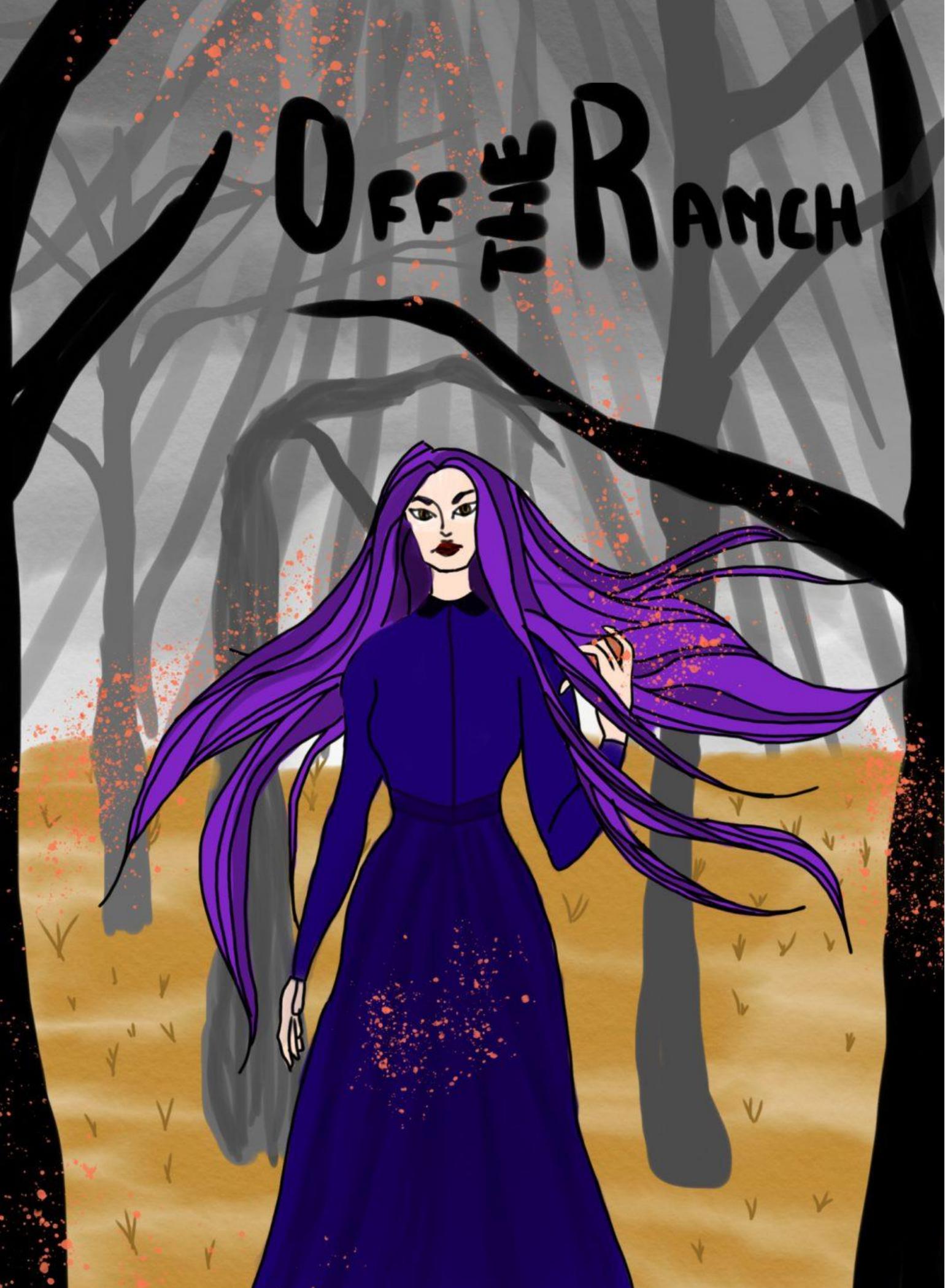


# OFF THE RANCH



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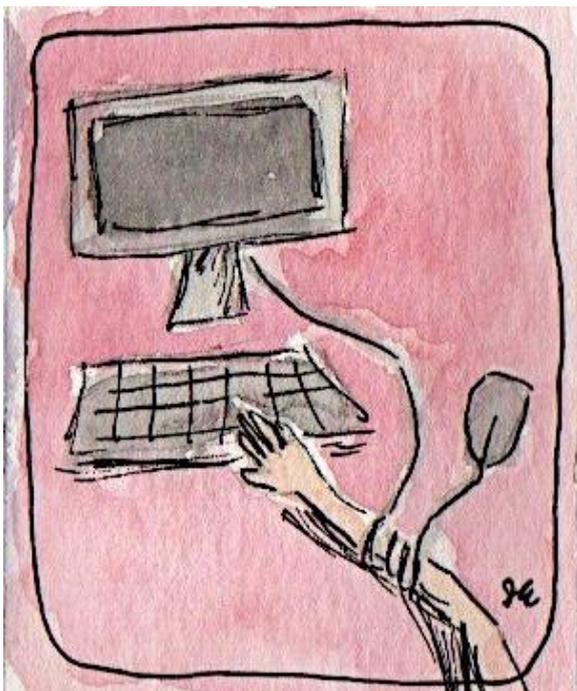
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# The Haunting House-Nicole Midkiff



# We Starved For This- Allison Lennox

The sycophantic villain feed,  
Invades all that I see and read.  
They bite and spit and growl at us,  
Forget that they don't have our trust.  
We lock them up and wait 'till dawn;  
They're tired out and dead upon,  
We feast without their broken lies,  
And to the sky we turn our eyes.  
There's too much blank and empty space,  
The stars, it seems, have been disgraced.



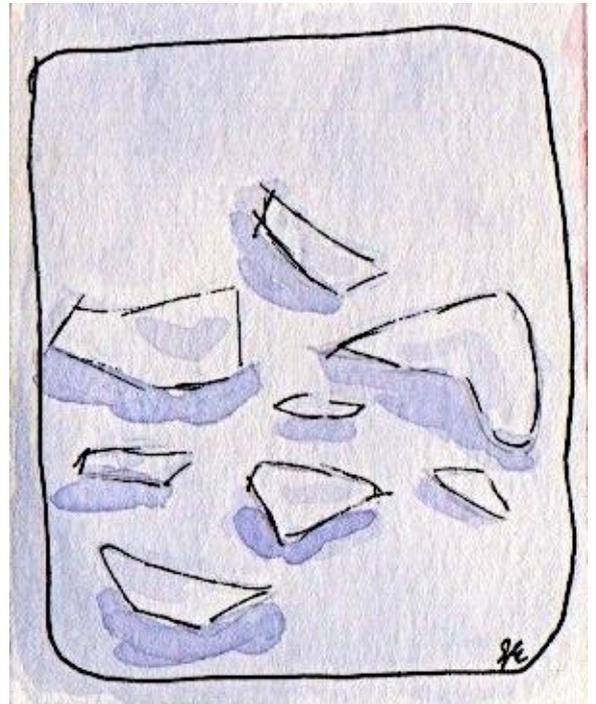
# To Those Who Grow- Nina Rueda

During this time, we continue to grow  
in an idyllic setting-  
Our movements begin to slow  
so long as the falling leaves turn to falling snow  
And here the present starts regretting  
We look back at the waiting world  
and wish we had costumes and crafts,  
but when the winds hurl, the leaves twirl,  
and the wrappers around the candies curl,  
we realize that another season has passed  
Here, in this town, although it's rarely bitter  
Time reflects the truth  
One days it's winter-  
The next we wither  
Yet we swear we just lost our first tooth  
While we shall be looking at it sadly,  
ages and ages ago-  
We were told direct and flatly,  
that memories- magical or ghastly  
allow us to childishly glow



# Haunted Objects- Rebekah Martin

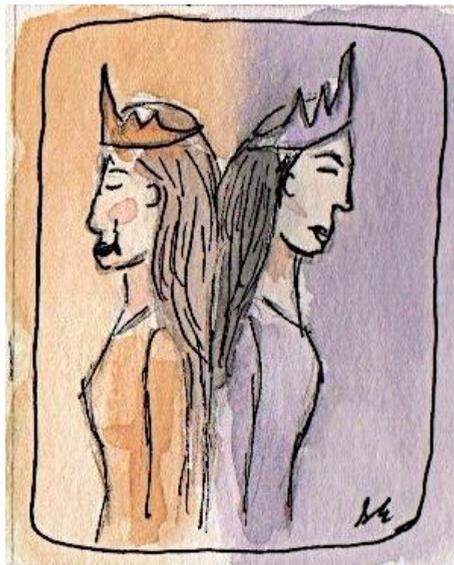
A broken heart  
Shredded into pieces  
Ripped apart  
Torn by past regressions  
Filled with menace obsessions  
Was a generous heart  
Until time ravaged  
All the built-up damage  
Made me tormental  
The excruciating pain  
A heart turned cold  
Nothing left to gain  
Nothing left to harm  
My fight left in a storm  
Wretched heart left in vain



# Perspective- Leila Sujanani

I am the evil queen.  
I refuse to believe that  
I could be good.  
I am positive that  
I could burn down the world.  
It is not true that  
Someone made me this way.  
I will remain the same.  
I do not believe  
I could be made good.  
I know  
I am not good.  
It is impossible that  
I could change.  
I believe  
I will destroy myself.  
It is a lie that  
I am a good queen.

