venue, where it can see the stage, leaving JEAN to stare at the rope in her hands.]

[Contemplation.]

[JEAN sets down the flashlight so that it illuminates her and the tree.]

JEAN: God, Mom, Dad, I'm... I'm so sorry...

[JEAN looks at the rope in her hands., then hangs it from the tree]

JEAN: You know... it's kind of funny. I wanted to see this... this horrible, guttural thing... this snake of string and fiber, dangling from a tree, just waiting for me to fall into its jaws, and have my survival instincts kick in...

[She touches the rope. BERRY is beaming in the darkness.]

JEAN: But when I look at you... This really is for the best. I... I hope this makes it right.

[Rustling in the woods, far away. JEAN stops and looks for it. Just as she's about to go back to the rope, someone very far away calls her name—LUCAS, her father.]

JEAN: Dad..?

LUCAS [far away]: Where are you? Jea—

[A snap of the fingers from BERRY, as it re-enters. LUCAS is cut off by pure silence.]

JEAN: Dad? Dad? Where are you?

BERRY: A trick. Do not listen to him.

JEAN: No, that was my name, my real name! I heard it! He said my name!

BERRY: A trap for his lost son. He just wants to fix you.

JEAN: No. No! You're lying!

BERRY: I am not. I know these things, Jean.

JEAN: Where is he? Why can't I hear him?

BERRY: Speaking with him will only hurt you.

JEAN: You don't know that!

BERRY: I do.

JEAN: I don't know what your game is, but let me see my Dad.

BERRY: I just want to help you.

JEAN: You can help me by letting me see him!

BERRY: So he can drive you here again? You are delaying what must be done.

JEAN: I don't believe you.

[BERRY shakes its head]

JEAN: You're so sure you're right?

BERRY: I am.

JEAN: Then let me see him. Let me talk to him! If you're right, I'll be back anyway.

BERRY: And if I do not?

JEAN: Then I know you're a liar.

BERRY: Very well. But be warned. You will see who your father truly cares for, and it will only hurt you more.

[BERRY snaps its fingers again, and exits. As it leaves, an owl starts to hoot, and the humming of the bugs returns.]

LUCAS [from offstage]: Jean!

JEAN: Dad! I'm over here!

[Enter LUCAS, holding his own flashlight.]

LUCAS: Oh, thank God you're okay.

JEAN: Dad... I'm so sorry...

LUCAS: It's okay kid, it's okay.

JEAN: It's not... I'm...

[LUCAS embraces her]

LUCAS: You're gonna be okay. You're still my s—kid. You're still my kid. You're always gonna be my kid.

JEAN: I'm sorry Dad...

LUCAS: Stop apologizing. You don't need to apologize.

JEAN: Okay, I'm—

LUCAS: And don't apologize for apologizing.

JEAN: Okay...

LUCAS: Just please... talk to us next time. Don't run off. I want you in my life. I don't wanna see you gone.

[A brief pause as the two hold each other. LUCAS breaks their embrace first.]

LUCAS: How long have you been like... this?

JEAN: What do you mean?

LUCAS: Nevermind. Let's just...

JEAN: Like what?

LUCAS: Can't we talk about this at home? Inside? With your mother?

JEAN: Like a girl?

[LUCAS grimaces.]

JEAN: I figured it out before I left for school, and...

LUCAS: Why didn't you tell me, or your mom?

JEAN: I was... I was scared you wouldn't believe me, or... or that you would, and you wouldn't want me.

LUCAS: I mean, if it's between this and you... [he glares at the rope]... I'll take this. But...

[The ambience gets quieter.]

JEAN: But..?

LUCAS: Look, you're clearly not well. It's okay! I've been depressed too. But I don't think this is a healthy way to cope.

[The ambience becomes silent.]

JEAN: You...

LUCAS: Look, Shaun, Jean, whatever you wanna call yourself... Let's just get out of the woods, get back to your mom, and figure this out.

JEAN: Figure this out? Figure what out? What is there for you to figure out? This is who I am! I can't change this, I can't figure myself into something else! I'm not a boy, Dad, I'm...

LUCAS: Don't! Don't. Look, I'm not saying that you have to be a man, I'm just...

JEAN: No, you are! You are saying that!

[LUCAS stammers, boiling.]

LUCAS: Well, it's a lot, okay? You can't expect your mother and I to grasp this instantly! It's not... you...