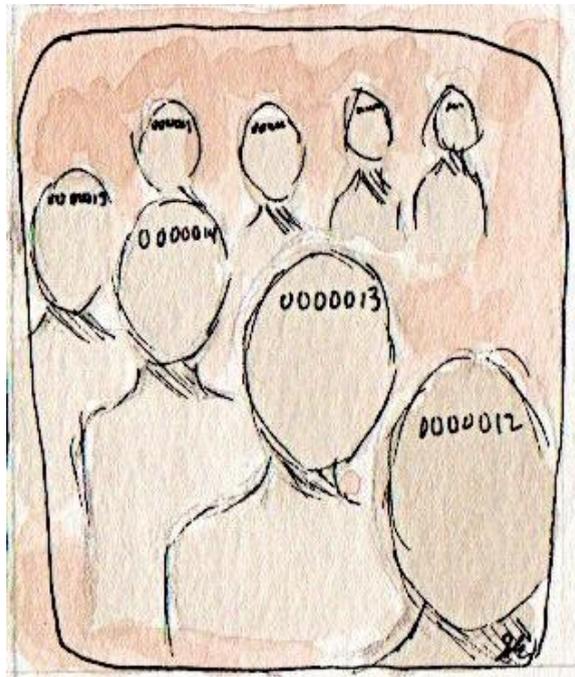
-Now read this from bottom to top and  
consider a new PERSPECTIVE.



# Untitled- Isabella Napoli



# Humanities Number- Abigail Fernald



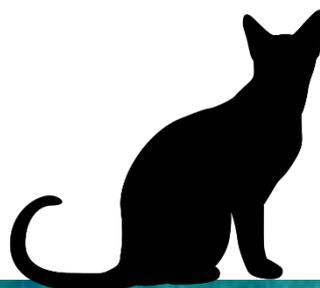
How do you live in a world where no one can hear you? It was a dark Friday night when the Districts got the news. As if this year wasn't bad enough, the government announced that every citizen in the District was required to have a code printed onto them by the Head Chief's office. The bats showed up about nine months ago and, just as the way of the world, people have bitten into the crisis. Since the introduction of the seemingly deadly virus, chaos and calamity have forced people to react instead of respond. Now, the people are being forced to conform to the Panel of the Seven. All 10 districts are required, by the letter of the law, to appear before Mr. Leopard, Mr. Bear, Mr. Lion, Mr. Serpent, Mr. Ram, Mr. Locust, and the leader herself, Ms. Dragon. These leaders were elected by the people, for the people, and most of the 10 districts look up to them. They reside in the 10th district, which is where I had to travel for my required code. The practice did not come out of the blue. For months, the Panel of the Seven had tried to keep its country's citizens in their homes and away from one another; but certain groups refused to stop meeting. I was a part of one of those groups.

As dawn approached, loud footsteps like thunder rattled my house. Peering tentatively out the window, my heart fell into my stomach. I clutched my bag and made my way to the door. Before twisting the brass knob, I remember looking into the mirror, “They said it could never come to this,” I said, as tears crept into the inner corner of my eyes. I blinked and wiped my eyes. “Snap out of it, Gabriella!” I choked, “Maybe it is for the good of everyone.”

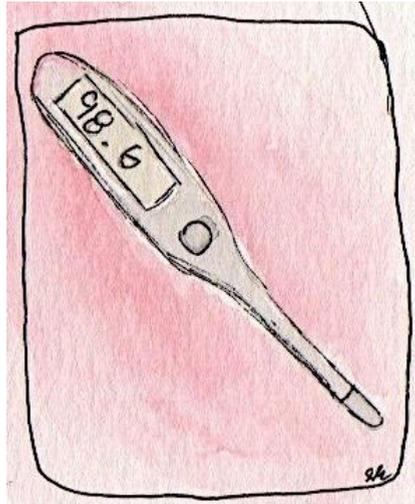
By dusk, I marched the final steps into the oval room. Ms. Dragon sat perpendicular to the line of civilians. Her eyes shot daggers at me as the time drew closer for me to receive the universal code. My eyes stayed locked on hers as a chill sprinted down my spine. A bitter man holding a clipboard startled me, bringing me back to reality. As I read the document held by the clipboard, I glanced around. No one was doing anything but signing. The woman next to me caught my puzzled expression from six feet away and inserted herself into my thoughts. “What other enemy is like this virus? I mean,” she twirled her hair casually as she spoke, “If this is what’s going to save lives, how could you not go with this plan? It’s our patriotic duty.” I stared at her with my mouth gaped open with a look of pure horror and utter bewilderment. The forceful women continued, “Who are we to say how to fight this virus? Let the experts do their jobs.” She smiled and stepped forward to receive the code. I peered over her shoulder to see what looked like a barcode, you’d find in the grocery store, being tattooed on her forehead. I looked back down at my documents and read attentively. The closing statement read, “By signing below, I am acknowledging my willingness to follow protocol and basic human decency. I will proudly wear my code to show others I care. I accept that I will not be able to buy, sell, or enter any place other than my home without this code.” Salty droplets appeared in streams that flowed like a river down my cheek as I looked at the line I was supposed to sign.



My hand shook as I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, immediately handing my clipboard to the attendant. I held my breath as I stepped up to the podium. The attendant, a bubbly man in a pink shirt, smiled, “This is blank, I think you forgot to sign.” He held out his pen to me, “Would you prefer wrist or forehead?” Swallowing the lump in my throat, I refused the pen and explained gracefully that I wished not to participate. The man’s face became fuchsia with frustration. That was the moment I deciphered the code on his right wrist. Humanity’s number had been distributed by the millions right under our noses. What seemed simple was anything but. I was placed into cold metallic cuffs and put here, in the first cell of 144,000. I will be executed tomorrow for my refusal to conform to their moral way of life. So, tell me, how do you live in a world where no one can hear you?



# Wrong- Sean Guevera



There was something off. He couldn't place it. An awful malaise that fogged his mind and lingered in his chest. There was no sign of anything "tangible;" the congestion or cough that normally accompanied sickness was absent. He placed his hand on his forehead: no fever. But as he laid on his back, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, his mind couldn't help but focus on its unease.

He knew *something* was wrong.

The cheesy piano tune of his alarm jolted him out of his thoughts; five snoozes was pushing the line, but a sixth was unacceptable. He rolled himself out of bed against his own will; the clothes he wore to sleep would have to suffice. With a quick donning of the facemask and backpack, he began his trek to school, trying to throw off the discomfort that beset him.

The passing of the hours only saw the effect rise slowly in its severity, but truth be told, it was effortless to hide. *If it gets worse*, he promised to himself, *I'll just take tomorrow off*. With the sounding of the final bell, he made his way back home, where he'd fixate to his computer in a vain attempt to forget about the illness. He fell asleep to the sounds of revelry and clinking bottles from his stepfather's party in the living room.

When he awoke, it was to fatigue at a scale he'd never before endured. The haze in his head had shifted into a suffocating smog, and a disgusting feeling of disease swelled in his chest. The potency of it was almost too much for him to overcome as he sat up and was filled with a sense of immediate sickness. There was no way he was going to school today.

And still, nothing external manifested that would indicate a problem. By the way he was feeling, he *should* be hacking up his lungs or warmer than the sun. But not so much as a hint of nausea would rear its face.

Uneasily coming to a stand, he would leave his room to find his mother watching the news from her normal spot on the couch.

"Finally awake?" she said without a glance.

"Yeah, I had a hard time getting up." His mother would take her eyes off the television screen, staring at him with a skeptical gaze.

"And why is that?"

"I'm not feeling well. Can I take a sick day?" he pleaded. For a moment, she expressed genuine concern.

"Don't tell me you've caught the 'rona, boy. You've got a cough?" He shook his head. "Nausea? Fever? Congestion? Loss of taste? Aches?" She grew increasingly irritated as he denied each one. "Tell me then, what in God's name DO you have?"

"I just feel really off, I can't explain it. Fatigue, I guess?" A tense silence followed his words.

"Get to class," she snarled. Reading the room, he didn't bother with anything but the necessities before he made for the door. When the humid air filled his lungs, he thought he would die on the spot.

He *knew* something was wrong.



Hoping for an improvement was unfounded at best, but it was an idea he had to cling to. Yet, despite the attempt at forced optimism, the lectures of his teachers fell on his deaf ears; the only thing occupying his mind was the awfulness that resonated within him. He realized at lunch that along with his focus, the malaise had also stolen his appetite; *when was the last time I actually ate?*

With all of this, it became increasingly obvious to him that he should, at the very least, try to convince the school nurse of his dilemma. Before even sitting down, he departed the cafeteria and creaked open the door to her office. The nurse peered over her desk and stood up, a questioning and worried look on her face.

“What’s the matter, hun?” she inquired. With every word of explanation he spoke, she seemed less convinced. “No fever or cough...? Through that alone, we can at least rule out COVID, but no symptoms other than just... feeling unwell?” He knew she’d heard it before a thousand times over but hoped that the desperate look he conjured in his eyes would be enough to convince her that he spoke the truth. She responded coldly, “Look, I understand you don’t want to be here, but I’ve got way more to stress about this year than students like you pretending to be sick.”

“But I’m not-“ the bell interrupted his sentence. She nodded towards the door.

“Still feeling sick?” His mother mocked as he entered the house hours later, the smell of booze heavy in the stagnant air. His stepfather, sitting right next to her on the couch, joined in on the jeering.



“Ya think he feels any better darling?” They both laughed as he hurried silently to his room.

He felt worse than when he left. Languishing in the malady for what seemed like an eternity, it took the ever-appreciated aid of ZzzQuil to quell his thoughts for the night as he fell asleep to a strange, soft buzzing in his chest.

The light of the morning sun poured into his now-opened eyes.

He knew something was *wrong*.

He struggled to understand how someone could be in such physical agony without any semblance of pain. The grip of the malaise had grown exponentially, now filling every corner of his conscious with a thick, black smoke. The horrible feeling that permeated deep within him became even stronger overnight, its uneasy cacophony now accompanied by an unnerving buzzing between his ribs. Though his muscles weren't hindered, it still took the entirety of his strength to heave himself up; a disgusting dropping feeling beset him as he did so, sending shudders down his spine.

Despite all this, the issue that plagued him over the last few days was still present; no cough, no fever, no nausea. Nothing to prove himself sick beyond his own, pleading word. But to him, it was clear as day that he'd be in grave danger if he didn't do *something*. He put on his school clothes and emptied his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder as normal; the contents didn't matter. Leaving the bedroom, he passed by his mother, who was planted in her normal spot.

“Look who got up!” she sneered; he paid no mind as he left for the door and took a wrong turn, headed straight for the local Urgent Care. The walk there, however, was the hardest he'd taken in his life. He felt like a zombie rotting from the inside out, only maintaining the façade of health as the soft eight o'clock sun illuminated the sidewalk ahead.



After fifteen minutes of hardship, he breathed a sigh of relief; he'd finally reached the front doors of the Urgent Care. He stumbled in and was greeted by a thoroughly confused secretary.

"Hello... You seem pretty young to be coming here without an adult." she remarked. He couldn't afford to mess this up again.

"They wouldn't listen to me, ma'am. Please believe me, I feel awfully sick." She took a moment to size him up before responding.

"We're going to take your temp regardless, but do you have any other symptoms?"

"I... I have a weird sensation in my chest. And my mind is clouded." The doubtful look on the secretary's face caused his heart to drop.

"Are you not supposed to be at school by now?" she questioned. As he continued to beg for a checkup, she would take his temperature with an unsurprised sigh before picking up the phone behind her desk. "I need your parents' number if anything's going to be done about your... 'sickness.'"

Ten minutes later, he'd find himself in the back of his mother's Civic, with both her and his stepdad berating him from the front seats. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't be opposed to fighting back with his own words, but now was not the time to listen and respond.

The buzzing was growing stronger.

At an alarming pace, the feeling became more and more pronounced. Like a tremor in his chest, it rumbled steadily, growing in its power by the second. He picked up pieces of the one-sided conversation through his racing thoughts.

"You really think you're sick, huh? I didn't raise you to be this weak, you little..." his mother's shrieking voice bled into his stepfather's booming threats.



“When we get home I’ll GIVE ya something to be sick about...” His heart started throbbing in his ears, prefaced by a terrible fizzing harmony that relentlessly rose in its intensity. He felt it in his bones.

The car pulled over on the side of the road. His mother looked back at him from the passenger’s seat. “You are GOING to listen to me child. Don’t pretend you can’t hear me.”

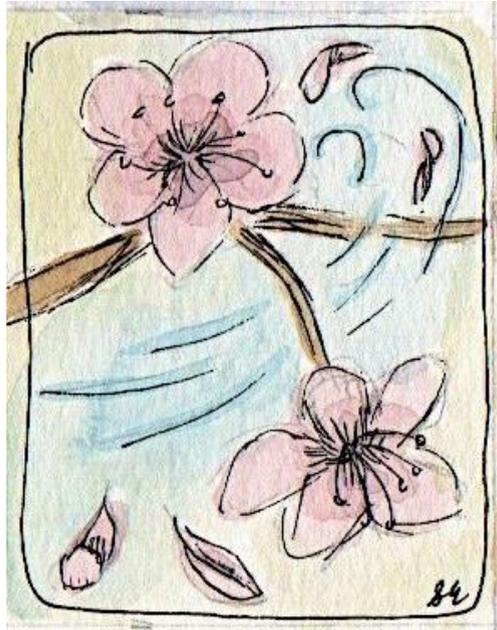
“Mom... I’m not...” he uttered under his breath. The buzzing tremor reached a crescendo, filling every inch of his malaise-soaked mind with utter dread.

“You’re fine,” she spoke.

A sudden, piercing pain erupted outwards from his chest as he slouched to the side. A thousand darting black dots entered his vision, spewing from the gap in his torso, while his mom and stepdad screamed in pure terror.

Something *was* wrong.

# Cherry Blossoms at Dusk- Kira Gibson



The Hawthorne Daylily Cemetery has been an important part of my life since the day good ol' Ma passed away some 40 years ago. She wasn't supposed to die, they say even to this day, but I think they were just all trying to make me feel better about myself and my loss. Ma was always one to look to the bright side; I joke around with myself that she told the doctors to tell me that, to make sure I don't grieve. Well, I can't help that every Sunday I just have to go visit her. Gotta keep her memory alive, eh? Ma's favorite tree was the Japanese cherry blossom tree; she loved the flushed, shell-pink blossoms that lit up the thin, dainty branches. She believed in their meaning, that life was fleeting yet beautiful, and that renewal was a time of great importance. That's why I bought Bailey as a small tree, planting her behind Ma's marble tombstone. It blossomed every two weeks before the small flowers were plucked from the branches by the wind, floating down and littering the gravesite with beauty and remembrance. This specific Sunday, I felt weighed down by my hardships more than normal, and I clutched a bit weakly at my tie, gulping.

“Hey, Ma.” I smiled, kneeling down by her grave and setting a hand gently on the toiled dirt below, glancing at the small flowers springing up around it. The grave never had enough time to grow ivy or ferns around it, I always kept it fresh enough. The keeper gave me weird looks every time I saw him, but I never cared. Releasing the tie, I got to my feet slowly. “It’s been really hard without you these past years.”

The tombstone laying in front of me marking Ma’s demise seemed to stand out among the other broken-down slabs marking nameless passings. Ma’s grave read loud and clear while others barely seen:

*Felecity Jocelyn Holmes*  
1926 – 1979

*1 Corinthians 13: 4-8.*

*“And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love.”*

“Casey finally graduated from Harvard, just like I planned.” I shut my eyes slowly, almost a bit pained. “She’s going to be a great lawyer, I can tell.”

A small breeze ruffled through my short, ginger hair before swirling around my chin, almost feeling like a hand caressing me and guiding me to look in another direction. I ignore it and continue to focus on Ma’s grave.

“I’m not sure what I’m going to do with my job, I’m on the verge of getting fired.” I grit my teeth, kicking a bit of loose dirt under foot and jerking my head a bit to the side angrily. “Damn, Robert really doesn’t like me, does he? He always threatens me that I won’t be able to work for him for much longer if I-”

Blinking, I pause at the beginning of my rambling as a soft sound catches my attention. The wind suddenly stirs up beside me, throwing up piles of leaves, and I think I can hear a dog barking in the background. Strays are normal around here, but normally the cemetery is abandoned. All the people here died ages ago; their memories long forgotten. No one bothered to come to their funerals, much less keep up with them. It’s almost a bit sad, but it’s reality, and reality is tough.