JEAN: It is me, and I'm not asking you to grasp it instantly!

LUCAS: No, you know what?

JEAN: What?

LUCAS: You're right. You're not asking me anything. You're hiding things from me, and

you're lying to me, and you're running off into the woods at night to do... to... It's like you're... someone else. And I just... God forbid I want my son to end up okay!

JEAN: I... I should've known.

[Enter BERRY, behind LUCAS]

BERRY: I told you.

[LUCAS turns around to see BERRY looming over him]

LUCAS: What the hell?

BERRY: Shhhhh.

[BERRY grabs LUCAS, and tosses him to the ground. It looms over him as he struggles to get back up.]

BERRY: Now do you see who your father truly loves?

JEAN: You were right. I don't know why I gave him another chance.

[JEAN approaches the rope]

LUCAS: Please— don't— I'm... sorry...

JEAN: Are you? Are you really sorry for me? Or are you just feeling sorry that I didn't turn out the way you wanted?

LUCAS: I—

BERRY: Shh.

[BERRY strikes LUCAS back down to the ground. JEAN grasps the rope, and a slow smile starts forming on BERRY'S face.]

JEAN: Don't bother. You won't miss me. You'll just miss your son... and he's already gone.

[BERRY grins as JEAN is dangerously close to the end. LUCAS is struggling as hard as he can to get up.]

LUCAS: Please... I don't wanna lose you, Jean....

[JEAN looks back and forth between her father and the rope.]

BERRY: Hush. You do not love her. You love Shaun; and he has been lost.



[BERRY leans in closely to LUCAS, and starts to smile from ear to ear.]

BERRY [whispers]: But... you may still take solace in knowing your son's killer died tonight.

[BERRY holds LUCAS' head up, forcing him to watch, a twisted smile on its face. LUCAS struggles to break free, but BERRY's grip will not break. JEAN sees BERRY'S smile.]

JEAN: Dad... How did you find out about my name?

LUCAS: [strained] After you ran off when we saw you, we asked everyone we could if they saw where you went... We just... wanted to find you. They all said your name is Jean...

[BERRY tightens its grip]

LUCAS: Truth is... I didn't care that it wasn't the name I gave you... I just... I just want you to come home. I just want to have dinner with you. I just want to give you your birthday presents.

BERRY: Hush! Liar!

LUCAS: I don't care... what you are... so long as you're not a dick... and so long as you're not dead...

[JEAN steps away from the rope and towards BERRY. BERRY'S smile melts]

JEAN: Let go of my Dad.

BERRY: Why? He does not love you. No one could love you. Not like this.

JEAN: He does, he just... he doesn't know how to express it.

BERRY: And he never will. Finish it, Jean.

JEAN: No. I'm going home with my Dad.

BERRY: Only misery awaits you with him.

JEAN: I said let him go, you sadistic freak!

[BERRY releases LUCAS, and approaches JEAN.]

JEAN: The only misery waiting for me is right here, with you. I'm going home.

[The two stare at each other for a moment.]

BERRY: I'm sad for you, Jean.

JEAN: Shut up.

[BERRY shakes its head.]

BERRY: You'll be back here. I know it. And when you do... [BERRY takes the rope from the tree]... I'll be waiting.

[BERRY disappears behind the tree and the sounds of the woods return once more. LUCAS gets up.]

LUCAS: Look... I'm sorry. I know I'm not, super PC, or anything, but... at the end of the day you're still my kid. Always gonna be.

JEAN: Dad—

LUCAS: Please. Let me finish. This whole... "Jean" thing... It's gonna take a lot of getting used to. And I may not get it. But... It seems like it's who you are. And if that's true, then I can't stop you. So I might as well learn to like it.

[LUCAS extends his arms, opening himself for a hug. JEAN embraces him.]

LUCAS: Just don't run off like this again, okay? Your mom and I worry about you. A lot.

JEAN: Okay. I'm sorry, I just... I wasn't ready for you to see me like this, and... I thought you'd hate me for it.

LUCAS: Hate you for it? No. Never. I'm just... confused, is all. And you know I hate feeling confused. But I can't hate you for this.

JEAN: So... you're okay with it?

LUCAS: God, no. I'm— I don't like... this. But, I love you... Jean... And if this is who you are, then I... I gotta get used to it. For you.

JEAN: I'm sorry, Dad, I—

LUCAS: No. Don't be sorry. You're your own person, okay? Even if I don't get it. Come here.