The low cry comes ago, almost like a sort of gentle wailing, and I can tell it's coming from a small grave a bit to my right. Turning, I can just barely see her through the mist; a blonde, no doubt, with long, straight hair trailing all down her back and practically touching the base of her spine. She seems to have ghost white skin. As the fog starts to part, I can see that she's not some apparition; just a light skinned girl standing over a grave, a handful of roses cupped delicately in her hands.

I wasn't going to at first, but something seemed to tug at me, slowly guiding me forward until I stood a respectful distance behind her, awkwardly clutching at my tie.

"Erm, hello." I call out to her, and she slightly jumps, spinning gracefully on her toes and causing her strawberry blonde hair to spin out behind her. She settles as her bright blue gaze meets mine, a look of startlement clearly showing on her face.

"Hello." Her melodic voice seems to ring out across the otherwise abandoned cemetery. She reaches up a slender hand, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear, her other hand clutching the roses to her chest a bit more tightly. "Might I ask what you're doing here?"

"Oh, uhm, I'm here to visit my mother." I reply a bit quickly, giving a small laugh as I take a step back, releasing my tie and holding my hands up in front of me. "Normally it's just me here, I was a bit startled."

"Oh." The girl falls silent, turning back to the grave and turning her back to me. A long silence dawned over us two, and I began wondering if I had gotten that cue that I should leave. Before I could leave however, her voice rang out again. "Your mother's very lucky to have someone to look after her even after she's gone."

"Yeah, I try and come out every week, but life sometimes gets in the way." A slight smile crossed over my face as I thought of Ma once more, staring off a bit into the distance. "It's the least she deserves."



“Well that’s very sweet of you.” The girl collapses suddenly onto the grave in front of her, giving a long, melancholy wail as if her heart had been ripped in two, much like how I had once been broken. My heart immediately jumped; reaching out to her and trying to drag me along. Swallowing, I crouched down, moving forward a bit and reaching out a hand as if to comfort her but I decided against it.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked softly, blinking slowly as I glanced down at a cherry blossom which had drifted down towards the grave, now laying across the untouched soil.

“No.” The girl voiced out quickly before seemingly collected herself with a deep breath and a sigh.

The young girl was silent for a few moments aside for her occasional sniffles, before she finally glanced up at me. I could see the pain in her bright, baby blue eyes and the tears gently streaking her cheeks; for a moment, it seemed as if the last days of dusk were passing right through her as if she were nothing more than a wisp.

“It’s just...” A faint, wistful smile traced her face as she turned back to the grave she had collapsed on top of, her hair gently blowing from side to side with the now chilly wind. I felt myself shiver as she gave a small, almost mournful laugh, fainter than the whisper of a breeze in spring. A sinister feeling crept up my spine, lifting the hairs on the back of my neck. “..No one came to my funeral.”

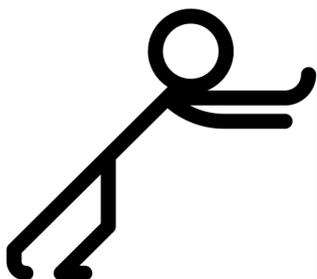


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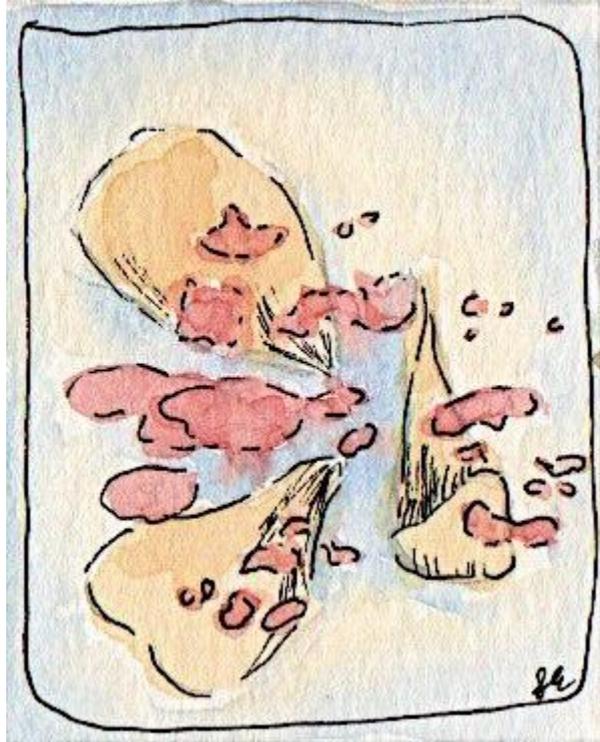
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# The Evergold- Sarah Evans



The chill of the year's latter end gusted into the confined brown room in which Jade sat, mirror in hand, watching goosebumps flood her pale flesh. Drawing the shutters and returning to her prized hand mirror, her eyes once again settled on the curve of her cheek and the tawny hair that grazed it.

Jade was fair; known to be the most beautiful in her town. Her friends longed to possess her slender slope of nose, gracefully settled between two lifted, supple cheeks. The elder women envied the glow of innocent youth that they had surrendered long before still present in her eyes. Young suitors coveted her gentle grace, forever longing to know the warmth of her dainty hands. Many brave young men had attempted this feat, yet their pursuits were fruitless, as Jade had love for only one.

“He wouldn’t give me a second look,” Jade sighed and turned over the mirror, providing herself relief from the abrasive gaze of the visage she had spent the afternoon analyzing. Unfortunately, Jade was not mistaken in this assumption. The pallor of impoverishment washed over her young skin, and despite the admiration received from her village, she was far from catching the eyes of royalty.

“Beauty is the only way to get anything in this world,” she declared, defeatedly tucking the mirror in the drawer beneath her.

\*\*\*

Prince Insatias was the most handsome, albeit most pampered, of his lineage. The emergence of the kingdom’s Golden Age enabled the importation of decadent foods of foreign cuisine, fine silks and furs, and any precious metal imaginable, making the prince the most well-fed, well-dressed, and well-decorated noble in his family’s history. Remarkable women oceans away sold themselves to Insatias’ chancellors in desperate hope of becoming his bride. Insatias however, refused them all. One by one he sent them back to their homelands with broken hearts and shattered egos, for none of them were worthy of his gaze.

The prince was often too occupied with his own image; a gilded mirror of grandeur scale provided him with ample exposure to his stately stature. A stroll down the portrait hall revealed a myriad of sickly predecessors, immortalized by their pallid complexions and meager arms clad in shoddy brown robes. Insatias’ portrait, being the outlier, was marked by a prominent jaw and broad shoulders swathed in red velvet and gold. Yet no matter his unprecedented comeliness, nor the richness of the colors he donned, Insatias failed to see past the mossy hue of his hair and the mortal discoloration beneath his eyes.

“Curse this imperfect being!” he spat, “I refuse to be this monster any longer.”



A gentle tapping at the door summoned Jade, who upon opening, was surprised by the warmth on the face of the woman in front of her. There seemed to be a glow of sorts, unearthly almost, emanating from her cheeks as her eyes met with Jade's.

"Would you be interested in purchasing some Evergold petals?" she smiled, and Jade felt something in her chest that she hadn't felt since the summer had faded months ago.

"Evergold?" Jade furrowed her brows, "I've never heard of such a flower."

"Oh yes," the woman of light unearthed a small vial containing four amber petals from her cloak, "This flower is dormant during the summer months, but sprouts deep within the forest just as the air begins to bite, and just like the Evergreen tree," she lifted the vial, casting a honey glow on her features, "The Evergold shines through the harsh winter, radiating with eternal beauty."

"It's beautiful," Jade nodded, tantalized by its light, "But I really won't be needing any." She subverted her gaze and lowered her head at the acknowledgement of her family's meager funds.

"Oh, but dear," the woman lifted her chin and grazed her cheek, "Evergold is known to radiate eternal beauty in those who consume it as well. Surely it would add some warmth to your lovely cheeks." At this Jade froze, and looking again at the saleswoman's complexion, she saw what she did not have, what was vital to winning the prince's affections. Gathering all the gold pieces hidden in her room—more than she had paid for the hand mirror—Jade paid the woman for the four glowing petals: the antidote. "Be sure to use only what I have given you," she warned, "You will need no more than this dose can supply." Jade nodded and thanked the woman, swallowing the first petal soon after she left.

Insatias' servants, aware of the prince's dissatisfaction with his appearance, caught wind of the Evergold flower's qualities, and were ordered to purchase twenty vials to ensure their highness' satisfaction. The kitchen staff concocted various teas and pastries infused with the flower, which Insatias consumed four times a day in hopes of reaching his god-like expectations.

\*\*\*

Soon after her first petal, Jade began to notice the Evergold's mark on her cheeks. Where there once lay pale, lifeless skin, there was now a rosy sheen, and Jade stared with admiration at her new reflection. Continually she swallowed petals, and the more picturesque she grew. Her once tawny locks turned golden, and her lips became two warm petals themselves. Her friends commented at her vivacity, the likeness of summertime she suddenly seemed to radiate. Jade told no one of her secret, only basked in the glory of her own loveliness. After the fourth petal, Jade felt the most stunning she had ever been and ever would be, and donning her finest gown, headed to Insatias' palace.

Upon her arrival, the guards were captivated with her luminous nature, and assuming she had been summoned by the prince, admitted her without question. The king too was so astonished with Jade's beauty that he asked for her name and brought her directly to Insatias' chambers.

"It is such an honor to meet you, your Highness." Jade curtsied as her warm cheeks flushed warmer with deep-seated admiration. To this kind greeting Insatias said nothing, peering ceaselessly into his colossal mirror, examining his eyes. For he too exhibited the glow of the Evergold, yet he found that the brightness of his cheeks accentuated the blackness of his eyes.

"What are you disturbing me for?" He snapped, failing to look at her once more.



“I am Jade, your Highness. I came to introduce myself,” she reaffirmed, though her confidence dwindled. “Do you think that I am beautiful?” She asked meekly. Insatias shifted his eyes minutely enough to see Jade’s distant reflection in his gold mirror.

“No.” He replied shortly, “I have seen many women as beautiful if not more, and I sent them away just as I will you.” He returned to the hostile inspection of his eyes as Jade sunk. Looking at herself in his mirror, she saw the same sickly, penniless girl she saw in the hand mirror just weeks before. And with frenzied fear and all-consuming defeat, she fled the palace in shambles.

\*\*\*

With labored breath and wild eyes Jade cut through thick shrub and stubborn branches. Her feet were enveloped in more snow with every step, but she would stop at nothing to find the deeply hidden flowers.

“Disgusting...embarrassment...I can’t believe I-“ Jade intelligibly panted as tears saturated her cold, reddening cheeks. A small pocket of light shone through the thick Evergreens, and Jade came onto a clearing where hundreds of Evergolds sprinkled throughout the snow sang of the warmth of summer. But someone had beaten her there.

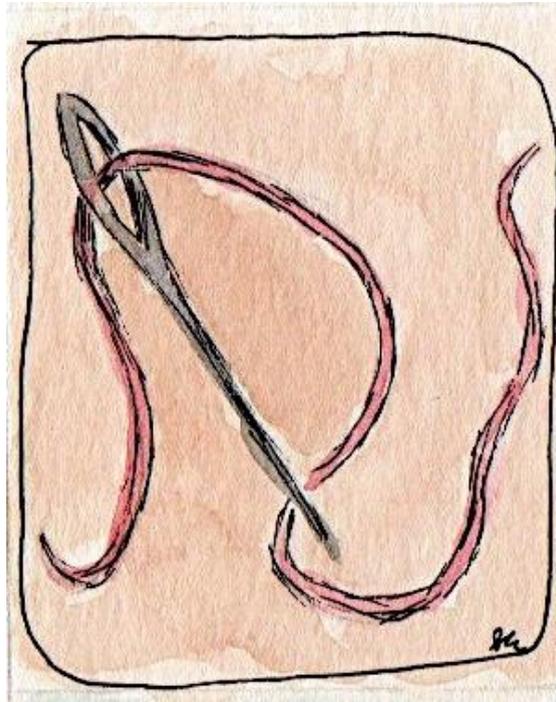
Upon a closer look, Jade recognized the face of Prince Insatias, who was crawling fervently in the snow, grabbing flowers by the handful and gorging his mouth. When he recognized her presence, his dark and wild eyes widened, like that of a rabid beast. Hurriedly he began to tear and shred more frantically, choking on pieces of icy stem and leaf. Jade fell to her knees in desperation, as seeing Insatias again deepened the fissures in her heart. She too grabbed handfuls of petals and violently shoved them down her throat, coughing and struggling, tears rolling down her glowing cheeks.



Insatias caught a glimpse of his black eyes in the snow in his frenzy, and crying out, forced petals into his eyes, deepening the void, and sending hot blood down his fingers and red cheeks. Jade gasped and shrieked, fragments of dry petal flying out of her mouth and nose with every sob, and she too sent the sun drop flowers into her eyes, gouging them with her once coveted fingertips.

The woman watched from the edge of the clearing as the pair writhed in agony from their mutual self-destruction, and as the screams quieted, she began to float toward the two, stopping suspended above them. The woman of light's warm smile crept slowly across her soft cheeks as she examined the once-beautiful pair, strewn out side by side, flower petals caked to their faces and hands with thick drying blood. She descended rapidly, consuming the youthful remains of the foolish handsome beings, absorbing any glow left from their wasted flesh. This feeding spread golden light through the locks of her thick hair, reddened her lips, and warmed her limbs. After all, beauty is the only way to get anything in this world.

# Pieces- Jack Goldstein



He was on his way to the gas station where he worked Mondays and Wednesdays overnight, when out of nowhere a truck spun out of control and collided with him, smashing his car to pieces and leaving him worse for wear. An ambulance was quick to arrive on the scene, and he was immediately rushed to the hospital in town. Nothing could be made out save periodic flashes of pale light and sounds of miscellaneous machinery. It was not long before it all went black.

\*\*\*

She always knew she would be a veterinarian when she grew up. The innate fascination for the anatomical structure of animals was not an interest shared with her peers. The town zoo was her second home, or at least it was until she was committed to the nearby psychiatric facility. Her friends and family didn't understand why she was conducting these experiments; they didn't see her vision.

They began to worry when she wouldn't answer their calls, or leave the house; and that's where they found her, covered in blood sitting on the living room floor surrounded by parts from different animals shoddily sewn together. She hated the hospital. Eventually, however, she learned that good behavior would expedite her stay. It was her release date; her family was ecstatic to pick her up and bring her home. She was better now, and the past faded away like a distant memory;

A free woman.

\*\*\*

He knew he was awake now; a warm glow flooded his vision as he struggled to lift his heavy eyes. The pain was quick and spread fast, within seconds his entire body was throbbing. He felt the need to writhe and twitch but was shocked upon the realization that he was bound to a flat table-like surface. His eyes sprung open as he took in his completely foreign surroundings; it wasn't the hospital, maybe a basement? His adrenaline peaked, not only was his environment unfamiliar but his entire body felt odd too. He felt significantly bigger, heavier, and warmer, but he was terrified to look at himself, the last thing he remembers is the car accident. Expecting to see a slightly beaten physique he managed to let out a squeal at the sight of a completely disfigured body, far from human. His jaw ached at the movement, and he could see at the edge of his vision two large tusk-like objects which seemingly emerged from his mouth. He was covered in dark brown fur from head to toe, extremities replaced with the strong arms and legs of a grizzly bear; and implanted in his jaw were the tusks of a walrus. He was a beautiful beast.

She watched him fade into black again with tears welling up in her eyes as she gazed upon her beautiful creation.



# The Scream- Emily Harris



The branches whipped against my face as I ran through the forest. Around me, all I could see was a blur of green. The air smelled crisp and cool, and the sky was pitch black except for a sliver of a moon that was suspended in the air like a silver charm. I could hear the screaming echoing throughout the forest behind me. It sounded like an army of banshees. If you're reading this, you may be wondering how I got myself into this situation. Allow me to explain.

It started one day when I got home from school. As I walked through the door, I noticed that my house was freezing cold. The thermostat read fifty degrees! I quickly changed it back to seventy-five and turned around to see the back door wide open. I walked over and looked into the backyard. I was startled to see my sister standing on our deck, gazing out into the vast forest beyond. Her arms were limp by her sides, and her long blonde hair was damp and stringy. She was wearing a tank-top and shorts, and it was the middle of January.

“Alyssa?” I asked, stepping outside slowly.

My sister turned to look at me as if in a haze. Her blue eyes were cloudy and unfocused, and it looked as if she wasn’t even Alyssa anymore.

“Alyssa?” I repeated. “It’s me, Carly.”

As if woken from a trance, she snapped back to reality and a look of friendly recognition seeped back into her eyes. She smiled sweetly and shivered a little.

“Hey, I didn’t hear you come home. Mom said it’s your turn to do the dishes tonight by the way.” She said.

I stared in disbelief as she strolled calmly back inside. Was it me or had her mouth opened a little too wide when she talked? I followed her inside and shut the door. For the rest of the afternoon, she stayed in her room until our parents got home from work. My dad ruffled my hair and went to change out of his work clothes. Sometimes, I don’t know how I’m even related to my family. I have short, fluffy chestnut hair and brown eyes, while the rest of my family has blonde hair and blue or brown eyes. We ate dinner and talked about our day, and I went to my room to do homework. I was listening to music when I heard a loud commotion. It sounded almost like someone had screamed. I ran out of my room to see my parents sitting and reading books quietly. They looked up and smiled when they saw me.