[They embrace again for a moment]

LUCAS: Let's get home though, okay? Your mom needs to know you're okay. And that we're still on for chicken parm and birthday festivities this weekend.

JEAN: Thanks, Dad.

LUCAS: Of course, kid.

[The two exit. The woodland ambience remains for a moment, and then fades, ending the scene.]



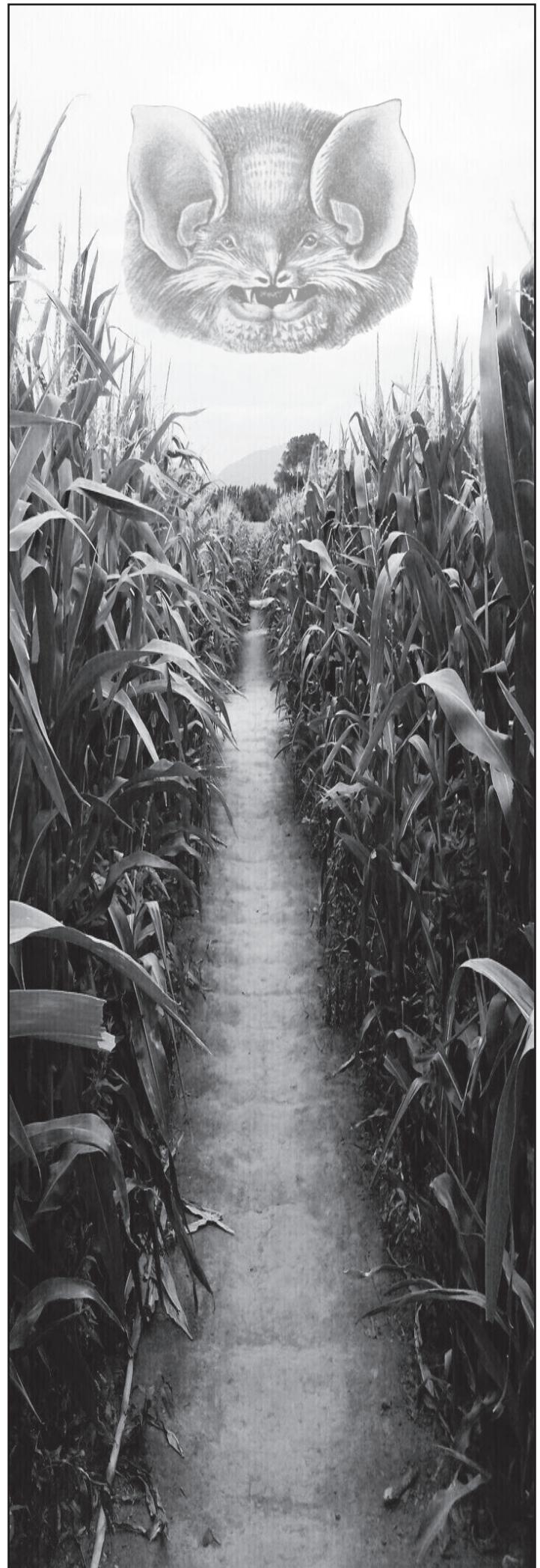
Corn Maze

-by Drew Bush

Honorable mention

Crunch. I reach my right foot out to step on a leaf on the edge of the sidewalk. My girlfriend turns her head towards me in response to the slight tug on her hand. She sees my foot come down on the leaf and she smiles. I don't notice. My mind is already occupied with finding the next crunchy-looking leaf. I look over at her to see her staring at the amber leaves on the trees ahead, her hair blowing in the wind from the cars driving by. We're walking back to my car after our breakfast at the diner, with plans to head to a farm a few minutes out of town to pick pumpkins and apples and make our way through the corn maze. I've always loved corn mazes, ever since I was a kid. I would always take the lead, navigating my group. I felt so accomplished when we would finally emerge after what always felt like miles and miles of walking. Sarah was a little more skeptical, though. She told me that she thought it was a little childish, but I didn't care. I was willing to trudge through the apple orchards (snooze) and carry her bags of apples. She can walk with me while I relive my childhood sneaking my way through the cobs. As we buckle our seatbelts, I look over at her again. Her cheeks have a rosy glow from the crisp fall wind and she lets out a sigh as she sinks into the leather. "Ready?" she asks. I nod and put the car in gear.