“Carly! Are you done with your homework?” My mom said cheerfully.

I nodded, still perplexed.

“Did you guys hear that?” I asked.



“Hear what?” My father asked innocently.

“That scream. It sounded like it came from the living room.”

“No honey, maybe it was the neighbors?” he replied.

“Yeah, probably...” I trailed off. I turned and went back to my room. I passed by Alyssa’s room and saw the door wide open. I decided to peek my head in to say hello. When I looked inside, I saw that it was empty. But that wasn’t the only thing I saw. There was a strange liquid on her rug, leading from the middle of her room to her window. I crept over there, not daring to make a sound. I opened the window and saw our garbage can right below it. There was something odd in the bottom of it, and for some reason, I felt the need to check it out. I exited her room and went out the front door.

I peered into the trashcan and saw the most horrendous thing I’d ever seen. Piled in the can, was some sort of molt. In fact, it looked like several. They were translucent with some sort of green slime on them. I screamed and ran inside to tell my parents.

My mother looked up again from her book and smiled sweetly.

“What’s wrong, sweetie? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she said. I was beginning to wonder if there was something wrong with her too. She was acting too friendly.

I think she started to realize that I knew there was something wrong because she stopped smiling suddenly. Her eyes filled with a blank stare, almost as if something had overcome her. I started to back away towards the front door when I felt something icy grab my wrist. I turned to see Alyssa, staring at me, emotionless. She used her other hand to shut the door, and I realized that these people in this room were not my family. They were something else.



I did the only thing I could think of to get free: I punched her. The ring on my right hand had cut her cheek, but I was surprised to see something else on her face besides blood. It was green, like the liquid I saw all over the molts outside. That's when I realized that the molts weren't covered with slime, it was that thing's blood. Alyssa stumbles back, her hand immediately covering her left cheek. I turned to face my mother, seeing that she had an identical wound. Somehow, these creatures were linked. She slowly opened her mouth extremely wide and emitted an earsplitting scream. I was horrified. Soon enough, my sister had done the same. I had little time to think before my mother lunged for me. I dodged her attack and ran through the back door. I turned back to see them chasing after me. I saw the front door open and several more people stream through, their mouths wide in a silent scream. My mother and sister stopped and pointed at me, and the rest began to run towards me. I turned around and ran into the woods behind me.

The branches whipped against my face as I ran through the forest. Around me, all I could see was a blur of green. The air smelled crisp and cool, and the sky was pitch black except for a sliver of a moon that was suspended in the sky like a silver charm. I could hear the screaming echoing throughout the forest behind me. It sounded like an army of banshees.

Still, I kept running. It felt like an eternity until I saw a light. This then turned into several lights, and I realized that I'd found a street. I banged on the nearest door, and a kind couple let me in. They thought it was a prank until I showed them my ring. It had traces of Alyssa's blood on it. Well, Not-Alyssa. I believe the last time I actually saw my sister was over a week ago. There were a lot of molts in that garbage can. They stayed with me and called the police. I told them the address and they went to check out my house, only to find it empty. The only proof of my story were the contents in the garbage can.

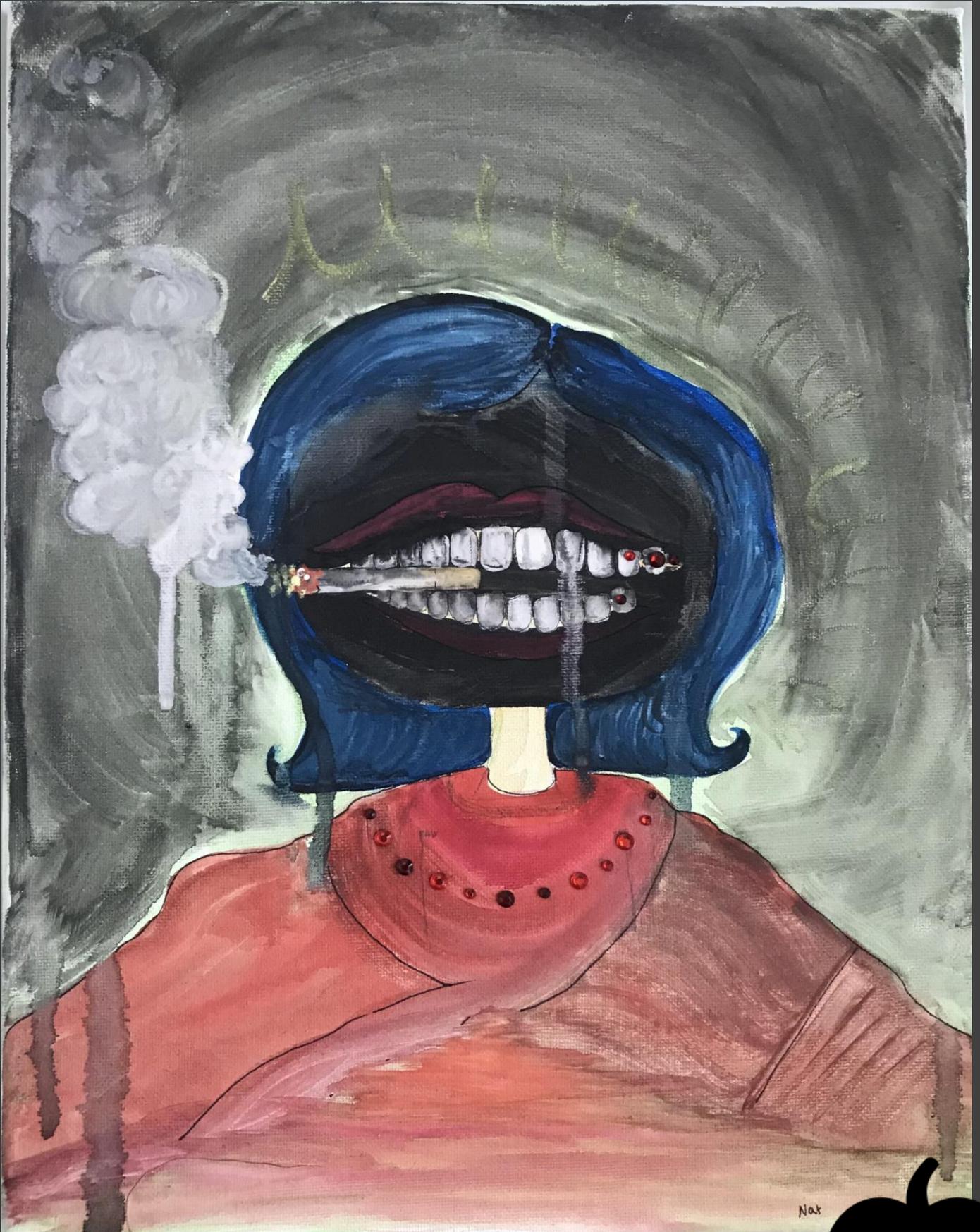


They debated where to send me, and eventually I was sent to my grandmother's house and she became my legal guardian.

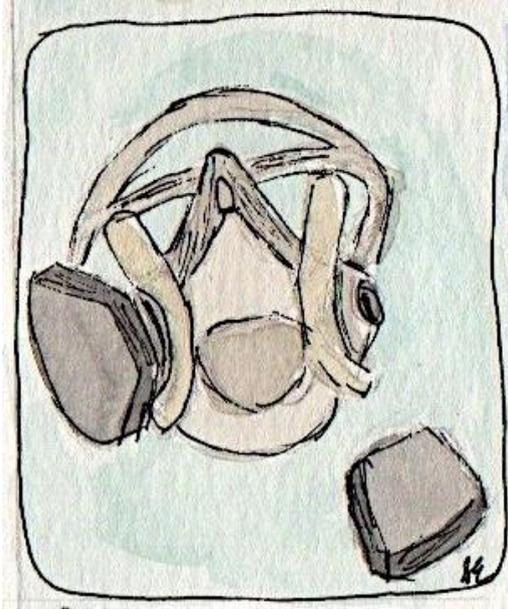
I feel safer here, like I'm far enough away from those creatures. The thing that still bugs me at night is that on that dreadful evening, my father disappeared when I went outside. I believe that he was one of those things too, and that him and my family are still out there. My grandmother said she'd seen "Julia" the other day. Julia is my mother's name. I dismissed it as a trick of her memory, but now I'm not so sure. You see, whenever my grandmother smiles at me, I feel like her mouth is spreading just a little too wide...



# Untitled- Natalie Goldstein



# Staying In- Craig Moore



**Scene** *A small, dark room in an unknown location. A decaying couch sits next to an equally decrepit armchair, with a softly flickering lamp in between. A bright television plays at a loud volume, filling the room with light and the sounds of a news broadcast. The three windows behind the couch are crudely covered with tarp fixed by nails and duct tape. The door on the right side of the room appears to be barricaded, but the door on the left remains unguarded. There are two large boxes in one of the back corners of the room.*

*A young man, Peter, is spread out on the couch watching the television. He appears to be falling asleep while flipping through channels. Another young man of about the same age, Robert, is sitting sideways in the armchair. He is shifting his weight around in a futile attempt to get comfortable.*

## Television

AS THE NUMBER OF CASES CONTINUES TO-

*The channel is changed.*

MEANS BEING PREPARED FOR-

*Again.*

AND WHAT THEY'RE EFFECTIVELY DOING IS-

*The volume is lowered.*

**Peter**

*Mumbling.*

How— —left?

**Robert**

Can't hear you.

**Peter**

*Loudly.*

How much is left?

**Robert**

*Sighs.*

Out of the big box? Only one more full pack. Then there's the open one, so that's-

**Peter**

*Cutting  
him off.*

Fifteen. We're gonna have to start being more careful.

*Robert glares at Peter, but he does not notice. Peter turns the television back to its original volume. Robert glances at his watch, then turns around in the chair to look at the door behind him. After a brief moment, the television is muted, causing Robert to turn back around.*

You know, it hasn't been that bad.

*He pauses, finally turning his head to look back at Robert.*

I mean staying here the whole time and everything. When they told us how long we'd-

**Robert**

*Coldly interrupting.*

Yeah, it's great.



*He looks at the flickering lightbulb, then at the television, before slouching back down.*

**Peter**

Oh, come on man! Cheer up!

*He sits up, attempting to rouse Robert's hidden positivity.*

We've got quite the setup here! I bet we're the only ones around here with a TV that works. Plus, we're still getting Courtney's extra shipment every month, so we don't even have to skip days.

*After no response, he continues.*

Not to mention,

*Motioning to the blocked windows and barricaded door.*

we're totally safe here.

**Robert**

Don't you think-

*He pauses.*

Don't you think it's been too long, Peter?

**Peter**

These things take time.

**Robert**

I know, but—

*Struggling.*

but after thirteen months!? You can't help but wonder.

**Peter**

I can.

**Robert**

*Confused.*

What?

**Peter**

I can help but wonder.

*Robert glares at Peter again, their eyes meet.*



**Robert**

*Frustrated.*

Peter I swear to-

*He stops himself.*

Peter, I don't know what it is about this situation that has made you put your blinders up. I mean, you sit there and watch more television than anyone I ever knew—scratch that, more NEWS than any one I ever knew, yet you sit there acting like nothing is wrong.

*Getting worked up.*

I feel like I shouldn't even have to say anything about this, but have you seen what's going on out there? Have you seen what they're doing to people?

**Peter**

That's actually the part I don't understand. How is everyone out there when—

**Robert**

*Interjecting.*

That's what I'm saying, Peter.

**Peter**

*Slouching in defeat.*

I don't know.

**Robert**

I think you do.

*After an uncomfortable silence, he starts to make his point*

When this started you even said it yourself.

**Peter**

*Sarcastic.*

Oh yeah? What exactly did I say?



**Robert**

You told me that you didn't know a single person that got sick.

*Peter looks down at his knees, then at the muted television. Robert keeps looking at Peter.*

And then when Courtney-

**Peter**

*Suddenly furious.*

Shut up!

*Robert tries to start again but is interrupted.*

No! I said shut the hell up! That's completely different and you know it!

**Robert**

*Backpedaling.*

All I'm saying is that by the time she got back to the house she had already been out there for like seven hours.

**Peter**

*Clearly hurt.*

So?

**Robert**

*More friendly.*

So...

*He looks at Peter, expecting him to catch on.*

So why did she seem totally fine?

*This question appears to cross a line for Peter, but he doesn't interject.*



We sit around for days, then she suddenly gets picked for “randomized” testing; sent away in a van wearing one of those government issued-

*He notices Peter’s expression and cuts himself off.*

Well... At least we got one of their new TV’s out of it.

**Peter**

Listen to yourself! How could you say these things? Always acting like there’s some elaborate scheme designed to work against you! You’re a selfish jerk, Robert. She would’ve never talked about you like that.

*He pauses, trying to think of the most scornful thing to say.*

Just know that if it wasn’t for me, you’d be out there dying like everyone else.

**Robert**

*Mocking.*

Yeah. You know what, Peter? You’re right. If it wasn’t for your dirty living room, and your stupid tarp, and your barricaded door

*Standing up, getting heated.*

and your damned crate of toilet paper I’d be-

*He trails off, standing with his fists clenched over Peter, who is now crying.*

**Peter**

*In between breaths.*

Oh, God!

*Sniffling.*

Why did she have to leave? Why didn’t that stupid thing work?

**Robert**

Well that’s-



*He stops to consider his words carefully.*

That's the thing, Peter. Remember when they sent out those emergency transport masks to everyone before the seal-in?

*Peter only partially acknowledges the question.*

They were supposed to be so that if anyone needed to get to the hospital, they could survive the walk to the metro station.

**Peter**

*Frustrated but no longer crying.*

Yeah. And?

**Robert**

They're fake.

**Peter**

*Dismissing.*

I thought I told you to shut up about this stuff.

*This prompts Robert to go rummaging through one of the boxes in the corner of the room. He pulls out a mask, most closely resembling a painting respirator.*

**Robert**

See for yourself!

*He begins to disassemble the mask, prying the ventilation caps off with a struggle.*

Completely fake! There's not even a filter!

*He throws the pieces on the ground.*

**Peter**

What are you trying to prove?

**Robert**

Pete... I think it's pretty obvious.

**Peter**

Well, spell it out for me anyways.

*Aggravated.*



I want to make sure I'm understanding what you're saying to me.

**Robert**

Alright. What I'm saying is that the night Courtney left, she didn't even bring the mask and she came back unscathed.

*He pauses, contemplating whether or not to continue.*

And those false alarms, when you had to go to the hospital,

*He glances at the pieces of mask on the ground.*

we were wearing fake protective gear.

*Peter stares blankly for a moment, then lets out some laughter in disbelief.*

**Peter**

*Dumbfounded.*

You think... You think this is all...

*He can't finish. Robert looks at him with slight concern.*

**Robert**

I know it might seem-

**Peter**

*Interrupting.*

You're wrong.

*He lays back down on the couch and grabs the television remote, turning the sound back on.*

**Television**

ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY VIOLENT AS TENSIONS CONTINUE TO SURGE REGARDING THE PROPOSED-

*Robert goes to stand in front of the television and turns it off. He faces Peter.*

**Robert**

*Sternly.*

There's something I need you to see.



*After a moment of waiting, Peter stands up. Robert suddenly walks straight back to the rightmost window and grasps an edge of the tarp covering.*

**Peter**

*Beginning to panic.*

What are you doing!?

*Robert says nothing before violently ripping the cover from the window, letting in nearly blinding sunlight. He begins to pry the bottom of the window open. This sends Peter running for the box with the masks. He recovers one and desperately struggles to fix the straps around his head.*

**Robert**

*Calmly.*

Hey... Pete, listen.

*Peter finally gets the mask situated on his face and looks up in terror.*

**Peter**

*Muffled shouting.*

Robert what the hell are you doing!?

*He shoves Robert aside and slams the window shut. He tries to pick up the tarp, but Robert is standing on one of the corners.*

**Robert**

I need you to calm down.

*He pauses, smiles, then takes a deep breath.*

Look, buddy-

*Deep breath.*

I'm fine.

*Peter is frozen in shock. After a moment, Robert continues.*

This is what I was trying to show you.



*Peter relaxes his posture slightly and drops the tarp, but only stands and stares in disbelief. After some time, he begins to speak quietly*

**Peter**

*Muffled, barely audible.*

You—get—ere...

**Robert**

Can't hear you.

**Peter**

*Muffled shouting.*

You need to get the hell out of here!

*Robert tries to speak, but Peter continues shouting and starts towards him.*

Out! Get out!

*This continues until Robert is standing with his back against the wall with the unbarricaded door.*

**Robert**

*Nervously.*

Pete, I really think you just need to listen. I know what I'm talking about. I've been going out there for months and I've been totally-

**Peter**

*Muffled screaming*

Shut up! Get the hell out of here! Now!