My boots squelch as I try to avoid the mud between the apple trees, my arms weighed down by bags overflowing with apples. I am practically juggling, trying to sort the flow of apples from Sarah's hands to mine and into the bags. There are a few casualties but she doesn't notice, she's too busy scoping out the next tree and scolding my slowness. It's a good thing I love you, I thought. I don't even know what we're going to do with all these apples. I think she's passed me about 15 pies worth. I watch her as she flits between the trees like a fairy, coaxing the most pristine specimens of Red Delicious from the branches, and I



imagine myself as some sort of gnome, forever indebted for this bountiful harvest. I slip and slide over the ground's poorly made applesauce trying to keep up with her. I forget the pounds of the bushels in my arms for a moment to take in the beauty of the scene in front of me. I feel like I'm in a movie, in one of those parts where the main character is reminiscing about his wife-who-might-be-dead-but-we-don't-know-that-yet, watching her frolic between trees basked in golden light, looking back at him with the most loving expression you've ever seen a person make. I wallow in my role as a moviestar for a second, until I'm harshly brought back to reality by the feeling of cold water soaking my sock.

By the time we've paid for the apples (have you ever spent 50 dollars on apples before?) and dropped them off at the car, I've forgotten about my wet sock. One of my hands is warm in my pocket, and the other is trying desperately to find any sort of warmth in Sarah's hand. It's not finding any. I glance at the kids playing on the hay bales while we walk towards the entrance to the corn maze, and the thought of having one with her whizzes through my mind. We've only been together for three years. I have no idea if that's long enough for that thought to even have any inkling of existing. I don't know about kids or anything like that, but I do know that I love her. That's enough. Enough to carry her apples through the mud with a smile, and tell her I like the gourd that she picked out even though I'm not sure that beauty could possibly be found in something so horrendously ugly, and watch as she spills cider on my favorite hoodie without a care. Enough. I just hope that she loves me enough to trust my navigational skills which have almost certainly dwindled since my youth.

There are little paper maps at the entrance of the corn maze. I, in my utmost masculinity and blind confidence, do not take one. "Are you sure you don't need a map?" Sarah asks. "It's getting dark." She looks at me a little bit nervously. I am unfazed. "Of course I don't. I know my

cardinal directions." I scoff. "North." I assert, pointing somewhere between South and West. "We'll be fine. It's so much more fun in the dark." I look toward the opening in the straight-up stalks and feel my childhood reunite as we step in. The sun had just dipped below the hills in the distance, casting brilliant oranges and pinks onto the clouds. With each step into the labyrinth, the mud caking my boots and the wetness of my socks matters less and less. Sarah's arm is linked though mine as I lead her, hugging me close.



It is pitch black out. I forbade Sarah from using her phone flashlight, because that would take away from the purity of the experience. I can feel her unease, but I hold steady in my resolve to make it out of my own intuition. It feels like we're miles from any civilization, but we can still hear the faint din of children playing at the barn. We haven't seen anyone else in 15 minutes now. I keep reminding Sarah that we're near the exit but I really have no idea.

15 more minutes pass, still without seeing another soul. Sarah grows ever more worried. My confidence is crumbling with every step. I know that we would both be terrified if not for the presence of each other. The moon peeks out from behind a cloud, shining a beam of white light onto us, just bright enough that I can make out the drape of Sarah's hair over her head. Something in my brain stirs; I don't know what. My eyes land on the faint glint of her cheekbone in the moonlight as she faces away from me. I think about the magnificence of its curve, and how perfectly it ties into the rest of her face. I can just make out the tip of her nose. I think about how many times I've tenderly kissed it, and how she giggles every time I do. I think about the feeling of her skin on my lips. My thought is cut short by a breeze that pushes her hair over her face. She momentarily lets go of my hand to brush it away. As soon as the connection is broken, I feel something I've never felt before. She looks back at me, and I feel the moonlight illuminating my face. She gazes

into my eyes with a sense of safety. My eyes feel empty as they stare back. I think about how many times I've looked at her face, but I feel like I've never seen it like this. She is striking; her silhouette cuts through the chill like a skate through ice. She can't tell that the blood has drained from my face in the pale glow. She still seems so full of life. I can't say the same about myself. Only a split-second has passed but I feel like I have lived a thousand lifetimes. Every memory we've had together replays at lightning speed in my head, but they're all missing something. I try to figure out what it is, but I can't place it. I am acutely aware of everything that is happening, yet I have never felt more disconnected. I feel like I'm watching myself through my own eyes. I feel like every thought I have falls into nothingness just as fast as I think it. I grow more frantic, but I have never felt more calm, more at peace. Everything I've ever wanted and everything I've ever dreaded is coming to a point, the point of a pencil pressed too hard into the paper until it snaps and leaves a gash. The cold wind stings my eyes as they lay open, unwavering. I inhale and the cold hits the back of my throat. No time has passed, but everything has happened. There is a peace about her barely perceptible outline reflected in the glass of my eyes. There is a peace about being so far away from another soul that all we have is each other. There is a peace in knowing that she will always ever be mine. I feel my body as it guides me, taking my conscious along for the ride. I suppose there is nothing I can do but let it. ☺

SPOOKY STORY

-by Johnny Fuhrmann

A real story.

Not based on. I ain't the author type. This is just me telling my story into my transcription app. A true story, heart to hand and hand to God – and I got a picture.

As dramatic as it sounds, it ain't a terribly long story. I was out cutting firewood for the upcoming winter. The sun had just dipped by the horizon so everything was sort of blueish and dark. I was whistling a song...

and then I hear something whistle back.

Now, I ain't a superstitious man. I know the stories thrown around in my hick town, and I know what kinda animals are out here. This was not a bird song.

This was not a prankster's human larynx (no human should be out here anyway). This was the exact melody I just sang.



No, I ain't superstitious, but I'm a sensible man. I hit the bricks.

Next day I come back to get the firewood I left. Near the pile is a weird, TERRIFYINGLY clean animal skull(?) that couldn't have been there last night.

(to folks who may not spend much time in the woods - it's not uncommon to find stark white, so-clean-it-looks-fake bones. It just means it's been there a while, and bugs and stuff ate every little bit of meat left.)

But look at the anatomy itself – what could even this be from? Fused teeth, massive eye sockets... and where's the rest of the animal?

But yeah. When it happened a friend of mine posted it on Reddit to try to get it identified. Ain't heard anything about it again :/ ☺

Bui'zeil

-by Igor Polotai

"Henry, look at this!"
I turned to view the statue.
"Is it not pretty?"

Lilith was smiling.
"Where did you find this odd thing?"
I asked, curious.

This statue, clay, grey, dull.
Small, unimposing. Ancient.
Something not from here.

Strange markings etched deep.
Indecipherable runes.
Unknown old language.

Still, it intrigued me.
The origins elusive.
I had to know more.

"Right here, in this tomb.
Alone, half buried in dirt.
I wonder why it..."

Lilith trailed off.
Her mind raced to the next idea.
I love that about her.

The statue had a
Small figure engraved, sitting
On a pedestal

Its features were quite
Undiscernible. An eye.
A mouth. Twisting skin.

I peered into
The darkness within its gaze
I saw emptiness.

Lilith inspected
The etched runes, running over
Them with her finger.

Miraculously,
She started to read the runes
In a language she

Does not comprehend.
"O Old Truth, guide me to your
Cosmic salvation."

"O who sees within
Us all the true nature of
This reality."

"O Great One, I beg
For but a glimpse of your
Foresight. Hark, Bui'zeil!"

Lilith uttered these
Words for no longer than a
Second before she

Herself started to
Twist and contort. But she was
Entirely content.

I could not move. My
Heart had betrayed me. I
Gasped for air, but

There was none to
Breath. I slumped down in shock.
"Oh, Henry. Join us."

Outside, the stars were dark.



My Girlfriend Has Become a Girl-friend

-by Cider Season

My girlfriend and I have been dating for two years now. She's the only one I've ever dated. We met our second year of college in an improv club. I was new to the whole theater thing, but she was the most talented person I'd ever met. The way she was able to weave stories, grab everyone's attention... it was hard not to like her. I was warned to never date another improviser, but I couldn't resist.

I finally caved in around spring and asked her out at a party and was elated when she agreed. I immediately began planning out our first date: classic movie and dinner, beach picnic afterward. It went great and we decided to go steady. It was bliss for the first few months. She was smart, pretty, and talented. She had really unique interests, too, investing herself in niche audiobooks. I'd tried listening to them, but didn't really like them. I prefer most genres to horror.