*He grabs the handle of the door and throws it open. He quickly walks across the room to the largest box and knocks it over, spilling ration kits across the floor. He hastily grabs as many of them as he can off of the ground, then drops them in between Peter and the open doorway. He starts to kick them out of the door.*

Take these and figure it out on your own! Get out!



## **Robert**

Peter, man, I don't mean to-

*He starts towards Peter, who suddenly raises his fist.*

## **Pete**

*Muffled.*

## **Out.**

*Robert stares at Peter, then laughs in shocked disbelief. He turns around and makes for the door; stopping to pick up the few ration kits that are still on the floor of the room. He walks out of the door without turning around or closing it. Peter relaxes his posture and stares out the door for nearly a minute before closing it. He turns around and walks over to the tarp on the floor. After a lifeless attempt to re-attach the window covers, he gives up. He tries to use the remote to turn on the television but is only met with abrasive static. He has no luck changing the channel, instead opting to turn the television to its full volume, completely filling the room with static noise. He stares for a moment, then walks over to the large empty ration box. He pulls the tarp off of the ground and over his head and then climbs into the box. After awkwardly shifting for a moment, Peter settles inside the box, invisible to the audience. The sound of static continues as the lights fade.*

**Curtain**



# The Dreamer-Craig Moore



# The Torment on Rock Ave-Jack Goldstein

## The Torment on Rock Avenue: An innovative haunted house experience

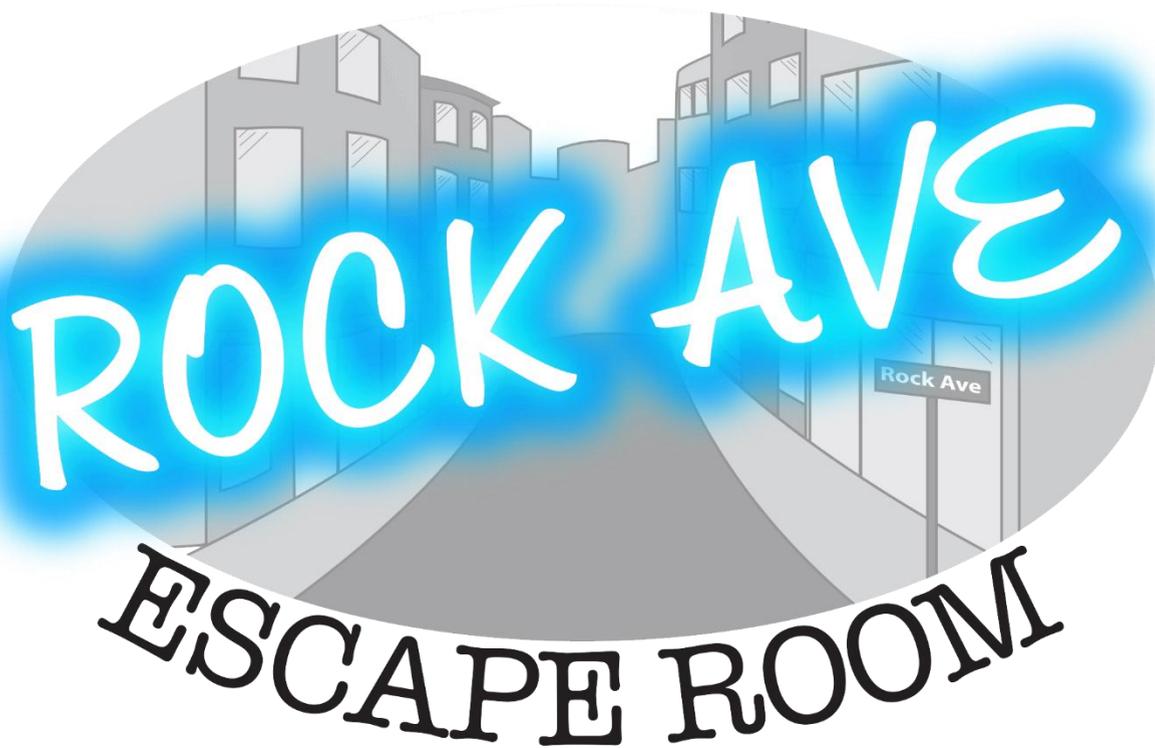
You may have heard about Rock Avenue from their local escape rooms such as Apartment A.I and History Mystery, or even their more recent virtual addition, Ready Mayor One. This 2020 Halloween season brings an exciting new addition to their virtual experiences, The Torment on Rock Avenue. This virtual haunted house is a great way for horror/Halloween fans to safely get their horror fix during these difficult times.

“For the last three years, three people have died on the same night in our town. Something or someone is behind it. The mayor has been sent a letter telling him to meet at town hall on that night this year, and all secrets will be revealed.”(Rob Faiella) The Torment on Rock Ave is not an escape room, but rather a virtual haunted house with interactive elements. This means that this experience will not be for the light of heart, seeing as it is PG-13 with some adult language and intense thematic situations. This is good news for fans of classic Halloween events like Halloween Horror Nights or Howl-O-Scream who aren't able to leave the house this year. The Torment on Rock Ave will provide a similar experience over a zoom call, taking full advantage of the online format to create an immersive and interactive story that will deliver on scares and entertainment.

The Torment on Rock Ave is also a great way to spend some time with your friends and family this Halloween. This experience allows up to 8 people per group, and will run for about an hour. The price for your group is \$99.95, or about \$12.50 per person if you have a group of 8, so gather your friends and brave the night together!



This virtual haunted house will run every Friday throughout October and the first week of November (future dates may be added). Hurry up and buy your tickets because they will sell out quickly! Good luck surviving The Torment on Rock Ave.



# Pop Smoke's *Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon* Review- Ariel Galbreath



A lot of us were shocked to hear the devastating news that Pop Smoke, an American rapper from Brooklyn, New York, had passed away. It hits us harder knowing he passed away at such a young age (20) and was just starting to be recognized by the world. Pop Smoke's hit songs *Welcome to the Party* and *Dior*, which were released in 2019, completely blew up. Pop Smoke's name was finally getting around. Unfortunately, Pop Smoke passed away on February 19, 2020. Many of his old fans and new fans were heartbroken and disappointed about not being able to continue hearing his music. Soon after, we began to learn that Pop Smoke had been working on a special project before he died. This gave a lot of his fans high hope for his music and his legacy.

On July 3, 2020, the studio album *Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon* was released by Victor Victor Worldwide and Republic Records. It features 19 tracks, with appearances from artists like Lil Baby, DaBaby, Future, Quavo, Rowdy Rebel, 50 Cent, Roddy Rich, Tyga, Karol G, Lil Tjay, and King Combs. The album has a great variety of music and shows Pop Smoke's range of talent. Not only do we hear the bars included in his songs but we also hear some vocal range coming from him. His album has been certified platinum and has over 1.5 million streams. This album is most definitely worth listening to and is a great way to lift his name after his tragic death.



# A Not So Normal Halloween-

## Rosemary Embry

As we finally enter the season of spooktober, we've kept many of the typical traditions. Between theme park events, pumpkin spice lattes, quite a bit has stayed the same. But one of the main questions running through our minds is what else will stay the same? With Halloween coming close, we wonder what the people in our community will do.

"I think other people are going to do what they normally do for Halloween," said Lindsay Fontana, a senior. "I think a lot of people are going to go mask free, host parties, etc. It's been a rough year and people want to celebrate more than ever, but COVID is still happening and we should take the necessary precautions." A lot of other students seem to feel the same. It's a holiday that people want to participate in, but are they going to let their excitement overturn their safety?

Between children trick-or-treating and teens attending parties, most would assume some boundaries will be made. Given the current circumstances, everyone's actions are unpredictable. In regards to trick-or-treating, most children's costumes come with or can be matched with a mask. Candy givers could leave treats on their porches in bowls preventing cross-contamination considering individual candies are wrapped, and children can social distance as much as possible. Halloween, ironically, is one holiday that can adhere to most CDC guidelines. However, teenagers might be a different story. Considering most teens enjoy getting dressed up and going to parties, it's mildly difficult to figure out what our community's teens may do, especially considering Halloween 2020 is on a weekend. Teens love to be with their friends and enjoy a good night out. However, many teens also enjoy staying in.



“I might dress up, but probably not; I’m planning on binge-watching movies”, says Emily Rubner, a senior, her favorite spooky movie being the Nightmare Before Christmas.

Overall, the outcome of Halloween is highly unpredictable and could go either way.

I guess we’re just going to have to wait and see how it unfolds.



# PROMPTS FOR NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

Get thinking about stories for our November issue:



*"It was the night  
before thanksgiving"*

*"I jumped into a pile of  
leaves and found."*

*Any genre. Somewhere in the story  
must include a pumpkin in a carriage*

Good luck and hope to see you next  
month

WRITE ON->