Things started changing around August. She began to want to go out with me less and less. She also generally stopped showing up to improv, which I'd thought was her place. People who had been there a while told me this was the "cycle" she usually went through, being really involved spring semester and going back to skittish the next fall. The first year I chalked it up to her being nervous about the start of the semester before settling back into a rhythm. College summers can mess a person up, and I didn't really know much about her home life. Whatever it was, I brushed it off that first year, not yet invested in the relationship and not wanting to bother her. We continued vaguely dating and around Christmas break we started connecting again.

After one of our improv shows that spring I realized I wanted to be with her much more long term. I could see myself

having a life with her. Something more long-term than I originally thought. She seemed really invested, too. Things were going great.

That's when autumn hit. She stopped showing up to improv again. She stopped showing up to me. Every message brushed me off, a reschedule for a later date. I'd decided I'd had enough and needed to talk to her in person. I really wanted this, but it didn't seem like she had any interest in it now.

I probably should've texted her to let her know I was coming over, but it slipped my mind. When I knocked on her door her roommate answered. He was absolutely drenched in sweat and reeked. Someone had to be burning at least ten candles because pumpkin spice hit me like a wall when the door opened. Her roommate seemed pretty relieved I'd come and asked me to 'deal with' my girlfriend. I really should've asked him to elaborate.

Someone hadn't bothered to wipe their shoes off because a heap ton of mud and leaves were all over the hallway leading up to my girlfriend's room. I stopped just outside her door, preparing to knock and have the conversation about whether she even wanted to date me anymore. But she somehow knew I was there.

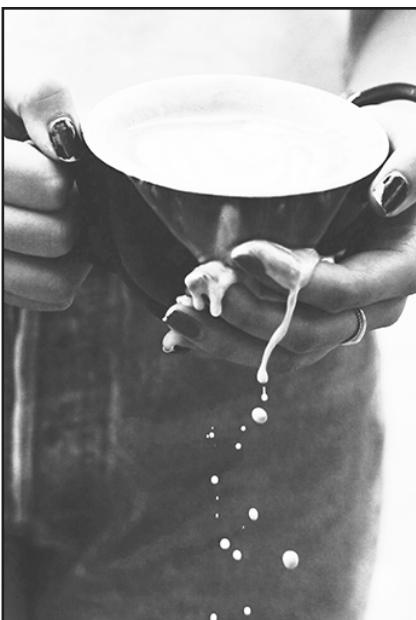
"Come in. Now." Her voice was lower, more gravelly than normal. I wondered if she just woke up or finished crying. Anyway, I opened the door.

She was sitting on the bed hunched over herself absolutely quaking. Her hand darted out, reaching for something. I thought she wanted my hand so I came over and held hers. She jolted at the touch, whipping around to face me. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"Where's my latte?" She asked.

"Your latte?"

"My. Latte."



At this point I thought she was trying to start an improv bit, so I played along.

"Oh yeah, I lost it. Sorry, boss," I joked.

"Another."

"Hm?"

"Bring me..." She glared at me, "ANOTHER!" Her head snapped forward and I narrowly avoided being bit.

"What the hell!?"

"I... need... pumpkin spice..." She hissed. Her body began churning as if her bones were rearranging inside her skin. Her voice raised in pitch, now a saccharine cheerfulness. "I need my pumpkin spice lattes!" Her eyes rolled around in her head, not quite able to focus. Everything about her was vibrating.

"Are you joking right now?" I asked. It's sometimes hard for me to tell.

She giggled. "You're wasting my time. Get me a latte." Her voice dropped as her bones stretched and pulled. "Now."

Needless to say I got out of there quick. I went home and tried to pretend nothing happened. Her roommate ended up going missing. The wind bites now and it's started snowing, but autumn isn't over yet.

I don't know what will happen when winter begins. ☕



About the Judges



Adam Fletcher, Kelly Gunter, and Sean T. Hammond are alumni of RIT and of *Gracies Dinnertime Theatre*. Kelly & Sean were the original co-editors and founders (they represent two of the three pillars in the logo...and in the Unity statue), and Adam has the dubious distinction of having the longest working relationship with *GDT*. The Judges were also the three editors for *GDT*'s only book: *The Big Red Book – the best of Gracies Dinnertime Theatre (1995–2000)*.

About the Judging

Prior to the Judges getting access to the submissions, one of *GDT*'s editors stripped the identity of the authors from the materials. Once freed from their authors, the Judges threw them into a fighting pit and placed bets. It wasn't pretty, but pit battles between submissions striving for supremacy rarely are.



